

# So, someone you know is Transgender?



Q&A for Family, Friends and Colleagues of  
Gender Variant Individuals

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## **What do you mean you're transgender?**

When someone identifies as being transgender they are expressing a feeling that there is a mismatch between their physical sex and their brain sex, otherwise known as gender identity. This is known as gender dysphoria when it is persistent and becomes unmanageable for the individual.

## **Why do you choose to put yourself through this?**

The vast majority of trans people simply don't have a choice. Their instinctive sense of their gender (something most people never have to consider) simply doesn't match their physical sex. Imagine trying to stop breathing – you simply can't for too long before panic sets in and you have to take a breath.

## **Isn't Sex and Gender the same thing?**

No. A person's sex describes their physical attributes. Their gender describes whether or not they feel masculine, feminine or somewhere in between. Sex and gender develop separately while in the womb; scientific opinion currently favours a mix of genetic factors and hormonal responses and timings during certain phases of foetal development that lead to this mismatch.

## **But what of the gender binary?**

There is no such thing as the gender binary. This is largely a social and religious construction of western civilisations. Many other cultures recognise mixes of gender and such people were often treated with a great deal of respect (or fear) for their ability to span the gap between male and female. (Native American "Two Spirit" people, Siberian Chukhi yirka-laul people, Old Israel recognised 6 genders)

### **Isn't it unnatural?**

No. Nature doesn't recognise the gender binary either; just observe it for a while. Biology is far too complicated to be foolproof so in the same way someone can be born with a missing or malformed limb, hare lip or birthmark so someone can be born with altered brain structures leading to gender variance, cerebral palsy or a squint.

### **Aren't you gay?**

No, unless your sexuality naturally leads you in that direction just like anyone else. There is no link between gender identity and sexuality. Some trans people are also asexual and some are bi - just like "normal" people.

### **Why is it always men?**

It isn't. Current thinking expects roughly a 50-50 split between male-to-female and female-to-male transsexual people presenting themselves to the medical profession for full transition in the fullness of time. Women have had the luxury of being able to absorb male clothing for a long time and no-one thinks twice about it. Males on the other hand are often ridiculed for taking a similar approach.

### **Do you want to be a woman/man?**

That is a very complicated question and very much depends on the individual. Think of gender identity being on a sliding scale with male at one end and female at the other. The majority of people fit somewhere at one end or the other. An unknown percentage of people however recognise that they don't fit the norm and fall somewhere on the scale in between. The most severe cases feel a deep and constant feeling of physical "wrongness" and require surgery.

Others can manage without surgery but choose to make a social transition. Still others find a balance that allows them to exist in both worlds.

### **When do you first realise you are trans?**

This varies greatly depending on the individual. Most know from an early age – say 3-6 years. Some only realise in adolescence or adulthood (sometimes old age) what their nagging feelings mean.

### **What terms can be used to describe transgender people?**

Well, their names are usually a good start. There is terminology though as there is with most things:

- Trans, TV, TG, TS, gender queer, non-gendered
- M2F, F2M, trans woman, trans man
- Pre-op, Post-op, Non-op
- Male, female, man, woman
- Gender dysphoric, gender variant
- Stealth, open, out

These are just a few terms used, there are many other terms and variations.

### **What terms are unacceptable?**

Generally, it is good practice to think “would I like to be called that or what would I think if someone called a friend or relative of mine that”. If you wouldn’t like it then nor would a trans person.

It is not usually acceptable to call a trans person a “tranny” although the term is sometimes used within a trans group to describe themselves. Similarly to refer to trans people as “a transgender” or “those transgenders” is also offensive as well as grammatically incorrect

Referring to anyone as “it”, “that”, “those”, “queer”, “freak” or any similar term or expression is unacceptable and rude and says more about the user than the target.

### **What questions can I ask you?**

You can ask any questions you like of a trans person but only ask questions that you are prepared to answer yourself. Polite enquiry is fine and curiosity encouraged to a point but always be respectful. You will find that most openly trans people are more than happy to educate and break down barriers.

### **How do I address a trans person?**

This is easy. Unless they specifically say otherwise you should always address a trans person according to the gender they are presenting as. Pronouns are a tricky business especially where a person has been known to you for a long time as male or female. This is simply a matter of respect and attitudes to mistakes and slipups will vary from person to person. The trans person will often change their name to something completely different or they may accept use of a slight change to their given name. Simply ask what they prefer.

## What toilets do you use?

This can be a bit emotive but the accepted view is that you use the toilets of the gender you are presenting as. There is no law against this (unless it is specifically to commit an offence) and the police generally agree with this position and usually exercise common sense if someone complains. It can be unsafe for the trans person to do otherwise. It is not appropriate to expect a trans person to use disabled facilities.

## So what's the difference between transvestites, transgender and transsexual people then?

Labels are an issue for trans people as they are often too restrictive. Generally speaking the following applies:

- Transvestite (TV) – these are typically men who dress in womens clothes for pleasure. This can be for social, sexual, both or other reasons. A TV can typically switch on and off the desire to present as their gender opposite.
- Transgender (TG) – this is a blanket term that can be used to encompass all gender variant people (in the UK). More specifically it can be used to describe people who have a level of gender dysphoria (the term gender identity disorder is being phased out as it's not a disorder) that isn't as strong as a transsexual persons but still entails a great deal of distress when having to revert to their birth gender.
- Transsexual (TS) – this term is used to describe a person who experiences a level of gender dysphoria that leads to a genuine level of discomfort when presenting in their birth gender that ranges from mild to extremely severe. Transition of one

sort or the other is normally required in order for them to lead normal” lives. This may or may not entail surgery, hormones and other treatments.

Remember this is being very general, gender variance is a very complicated and colourful affair.

### **Why have you chosen now to “come clean”?**

Usually a major life crisis has brought things to a head. This can literally be anything in the persons life that acts as a catalyst or it can be a simple rational realisation that things can’t go on as they are.

There is a very high rate of attempted suicide within this group of people – as high as 34% or more have tried to kill themselves at least once. There is also a very high incidence of clinical depression and psychological problems and some self-harm or abuse substances. Trans health is being targeted by Government as an area of concern.

Remember, the trans person has taken a major risk in presenting in public in their chosen gender. Sometimes it has taken decades of soul searching, upset, lost life, trauma, loss and despair before reaching this point. Most of this is because of the perception that society will mock, ridicule, shun or possibly harm them.

It is not unusual for the trans person to have gone through significant portions of their life feeling guilt, shame, anger, fear, loathing and many other negative emotions. Relationships with partners, families and friends become strained as the trans person withdraws in an effort to protect themselves and their loved ones.

This often leads to depression, anxiety or worse and the desire to simply be accepted for who they are becomes stronger as they get older.

Trans people often know themselves very well, are intelligent and hard working, capable people who have dealt and deal with a very difficult situation.

### **What about Partners, Spouses and Families?**

This is a really challenging area. On the one hand, this group see someone they love miserable, depressed and/or suicidal for no apparent reason. On the other they see someone they love changing immeasurably into someone else. Emotions run high over long periods of time, many lose their loved ones and are shunned by their families when they really need them the most – such is the stigma and lack of understanding. Others are brave enough to engage, endure, understand and continue to love. Divorce is common, ostracism is common, understanding is rare and little support is available to families.

Children of trans parents or relatives often experience a great deal of trouble dealing with these issues. Young children generally fare best as they are not fully programmed with society's stigmas and prejudices yet. They are also vulnerable to bullying and harassment on the street and at school.

### **How do you view your privacy?**

The same as everyone else. Most trans people are unknown to the world at large. Some are openly trans. Many transsexual people prefer or need to live in stealth as a member of their chosen gender. It's a personal matter how visible the trans person chooses to be.

Under normal circumstances the same needs, wishes and rules apply as they would for anyone else – a trans person is not a specific mat-

ter for public debate, ridicule or anything else. The same treatment should be offered as you yourself would expect to receive.

It should always be born in mind however that trans people are especially vulnerable whether they are stealth or not. They, their loved ones and families are open to abuse, harassment, bullying, victimisation and discrimination and so people should be very mindful about how and where this group is discussed, especially in public or to the press. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

### **What about trans children?**

A few children realise they are transgender or transsexual from a very early age. Parents in such a situation require a lot of patience and understanding and the right doctors. In the US and some parts of Europe (including now the UK) use of drugs to delay the onset of puberty is permitted until the child reaches an age where it can make a permanent decision about its future. This saves the child from the discomfort of changes at puberty that are permanent and expensive to correct later.

Bullying, abuse and harassment is common for children and families especially in school. Teachers are often ignorant of the realities and schools are ill equipped to deal with trans children. This is a key target area the government are tackling.

Specific organisations such as Mermaids are dedicated to helping trans children and their families.

## **Why should the NHS pay for gender reassignment operations?**

Simply because for the individual concerned it is not a choice. Being transgender or transsexual is NOT a lifestyle choice. It is a recognised medical condition that warrants serious attention.

Compared to the amount the NHS spends on treating smokers, alcoholics, the obese and drug users - WHO HAVE A CHOICE, the amount spent on gender confirmation surgery and other procedures and treatments is miniscule.

## **I thought this condition was a mental illness?**

NO. It is not. It is however still classified as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (US) and International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems. This is likely to change soon in view of recent research into this area.

The “condition” however can cause immense levels of stress and can easily lead to a host of physiological and psychological problems requiring professional help. Many of these problems are caused or exacerbated by the attitudes of society and not necessarily by the mere fact of “being trans”.

The transgender state is a natural if unusual biological option for such a complex organism as a human.

## **What protection exists for trans people?**

There are three key pieces of legislation that are in place to protect transgender people:

- Equality Act, 2010 – protects gender variant, transsexual and transgender people and embraces the 1999 Gender Reassignment regulations under the Sex Discrimination act (1975) and the amendment in 2008 which extended provision to goods, facilities, services and premises.
- Gender Recognition Act, 2004
- Human Rights Act 1998

Snippet from “Legal Protection and Good Practice for gender variant, transsexual and transgender people in the workplace”, © GIRES, 2008, 2010:

*“The Equality Act, 2010 broadens the scope of “gender reassignment” protection to cover individuals whether or not they are under medical supervision and to protect those who associate with transsexual people such as partners, spouses, other family members and carers and also those perceived to be transsexual (who may be variously described as gender variant, trans or transgender people)*

*Equality law now requires those in the public sector to have due regard to the needs of those described above....”*

In March 2011 the Government published “Working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equality: Moving Forward” which details Government proposals to tear down barriers and advance equal opportunities for LGBT people in all areas of society including schools, at work and healthcare.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> December 2011 the Government released its transgender action plan: Advancing Transgender Equality: A Plan for Action. This document includes firm commitments to improve the lives of transgender people and support business and public bodies so they have the right tools to support transgender people.

The government is also dedicated to dealing with transphobic hate-crime and the home office has instructed police forces to record all such incidents since 2008.

Organisations such as Trans Media Watch have also established themselves to provide advice to both the media when dealing with trans issues and trans people when approached by the media. They work with all areas of the industry to ensure that trans people are depicted fairly and accurately.

### **I've heard of the Transgender Day of Remembrance, what's that?**

The Transgender Day of Remembrance was founded in 1998 to memorialise the murder of Rita Hester of Allston, Massachusetts. It now commemorates transgender people around the world who have lost their lives through transphobic hate crime, violence and murder.

It is held on the 20<sup>th</sup> November every year and has become an international day of action.

Some countries still insist on sterilisation (Norway amongst others and Sweden has only just repealed this law), some governments condone the murder of trans persons either directly or indirectly and others still class it as illegal. Sentences as severe as the death penalty still exist.

The Russian government is attempting to introduce a law to prevent LGBT people from publishing any "propaganda" and meeting despite having signed European Human Rights treaties.

Trans people are regularly murdered, assaulted, beaten and tortured around the world.

## Useful Links



Gender Identity Research and Education Society

Homepage: <http://www.gires.org.uk>

Legal Protection and Good Practice for gender variant, transsexual and transgender people in the workplace:



<http://www.gires.org.uk/TransitionAtWork.pdf>



**Press for Change**

The UK's Leading Experts in Transgender Law  
BM Network, London, WC1N3XX  
Tel: +44(0)20448 708165  
E-mail: [office@pfc.org.uk](mailto:office@pfc.org.uk)



Lobbying and legal support organisation

<http://www.pfc.org.uk> and <http://transequality.co.uk/default.aspx>



<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Transhealth/Pages/Transoverview.aspx>

## Government Transgender

### Action Plan:



<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/equalities/lgbt-equality-publications/transgender-action-plan?view=Binary>



Support for young trans-persons and their families:

<http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/>



Brighton based peer support group and counselling for all gender variant people:

<http://www.clareproject.org.uk>

