

UNDERSTANDING



TRANSGENDER

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

A Resource from the National Center for Transgender Equality
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HOW MANY TRANSGENDER PEOPLE ARE THERE?

We don't know for sure the answer to this question. There are a number of reasons for that. First, there really isn't anyone collecting this data. It's not something that the US Census or other agencies keep track of. Second, many transgender people are not public about their identities, so they might not tell anyone about it.

NCTE estimates that between ¼ and 1% of the population is transsexual.

WHY ARE PEOPLE TRANSGENDER? WHAT CAUSES IT?

There are a number of theories about why transgender people exist although there is not yet scientific consensus.

When you look across **cultures**, you will find that people have had a wide range of beliefs about gender. Some cultures look at people and see six genders, while others see two. Some cultures have created specific ways for people to live in roles that are different from that assigned to them at birth. In addition, different cultures also vary in their definitions of masculine and feminine. Whether we view someone as transgender depends on the cultural lenses we are looking through as well as how people identify themselves.

Biologists tell us that sex is a complicated matter, much more complex than what we may have been taught in school. A person with XX chromosomes is generally considered female, while a person with XY chromosomes is generally considered male. However, there are also people who have XXY, XYY, and other variations of chromosomes; these genetic differences may or may not be visibly apparent or known to the person. Some people are born with XY chromosomes, but are unable to respond to testosterone and therefore develop bodies with a vagina and breasts, rather than a penis and testes. A variation in gender may just be part of the natural order and there are more varieties than we generally realize. People with biological differences in gender may be considered intersex; they may or may not identify as transgender.

There are **medical** theories about why people are transgender. Some speculate that fluctuations or imbalances in hormones or the use of certain medications during pregnancy may cause intersex or transgender conditions. Other research indicates that there are links between transgender identity and brain structure.

Some people believe that **psychological** factors are the reason for the existence of transgender people. It is clear that there are people who are aware that they are transgender from their earliest memories. Many trans people feel that their gender identity is an innate part of them, an integral part of who they were born to be.

Then there are people who feel that everyone has a right to **choose** whatever gender presentation feels best to that individual. People should have the freedom to express themselves in whatever way is right for them.

Sex and gender are complex issues. A huge variety of factors are at work in making each individual the person that they are and there is no one reason that causes people to be transgender. Trans people are part of the variety that makes up the human community.

IS BEING TRANSGENDER A MENTAL ILLNESS?

No, but this remains a stereotype about transgender people. Gender Identity Disorder is listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-4th Edition (DSM-IV)*, a guide used by mental health professionals to diagnose psychological conditions.

Transgender identity is not a mental illness that can be cured with treatment. Rather, transgender people experience a persistent and authentic difference between our assigned sex and our understanding of our own gender. For some people, this leads to emotional distress. This pain often can be relieved by freely expressing our genders, wearing clothing we are comfortable in, and, for some, making a physical transition from one gender to another.

For people who identify as transsexual, counseling alone, without medical treatment, is often not effective.

Our society is, however, very harsh on gender-variant people. Some transgender people have lost their families, their jobs, their homes and their support. Transgender children may be subject to abuse at home, at school or in their communities. A lifetime of this can be very challenging and can sometimes cause anxiety disorders, depression and other psychological illnesses. These are not the root of their transgender identity; rather, they are the side effects of society's intolerance of transgender people.

HOW DO TRANSEXUAL PEOPLE CHANGE GENDERS? WHAT IS THE PROCESS LIKE?

Note: The information in this section applies only to transsexuals, not to transgender people in general. Remember that not all transgender people want to transition.

There are a variety of paths that people follow, but many use a series of guidelines set out by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. These guidelines are called the Standards of Care (SOC) and they outline a series of steps that people may take to explore and complete gender transition. These may include:

- Counseling with a mental health professional
- A “real life” experience where an individual lives as the target gender for a trial period
- Learning about the available options and the effects of various medical treatments
- Communication between the person’s therapist and physician indicating readiness to begin medical treatment (usually in the form of a letter)
- Undergoing hormone therapy
- Having various surgeries to alter the face, chest and genitals to be more congruent with the individual’s sense of self

Not all transsexual people follow these steps nor does the community agree about their importance. The Standards of Care not legally mandated. We believe that people should make their own decisions about their health care, in consultation with medical or mental health professionals as appropriate to their individual situation.

Transsexual people may undergo **hormone** therapy. Transwomen may take estrogen and related female hormones; transmen may take testosterone. It is important that people obtain hormones from a licensed medical professional if at all possible to be sure that the medications are safe and effective. Doctors should monitor the effects on the body, including checking for negative side effects. Some of the effects of hormone treatment are reversible when a person stops receiving hormone therapy; other effects are not.

Hormones impact the body by:

- Estrogen for MTFs
 - Softening the skin
 - Redistributing body fat to a more feminine appearance
 - Reducing some body hair
- Testosterone for FTMs
 - Lowering the voice
 - Causing the growth of body and facial hair
 - Redistributing body fat to a more masculine appearance
 - Causing the menstrual cycle to end

Hormones can have an impact on some people's emotional states. Many people report feeling more at peace after they begin hormone treatments, but hormones may also cause other fluctuations in mood. For many transgender people, there is no discernable difference in moods after beginning hormone treatments.

Some people and their doctors decide to pursue a full dose of hormones while others choose to go on a lower dose regimen or not take hormones at all for personal or medical reasons. Hormone therapy is covered by some medical insurance.

Some transsexuals have **surgery** to change their appearance. There is no single "sex change surgery." There are a variety of surgeries that people can have, including:

- Genital reconstructive surgery, to create a penis and testes or clitoris, labia and vagina
- Facial reconstruction surgery, to create a more masculine or feminine appearance
- Breast removal or augmentation
- For FTMs, surgery to remove the ovaries and uterus
- For MTFs, surgery to reduce the Adam's apple or change the thorax.

Surgery is often excluded from health insurance plans in the United States. At NCTE, we believe that the decisions about appropriate medical procedures should be made by people and their health care providers, not by insurance companies or government bodies.

Whether or not someone has had surgery should never make a difference in how they are treated.

In addition to the medical procedures, transsexual people often follow a series of **legal** steps to change their name and gender markers. The process may vary in each state. Some of the things that may need to be changed are:

- Legal name and/or gender change (done through the courts)
- Driver's license
- Social Security Account
- Passport
- Bank accounts and records
- Credit cards
- Paychecks and other job-related documents
- Leases
- Medical records
- Birth certificate
- Academic records

Different states have different procedures for changing driver's license and state IDs.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF TRANSITIONING?

Medical costs are high and are often not covered by insurance. The majority of transgender people cannot afford to pay these costs out of pocket.

There are social costs to transitioning. Because discrimination is widespread, transsexuals face a great deal of prejudice. This may mean losing a job or career, including their source of income, or not being able to find a job at all. Under- and unemployment in the transgender community is many times the national average. People may have to go from well-paying stable jobs to minimum wage work, seasonal employment or unemployment. This impacts their ability to support themselves and their families.

Some people are ostracized from their families, losing relationships with parents, spouses, children, siblings and others. They may be forced from their home by family members or no longer be able to pay their rent or mortgage.

While there are many costs associated with transitioning, there is also a cost when people who desire it do not do so. They may live a lifetime in which they never feel congruence between their body and their sense of self. They may be depressed and unhappy, or even suicidal, because they are not able to dress, live or work as they are comfortable. They may not have the opportunity to fulfill their dreams or live as they wish to live.

Some transgender people are able to keep their jobs, stay with their families and maintain their support networks—while enjoying their life much more fully because they have transitioned.

WHY DO PEOPLE CROSSDRESS?

Crossdressers wear the clothing generally associated with the opposite gender because it gives them a sense of happiness and fulfillment. They may also wish to express more than one aspect of their personalities—both a sense of masculinity and a sense of femininity—that are part of them.

Crossdressers, drag queens and drag kings like to change their appearance at times while generally identifying with the gender they were assigned at birth.

People used to believe that crossdressing was a purely sexual fetish. Now, however, we know that for most people it is much more complex than that. While crossdressers may find it sexually appealing and gratifying, they may also experience emotional and psychological fulfillment from it. It is one way that people may express who they are.

HOW IS GENDER IDENTITY DIFFERENT FROM SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

Gender identity refers to the way you understand yourself and your gender. It is about the internal sense of masculinity or femininity that a person feels.

Sexual orientation is our attraction to someone else of the same or different gender or both. It refers to the kinds of relationships that you have with others.

Transgender people can be heterosexual/straight, bisexual, homosexual/gay/lesbian or identify as queer. Many transgender people are in fulfilling and happy relationships.

Transgender people are often included in the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community, which is increasingly aware of the need to address issues of gender identity and expression as well as sexual orientation. This alliance is important to our movement for civil rights.

WHAT IS BEING DONE ABOUT THE DISCRIMINATION THAT TRANSGENDER PEOPLE FACE?

Around the country, laws, policies and attitudes are changing, making life better for transgender people overall. More and more employers, for example, now have policies which ban discrimination based on gender identity; they recognize that intolerance is bad for business. In addition, 39% of people in America (as of January 2009) are covered by anti-discrimination laws that include gender identity.

Transgender activists around the country and in Washington, DC, are working to pass anti-discrimination laws that provide protections for transgender people and send a message to their communities that intolerance is not acceptable. The United States should be a place where people can live free from discrimination and violence.

The transgender movement is part of a long line of activism as people have worked to claim their civil rights in this country. Yet there is much work still to do. The discrimination that transgender people of color face is compounded by racism; lower income transgender people face economic challenges and classism. The work for transgender equality needs to address these critical issues as well.