

Frequently asked questions – Transgender

Our society supports a very narrow and fixed view of what it means to be a woman or a man, and we learn this from an early age.

Some people do not fit these definitions, or do not identify with the gender that was assigned to them at birth. The term ‘transgender’ describes these people. While gender identity and sexual orientation are different issues, transgender and gay, lesbian and bisexual people experience similar social pressures.

Who does ‘Transgender’ include?

Any person whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their birth assigned gender. Transgender people include all of the following:

- Pre-operative, postoperative and non-operative transsexuals who generally feel they were born into the wrong physical body

- People who do not identify exclusively with either gender
- Cross-dressers
- Others who feel they do not fit our society's usual expectations of gender behaviour or appearance.

It is important to note that 'transgender' describes several related but distinct groups of people who use a variety of other terms to identify themselves. For example, many transsexuals see themselves as a separate group, and do not want to be included in the umbrella term 'transgendered'. Some post-operative transsexuals no longer see themselves as transsexuals. Despite the variations in terminology, most trans people will agree that the way they identify themselves is an important personal right, which should be supported.

What is gender dysphoria?

This is a psychological term used to describe feelings of pain, anguish and anxiety that arise from the mis-match between trans people's physical sex and their gender

identity, and from societal pressure to conform to the usual gender expectations. To seek relief from these feelings and pressures, trans people may choose to 'transition'.

What is gender transition?

This is the period during which a transgendered person changes their appearance and/or body to match their internal gender identity. It may or may not involve taking hormones or undergoing surgery. Because gender is so outwardly visible, trans people who are transitioning may be very vulnerable to discrimination, and will have a particularly strong need for the support of family and friends. Hormonal therapy can take from several months to many years to effect the physical changes that will produce a passable appearance. There are some trans people who may never pass completely.

Is transgenderism a form of mental illness?

Conventional medicine recognises several kinds of psychiatric disorders relating to gender, such as 'gender

identity disorder’, ‘gender dysphoria’ and ‘transsexualism’. Many different gendered people believe strongly that the expression of their right to make their own gender choice is not an illness, but is instead the sign of a mature, thoughtful and intelligent adult.

Because a medical diagnosis is necessary in order to receive medical benefits, trans people must often accept a psychiatric label in order to undergo funded treatment. This can mean that not only must they develop skills to cope with society’s stigma of being transgendered, but also to cope with the stigma associated with having a mental illness.

Can transgender people be same-sex attracted?

Yes. Just like the rest of the population, there is a range of sexual orientations within the transgender community.

How do I address a transgender person?

This is typically one of the first questions people ask. There are many variations in the ways trans people wish

to be seen or addressed. The answer is: ask the person how they want to be addressed, and how they want their gender identity to be described.

What is the legal status of transgender people?

It is certainly not illegal to be transgendered or transsexual, but our laws vary when it comes to recognising a person's choice to live as 'the other gender'. From time to time test cases take place, an example being a Family Court decision allowing a post-operative female-to-male transsexual to legally marry. In Victoria, current practice is that a Victorian Birth Certificate can be changed if the person has had sex affirmation surgery. Other records, such as VicRoads records, can also be changed. Victorian Drivers' Licences do not state sex, and the motor vehicle registry will change its records if an individual provides a letter from their doctor. Sex on a person's passport can also be changed if a change-of-name registration and letter from a doctor is provided.

Bibliography

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