

Gender identity, gender dysphoria

Gender identity and gender role

Gender identity is defined as a personal conception of oneself as male or female (or rarely, both or neither). This concept is intimately related to the concept of gender role, which is defined as the outward manifestations of personality that reflect the gender identity.

Gender identity, in nearly all instances, is self-identified, as a result of a combination of inherent (biologic) and extrinsic or environmental factors; gender role, on the other hand, is manifested within society by observable factors such as behavior and appearance. For example, if a person considers himself a male and is most comfortable referring to his personal gender in masculine terms, then his gender identity is male. However, his gender role is male only if he demonstrates typically male characteristics in behavior, dress, and/or mannerisms. Thus, gender role is often an outward expression of gender identity. In most individuals, gender identity and gender role are congruous.

What Is Gender Dysphoria?

Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify. People with gender dysphoria may be very uncomfortable with the gender their physical, sometimes described as being uncomfortable with their body (particularly developments during puberty) or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their biological gender.

People with gender dysphoria may often experience significant distress and/or problems functioning associated with this conflict between the way they feel and think of themselves (referred to as experienced or expressed gender) and their physical or assigned gender.

The gender conflict affects people in different ways. It can change the way a person wants to express their gender and can influence behavior, dress and self-image. Some people may cross-dress, some may want to socially transition, others may want to medically transition with sex-change surgery and/or hormone treatment. Socially transitioning primarily involves transitioning into the affirmed gender's pronouns and bathrooms.

People with gender dysphoria may allow themselves to express themselves and may openly want to be affirmed in their gender identity. They may use clothes and hairstyles and adopt a new first name of their experienced gender.

Gender dysphoria is not the same as gender nonconformity, which refers to behaviors not matching the gender norms of the gender assigned at birth. Examples of gender nonconformity include girls behaving and dressing in ways more socially expected of boys or occasional cross-dressing in adult men. Gender nonconformity is not a mental disorder. Gender dysphoria is also not the same as being gay/lesbian.

For some children, when they experience puberty, they suddenly find themselves unable to identify with their own body. Some adolescents become unable to shower or wear a bathing suit and sometimes undertake self-harm behaviors.

Diagnosis

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) provides for one overarching diagnosis of gender dysphoria with separate specific criteria for children and for adolescents and adults.

In adolescents and adults gender dysphoria diagnosis involves a difference between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned (biological) gender, and significant distress or problems functioning. It lasts at least six months and is shown by at least two of the following:

1. A marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and primary and/or secondary sex characteristics
2. A strong desire to be rid of one's primary and/or secondary sex characteristics
3. A strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics of the other gender
4. A strong desire to be of the other gender
5. A strong desire to be treated as the other gender
6. A strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender

Some research shows that children who had more intense symptoms and distress, who were more persistent, insistent and consistent in their cross-gender statements and behaviors, and who used more declarative statements ("I am a boy (or girl)" rather than "I want to be a boy (or girl)") were more likely to become transgender adults.^{3, 4}

Definitions and Pronouns

Definitions^{1, 5, 6}

- o **Gender** - denotes the public (and usually legally recognized) lived role as boy or girl, man or woman. Biological factors combined with social and psychological factors contribute to gender development.
- o **Assigned gender** - refers to a person's initial assignment as male or female at birth. It is based on the child's genitalia and other visible physical sex characteristics.
- o **Gender-atypical** - refers to physical features or behaviors that are not typical of individuals of the same assigned gender in a given society.
- o **Gender-nonconforming** - refers to behaviors that are not typical of individuals with the same assigned gender in a given society.

- o **Gender reassignment** - denotes an official (and usually legal) change of gender.
- o **Gender identity** - is a category of social identity and refers to an individual's identification as male, female or, occasionally, some category other than male or female. It is one's deeply held core sense of being male, female, some of both or neither, and does not always correspond to biological sex.
- o **Gender dysphoria** - as a general descriptive term refers to an individual's discontent with the assigned gender. It is more specifically defined when used as a diagnosis.
- o **Transgender** - refers to the broad spectrum of individuals who transiently or persistently identify with a gender different from their gender at birth. (Note: the term transgendered is not generally used.)
- o **Transsexual** - refers to an individual who seeks, or has undergone, a social transition from male to female or female to male. In many, but not all, cases this also involves a physical transition through cross-sex hormone treatment and genital surgery (sex reassignment surgery).
- o **Genderqueer** - blurring the lines around gender identity and sexual orientation. Genderqueer individuals typically embrace a fluidity of gender identity and sometimes sexual orientation.
- o **Gender fluidity** - having different gender identities at different times.
- o **Agendered** - 'without gender,' individuals identifying as having no gender identity.
- o **Cisgender** - describes individuals whose gender identity or expression aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- o **Gender expansiveness** - conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than typically associated with the binary gender system.
- o **Gender expression** - the manner in which a person communicates about gender to others through external means such as clothing, appearance, or mannerisms. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity or sexual orientation.

References

1. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Fifth edition. American Psychiatric Association. 2013
 2. Excerpted from DSM-5. Note: The term gender dysphoria replaced the term gender identity disorder used in an earlier version of DSM.
 3. Sherer, I, et al. 2015. Affirming gender: Caring for gender-atypical children and adolescents. Contemporary Pediatrics.
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4. Steensma, TD, et al. 2013. Factors associated with desistence and persistence of childhood gender dysphoria: A quantitative follow-up study. J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry, 52(6):582-90.
 5. [PFLAG Glossary](#)
 6. [Human Rights Campaign, survey](#)

Notes:

"Dysphoria" is a feeling of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and restlessness. Gender dysphoria used to be called "gender identity disorder." The condition has also been called "transsexualism." But this term is outdated. Some consider it offensive. Now "transgender" is often used to describe someone who feels his or her body and gender do not match.

Gender nonconforming (GNC) is a broader term that can include people with gender dysphoria. But it can also describe people who feel that they are neither only male or only female. Informally, people who identify with both genders or with neither gender might call themselves "genderqueer."

Gender dysphoria is not homosexuality. The internal sense of gender is not the same as 'sexual orientation'.

Symptoms & Diagnosis

To be diagnosed with gender dysphoria, a person has to have symptoms that last for at least 6 months.

In teens and adults, symptoms may include:

- Certainty that their true gender is not aligned with their body.
- Disgust with their genitals. They may avoid showering, changing clothes, or having sex in order to avoid seeing or touching their genitals.
- Strong desire to be rid of their genitals and other sex traits.

They might dress and otherwise present themselves like the gender they believe they are.

Undiagnosed or Untreated Gender Dysphoria

Diagnosis and treatment are important. People with gender dysphoria have higher rates of mental health conditions. Some estimates say that 71% of people with gender dysphoria will have some other mental health diagnosis in their lifetime. That includes mood disorders, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicide attempts.

Treatment

The goal is to deal with the distress that may come with the person's feelings.

Talking with a psychologist or psychiatrist is part of any treatment for gender dysphoria. "Talk" therapy is one way to address the mental health issues that this condition can cause.

Beyond talk therapy, many people choose to take at least some steps to bring their physical appearance in line with how they feel inside. They might change the way they dress or go by a different name. They may also take medicine or have surgery to change their appearance.

Treatments include:

- **Puberty blockers.** A young person in early puberty with gender dysphoria might ask to be prescribed hormones (testosterone or estrogen) that would suppress physical changes. Before making that decision, the young person should talk with a pediatrician and sometimes a psychiatrist about the pros and cons of taking these hormones, especially at a young age.
- **Hormones.** Teens or adults may take the hormones estrogen or testosterone to develop traits of the sex that they identify with.
- **Surgery.** Some people choose to have complete sex-reassignment surgery. This used to be called a sex-change operation. But not everyone does. People may choose to have only some procedures done in order to bring their looks more in line with their feelings.

With their therapists, people choose the treatment that is right for them based on what they want and what they already look like.

Some young people and even adults may have mixed feelings about their physical gender. They often find it useful to talk with a counselor before or after taking steps to become who they feel they are.