



Transgender  
and  
Gender Diversity  
Information  
for  
Guidance Counsellors

Transgender Equality Network Ireland



Transgender Equality Network Ireland  
Website: [www.teni.ie](http://www.teni.ie) / Email: [info@teni.ie](mailto:info@teni.ie)

*This publication is supported by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission.*

*Its funding is provided under the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity, PROGRESS (2007–2013). This programme was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields.*

*The seven-year programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies across the EU-27, EFTA–EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries.*

PROGRESS mission is to strengthen the EU contribution in support of Member States' commitments and efforts to create more and better jobs and to build a more cohesive society. To that effect, PROGRESS will be instrumental in:

- providing analysis and policy advice on PROGRESS policy areas;
- monitoring and reporting on the implementation of EU legislation and policies in PROGRESS policy areas;
- promoting policy transfer, learning and support among Member States on EU objectives and priorities; and
- relaying the views of the stakeholders and the society at large.

**For more information see:** [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/progress](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/progress)

The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

*The Institute of Guidance Counsellors welcomes the leaflet Transgender and Gender Diversity, Information for Guidance Counsellors, produced by TENI in conjunction with the European Commission and the Equality Authority, as an invaluable resource for guidance counsellors working with young people experiencing issues around transgender.*

*The information provided will assist guidance counsellors to support young people in an appropriate and inclusive environment.*

**Eilis Coakley**

*President*

*Institute of Guidance Counsellors*

**Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)** has produced this leaflet with the generous support of the European Commission and the Equality Authority, as part of the 'Burning Issues' campaign to ensure a legacy for the **European Year of Equal Opportunities for All** in Ireland.

This leaflet is intended to help Guidance Counsellors better understand transgender issues, and assist in providing effective guidance and support to transgender young people. Its goal is to raise awareness about transgender and gender-questioning young people and provide information that is both affirmative and inclusive of trans experiences. As the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) strives to promote equality and inclusive practice, we hope it will assist in building confidence and knowledge in your role as a supporter and facilitator working with transgender or gender-questioning people.

Individuals may present with a variety of issues and difficulties that need an informed and appropriate response. Because of the diversity of their experiences, Guidance Counsellors are in a unique position to be leading change agents and advocates for inclusion, creating welcoming environments in their schools. As a facilitator, supporter and information resource, Guidance Counsellors can help and support an individual in making informed decisions, whilst also providing the opportunity to simply explore and discuss feelings around gender identity.

---

### **What is Gender Identity?**

**Gender identity** is a person's internal feeling of being male, female or some other gender or combination of genders. Some people identify as having no gender at all while others feel their gender identity is outside the traditional male/female gender binary. Society understands and interprets gender through our gender expression – how we appear to other people, including our mannerisms, and how we walk, talk, dress, and live our lives. Gender identity cannot be changed by treatment or counselling and is completely separate from an individual's sexual orientation. Sexual orientation refers to one's sexual attraction to men, women, both, or neither, whereas gender identity refers to one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender.

### **What is Transgender?**

**Transgender or trans** is an inclusive, umbrella term which includes people of different gender identities and gender presentations, that differ from those usually associated with their birth sex, including intersex people, cross-dressers and people who cross-dress without any permanent desire for change, transvestites, transsexuals, transgender and other gender variant people. Exact definitions of these terms vary from person to person – some people who use these terms to describe themselves see traditional concepts of gender as restrictive.

A **transsexual** person identifies as, or has the desire to live and be accepted as a member of the sex other than that assigned at birth. This is accompanied by a sense of discomfort with, or inappropriateness of, their anatomical sex and a wish to have hormonal treatment and/or surgery to make their bodies as congruent as possible with their preferred gender. Put simply, a transsexual person is someone whose gender and sense of self is different from their apparent physiological sex.

A **transvestite or cross-dressing** person sometimes feels the need to dress in clothes considered appropriate to a different gender. There is generally no need or desire to change their gender, however, a small number can go on to identify as transsexual.

An **intersex** person is someone who was born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that is determined to be outside of the accepted norms for female or male with both sets, or a combination, of reproductive or sexual organs and/or different chromosomes or hormone levels present. There are many different types of intersex conditions – it is not always just about ambiguous genitalia.

An **androgynous** person may not necessarily identify as male or female and their gender may appear to be unknown, ambiguous, or indeterminate, neither expressively male nor female.

**Gender variant** people are themselves very diverse and it would be wrong to assume that there is a 'stereotypical' trans experience. There is no one generally accepted explanation for why some people are transgender. The diversity of transgender expression argues against any single or simple explanation. Increasing numbers of individuals now 'come out' or begin to question their gender at an earlier stage in life but there are many who may have lived with gender issues for decades before feeling confident enough (or having the opportunity) to seek support. Gender variance knows no social, ethnic, or socio-economic boundaries.

**Transphobia** is the irrational fear of people who transgress, challenge or break from stereotypical expressions of male and female gender norms. Transphobia is often expressed in subtle and overt ways that may include stereotyping, harassment, discrimination and violence.

We live in a world where trans people frequently experience prejudice and discrimination because their gender identities, gender expressions and sex embodiments are deemed less natural, less legitimate, and not deserving of the same rights or respect as those of non-trans people. Secrecy and stigma may lead many people to avoid 'coming out' as transgender. Coming out – telling someone that you are trans – is a very personal decision. As society becomes increasingly more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, young people are beginning to come out at younger ages and Guidance Counsellors can provide appropriate, non-discriminatory support to these individuals. Coming out for trans-identified youth can often be a complex process, which involves the intersection of sexuality, gender identity and gender expression. Therefore, the coming out age for trans-identified people may be delayed well into adulthood. If gender-questioning students or young people perceive their environment to be threatening or unwelcoming, many of them will experience a profound sense of isolation, alienation and fear of exposure.

### Peer Support

Transgender young people often do not have the same access to resources as adults. Peer support can play an important role in the overall health and well-being of trans and gender-questioning people by providing support and resources. As part of being trans-inclusive and aware, it is important that Guidance Counsellors can provide information about local and national trans peer support and professional resources to gender-questioning individuals. These may include individual therapy, participation in Internet discussions, group and social contact, or one-to-one support available through transgender community or LGBT youth organisations, such as BeLonG To Youth Services. Guidance Counsellors can assist with referral to peer groups that explicitly support diversity of gender identity and expression, and individual choice in decisions relating to gender identity.

### Raising Awareness about Trans Issues

As a Guidance Counsellor, it may be helpful for you to consider these questions:

- *What is your experience of working with trans or gender-questioning people?*
- *Are you interested in learning about trans issues?*
- *How comfortable are you talking about gender issues and being around trans people?*
- *What is your approach to gender and to gender diversity?*
- *Do you understand how societal issues (such as transphobia, homophobia, racism, sexism) affect trans people's health and well-being?*
- *Are you open to advocating on behalf of trans people if they are having difficulty with other issues?*

Transgender terminology is new and it may be especially hard to understand the language and identities that are relevant to trans people. The language used by transgender individuals is continually changing, as trans people become better able to articulate similarities and differences in identities and experiences. It is very important that Guidance Counsellors do not have stereotyped ideas of what it means to be trans. Visibility of the diversity of trans people is the most effective challenge to stereotypes. However, there are no data about the number of people who have concerns or questions about gender identity or cross-dressing, only some limited data on those who have sought surgical reassignment. Gender issues can affect all age groups, including children, adolescents, and older people who may present with previously unarticulated or repressed gender concerns.

As gender variance is often assumed to be evidence of homosexuality, individuals who are questioning their gender or are confused about gender identity issues may describe their feelings in terms of confusion about sexual orientation. It is important to remember that gender identity refers to one's sense of self as male, female, or transgender, whereas sexual orientation refers to one's sexual attraction to men, women, both, or neither. Transgender people can have a variety of sexual orientations – lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, straight or asexual.

One of the most alarming findings from recent Irish research on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people has been evidence of higher rates of self harm and attempted suicide, and particular mental health problems among young LGBT people<sup>1</sup>. Transgender people can experience very acute levels of prejudice and the resulting negative impact on mental health is linked to the lack of societal acceptance of trans people and experiences of transphobia. Therefore, the main focus in working with someone who is questioning their gender identity should be on being accepting and supportive.

### What you can do:

- Educate yourself about transgender issues and experiences
- Be aware of your attitudes concerning gender-atypical appearance or behaviour
- Create a supportive, welcoming environment with trans-inclusive posters, information leaflets and resources in your office – TRANS visibility is important
- Put in place specific resources and awareness training on trans issues, such as gender identity, working with transgender youth, and creating safer spaces
- Use names and pronouns that are appropriate to the person's gender presentation and identity; if in doubt, ask their preference
- Don't make assumptions about transgender people's sexual orientation, desire for surgical or hormonal treatment, or other aspects of their identity or 'transition'
- Keep lines of communication open with the trans or gender-questioning person
- Be aware of gender diversity and use inclusive language (partner – instead of boyfriend/girlfriend/husband/wife) when discussing trans relationships
- Respond positively when someone discloses their gender identity
- Create a 'safe space' environment that is free from judgement
- Become familiar with local transgender support groups and trans-positive events
- Don't assume that having a trans person's gender identity is problematic, or that it is the root cause of other issues.

## Conclusion

Some individuals explore gender identity issues through peer support, relationships, use of the Internet, or self-directed reading, writing, and reflection; others seek assistance from counsellors or therapists. It takes courage and persistence to confront gender issues that have often been surrounded with fear, shame, and feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Contact with peers who express their gender identity in various ways can help individuals to appreciate the multiplicity of options for gender expression, understand what is involved in and anticipate potential challenges relating to 'transition', and face the discrimination and harassment that is frequently experienced by someone who is visibly gender variant, as many trans people are.

Guidance Counsellors are more and more likely to be approached for assistance by transgender or gender-questioning people at some point in their educational practice. If they are informed and aware of the diversity of transgender experiences, they can have a significantly positive influence on the lives of many transgender and gender-questioning individuals.

## Resources

### Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) works to support transgender and transsexual people and individuals with gender identity issues. TENI is dedicated to promoting positive awareness about gender diversity and to advancing equality for transsexual and transgender people in Ireland. TENI can provide information, education and access to peer support services that promote greater understanding and awareness of trans issues in Irish society.

*Website: [www.teni.ie](http://www.teni.ie)*

*Email: [info@teni.ie](mailto:info@teni.ie)*

*Phone: 085 147 7166*

### BeLonG To Youth Services – LGBT Youth Services for 14-23 year olds

BeLonG To provides safe, positive and fun environments for LGBT young people – facilitating them through exploration, development and growth so that they can access all their rights as equal citizens and participate as agents in positive social change. BeLonG To supports designated LGBT youth groups throughout Ireland and offers resources and training for schools and youth projects on LGBT issues.

BeLonG To also runs a trans-specific youth group – **IndividualiTY**

*Website: [www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org)*

*Email: [info@belongto.org](mailto:info@belongto.org)*

*Phone: (01) 670 6223*

## IF A YOUNG TRANS PERSON COMES OUT TO YOU...

### SOME SUGGESTIONS

- Positive Affirmation is essential.
- If a young trans person comes out to you they need:  
Someone to listen, be positive, accepting and non-judgemental.
- Thank them for trusting you and having the courage to tell you. You must have been doing something right for them to tell you – build on that.
- Focus on them and what they need. Don't make it about you (or anyone else).
- Don't dismiss it as unimportant. Acknowledge that it is a big deal for them to tell you.
- Don't tell them they are too young to know. Many trans people are aware of their gender identity at an early age.
- Be led by the young person and what they need. They may just want to tell you and discuss their feelings or they may want further support and information. Remember that the young person may not have thought through the next steps after telling you.
- Take the time, don't rush. You may need to meet with the young person a few times. Encourage them to come back and talk to you again – to take their time, to reflect on what they want to do and whether they want to come out to other people. Support them as requested.
- Acknowledge the limitations to the support you can offer and refer them to additional support if appropriate.
- Assure them of confidentiality. (In exceptional circumstances it may not be possible to guarantee confidentiality if you have grounds to believe the young person is at risk.)
- Have information and resources available to give to them on LGBT or trans-specific youth groups. Information on support services for parents may also be useful.
- Remember, each person is unique and will require a different response. Use your professional judgement and skills to respond appropriately.
- This is a wonderful opportunity to educate yourself about trans lives and experiences.

