



Transgender
and
Gender Dysphoria
Information
for
Psychologists

Transgender Equality Network Ireland



Transgender Equality Network Ireland
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- *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

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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 raise awareness about transgender people, help mental health professionals understand and address trans issues, and assist in providing effective treatment and care of transgender individuals. Its goal is to promote transgender-competent mental healthcare and increase the number of psychological practitioners who engage in mental health practice that is affirmative and inclusive of transgender people - gender dysphoric, gender variant, transvestite, transgender and transsexual people or those with gender related issues. As the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) strives to promote equality and inclusive practice, we hope it will assist you in building confidence and knowledge in your role as a supporter and facilitator working with transgender people.

As a facilitator, supporter and information resource, psychologists can help and guide an individual in making informed decisions, whilst also providing the opportunity for them to simply explore and discuss their feelings about their gender identity.

What is Gender Dysphoria?

The experience of dissonance between the sex appearance and the personal sense of gender identity is termed gender dysphoria. The diagnosis should not be taken as an indication of mental illness. Instead, the experience is most constructively viewed and understood as a valid variation in the human condition, and is more accepted in certain cultures. It is important to recognise how gender variance, transgenderism and transsexuality are depicted and discussed within the medical literature, and the impact that this has on trans people's lives. The terms 'disorder' and 'mental illness' in the gender context are widely perceived by trans people as offensive and stigmatising.

What is Transgender?

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.

Transgender or trans is an inclusive, umbrella term which includes people of different gender identities and gender presentations including intersex people, cross-dressers and people who cross-dress without any permanent desire for change, transvestites, transsexuals, transgender and other gender variant people.

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' 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.

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, resulting in the perception of a much smaller trans population than may be the reality. Coming out – telling someone that you are trans – is a very personal decision. All aspects of health – physical, emotional/mental, sexual, spiritual – are potentially affected by being trans.

Psychologists can provide appropriate, non-discriminatory treatment to transgender individuals and are encouraged to take a leadership role in working against the discrimination of transgender people. It is important that you help a trans person work with you to determine what kinds of care they need, and for them to be clear with you about what being trans means to them, so that you are not basing their care on assumptions or stereotypes. Psychologists are in a position to influence policies and practices in institutional settings, particularly regarding the implementation of the **World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care**.

Good Practice

Good practice ensures that different treatment pathways are offered, tailored to the needs of the individual, recognising the great diversity of clinical and presentation needs. A transgender person should be addressed with the name, title and pronoun requested by the individual. If you are unsure, then please ask the person how they wish to be addressed. As everyone has the right to define their own gender identity and to be addressed in a way that is respectful, the practitioner must respect the individual's personal values and autonomy.

Availability, Accessibility and Choice

Regardless of location in Ireland, there should be competent and effective psychological practitioners around the country. Individuals should not have to wait unreasonable times or travel unreasonable distances for support.

Currently, in order to transition in Ireland, an individual must undergo certain medical procedures. They must first be referred by a General Practitioner to, and gain approval from, one or two mental health professionals such as a psychiatrist or a psychologist. While some mental health providers are thoughtful, sympathetic and have experience working with trans people, many others do not have any trans-specific training or experience at all.

As part of being trans-competent, clinicians are expected to know how to find answers to trans mental health questions and healthcare options. This includes knowing how to find trans peer and professional resources, and providing advocacy when making a referral, if needed. Working in co-operation with other gender specialist practitioners should be the goal of all clinicians, particularly when referring on to other

Raising Awareness about Trans Issues

Although no formal guidelines exist in Ireland for trans healthcare, it is not the responsibility of the individual trans person to educate mental health practitioners about trans issues. Many people do talk openly about their experience of being trans in the hope that it can improve the quality of care for other trans people.

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

- *What is your experience of working with trans people and their loved ones?*
- *Have you ever worked specifically with trans people – trans women (Male To Female transsexuals-MTFs), trans men (Female To Male transsexuals-FtMs), intersex people, transgender, cross-dressing, or gender variant people?*
- *Are you interested in learning about trans care?*
- *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 perceive transgenderism as a mental illness, sexual deviance, or a type of pathology?*
- *What is your approach to physiological diversity? Do you perceive intersexuality or disabilities as physical abnormalities?*
- *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 service providers?*

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. To facilitate communication, it is helpful for the clinician and the trans person to reach a common understanding of terms and key concepts in the discussion of gender concerns (e.g., gender, sex, sexual orientation). It is very important, however, that psychological practitioners do not have stereotyped ideas of what it means to be trans.

Trans Mental Health

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. 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 people¹. Transgender people, in particular, experience very acute levels of prejudice.

The particular vulnerability of trans people has to be acknowledged in the context of the lack of specific services, supports and resources to promote mental health among the trans community in Ireland. Professional staff across a range of relevant services (including psychiatrists, psychologists, GPs, social workers, and others) should receive educational resources and awareness training on the specific needs of trans people, highlighting the barriers they face in accessing these services. This must include the needs of transgender youth and address gender transition issues relevant specifically to young people.

It is essential that psychologists ensure their commitment to equality in service provision for trans people by becoming more accessible and appropriate to the needs of trans people. There is great diversity among transgender individuals and their needs relating to mental health services. Trans people may seek assistance with mental health issues, gender concerns, or non-trans-specific psychosocial issues. For some, all three concerns may be relevant, and the focus may need to shift over time to address the most pressing concerns.

Clinicians engaged in transgender health in Ireland are encouraged to become part of a network facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and communication as research in transgender health is still in its infancy, with widely diverging clinical and trans views about “best” practice.

Conclusion

Some individuals explore gender identity issues through peer support, relationships, use of the Internet, or self-directed reading, writing, and reflection. Others voluntarily seek psychotherapeutic assistance, or have psychotherapy recommended as a prerequisite to consideration for hormonal or surgical treatment.

It takes courage and persistence to confront gender issues that have often been surrounded with fear, shame, and feelings of hopelessness and despair. The psychologist can assist the trans person to consider all of the options and make an informed decision regarding their gender identity. Some transgender individuals have sophisticated knowledge about treatment options and have a clear direction they wish to pursue, while others have no knowledge and expect guidance from a professional.

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 the various treatment options that may be pursued, anticipate potential challenges relating to the transition and facing the discrimination and harassment that is frequently experienced by someone who is visibly gender variant, as many trans people are, especially when they begin transitioning.

Transgender people are an underserved community in need of empathic, ethical and clinically competent care. Mental healthcare providers are more and more likely to be approached for assistance by trans people at some point in their practice. Mental health clinicians can have a significantly positive influence in helping transgender people build resilience to heal from and cope with societal stigma, promoting healthy psychosocial development, and facilitating timely treatment of mental health issues.

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

Email: info@teni.ie

Phone: 085 147 7166

OutHouse – LGBT Community Resource Centre

Website: www.outhouse.ie

Email: info@outhouse.ie

Phone: (01) 873 4999

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

Email: info@belongto.org

Phone: (01) 670 6223

World Professional Association for Transgender Health

Website: www.wpath.org

TRANSGENDER AND GENDER DYSPHORIA

A Quick Reference Guide

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Coming out – telling someone that you are trans – is a very personal decision. All aspects of health – physical, emotional/mental, sexual, spiritual – are potentially affected by being trans. It is important that you help a trans person work with you to determine what kinds of care they need, and for them to be clear with you about what being trans means to them.

Working in co-operation with other gender specialist practitioners should be the goal of all clinicians, particularly when referring on to other health professionals and health resources for comprehensive care.

Peer support can play an important role in reducing social isolation and distress by providing support and encouraging the use of helpful organisations and resources. It is important that mental health clinicians provide information on local and national resources, where available, and assist with referral to peer groups that explicitly support diversity of gender identity and expression, and individual choice in decisions relating to gender identity.

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Trans people may seek assistance with mental health issues, gender concerns, or non-trans-specific psychosocial issues. For some, all three concerns may be relevant, and the focus may need to shift over time to address the most pressing concerns.

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