

DISCLOSURES

Unexpected disclosures about gender identity and gender expression bring with them a wide array of emotions: confusion, sadness, fear, surprise, disappointment, shock, anger, shame, and even relief or affirmation as family and friends finally understand why children may have been sad and withdrawn until they are allowed to dress and play in a way that feels right to them. The most important thing for family and friends to remember at this time is that they are not alone. Their feelings, questions, and concerns are important, and thousands of other people have gone through a similar process, and experienced the same feelings that they are having now.

YOU ARE NOT AT FAULT

Nobody knows why a person is transgender or gender variant, but there is no evidence that parenting or childhood experiences are in any way responsible. There can be no blame, as there is no fault with your loved one... or you! You did not cause this. You can, however, play a crucial role in how your loved one will ultimately feel about the phenomenon and about her or himself.

YOU ARE IMPORTANT

Self-care is crucial during this time, which means you must find support for yourself! It is imperative that you find a time, place, and people to whom you can express your true emotions, away from your transgender or gender-variant loved one, especially if your emotions are negative.

GENDER IDENTITY, GENDER EXPRESSION, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION: A STARTING POINT

What is gender identity? What is gender expression? What is sex? What is sexual orientation? And how are they all related? We know this can be confusing, so let's start at the beginning. When a child is born, the doctor looks at that baby and assigns it a gender (male or female) based on its biology (in this case its visible sex organs, although biological sex also includes things like internal sex organs, hormones, and chromosomes). This is what gets written on a person's birth certificate and is often called gender assignment.

For the vast majority of people, their gender identity, their internal sense of being male or female, matches that assignment. Those people are called cisgender, with cis being a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side" hence, their gender is on the same side as—matches—their biological sex. But for others, their gender identity does not correspond with their assigned gender and biological sex, and those individuals are often referred to as transgender, with trans being the Latin prefix for "across or over."

People reveal their gender identity at different times in their lives. Some do so from a very young age, while others do not make it known to anyone until later in life. This can be for a variety of reasons, including safety concerns, fear of alienation from friends and family, or potential discrimination at work, at home, or in public. There are also those who don't define themselves specifically as male or female: Perhaps they identify as both, or as neither, but they don't necessarily feel that their internal sense of self is at odds with their biological sex. Some demonstrate their gender, that is, communicate their gender identity in a manner that is comfortable for them, through clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, or other outward presentations or behaviour.

This communication, whether conscious or subconscious, is called gender expression. In most societies, certain examples of gender expression have been labeled "masculine" and others "feminine." These labels are artificial; all expressions of gender are valid, and while there may be patterns of expression more common for one gender than another, these patterns are not rules. When one doesn't strictly adhere to societal norms of "masculine" or "feminine" in gender expression, or their gender expression does not coincide with their assigned gender, we may refer to that as an example of being gender variant. As a child gets older, he or she will potentially become aware of feelings of attraction—physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual—towards other people.

This attraction defines sexual orientation. It is important to note that gender identity neither relates to, nor determines, sexual orientation. People who are cisgender and people who are transgender can identify as gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, asexual or queer. This might help answer a question we hear often: Why does a transgender person (let's say, for example, a transgender man) go through the trouble of transitioning from female to male if he is attracted to men (or vice versa for a transgender woman)? Doesn't that just mean they're straight? No, it doesn't. The key takeaway here is that it is not the sexual orientation that is the focus, but the gender identity: Their internal sense of gender does not correspond with their biological sex, regardless of their attraction to other people. Gender identity.

GENDER EXPRESSION. SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

Each one separate, each one distinct, and each of us has all of them!

WHAT CAUSES SOMEONE TO BE TRANSGENDER?

There is no single explanation for people being transgender. We don't know what contributes to the formation of gender identity? It's really complex." Whatever the cause, there is nothing wrong with your transgender loved one per se, and supporting them is critical to a more positive outcome. Gender identity, like sexuality, can be looked at as a continuum. A whole range of identities can be found on the gender spectrum.



WHAT IS TRANSITIONING?

The process of moving towards and affirming one's innate gender identity is known as transitioning. Some people transition through clothing, some through a medical process, and some through both, some through neither. There is no "right" way to transition, though there are some common social changes that many transgender people experience such as wearing clothes that more accurately communicate their gender identity, changing their names, or adopting different pronouns. One type of transition—medical transition—can include hormone therapy or surgical modification of the body. Since every transgender person's path and narrative will be different, it is important to remember that your loved one will need the space and time to determine how he or she wishes to live and express her or his gender identity.

Some trans people may know and express their need to transition at a very young age while others may not share their needs until well into their teens or even later in life. Again, there is no single right way to transition. What is important to understand is that the decision to transition, in whatever form, is a highly personal one. A respectful and caring approach involves providing the love, support, and resources necessary to help your loved ones make the most informed decisions to help them along their journey.

There are some who feel that innate gender identity has always been present and the word 'transitioning' is inaccurate to describe the process a transgender person goes through, from that person's perspective. What we see on the outside might be a change, but to the transgender person it is not so much a 'transition' as it is an 'affirmation'. This description may resonate more clearly with people who are transgender or gender variant. What is okay to ask and say—or not ask and say—when I learn that a person I know or care about is transgender? When you are ready and the timing is right, you may want to consider the questions below, which could lead to a meaningful dialogue with your loved one about gender identity. Do not, however, expect immediate and understandable answers to all your questions when first you ask them. They may well include areas that the trans person concerned has not yet completely sorted for her or himself.

Remember that you are gathering information in order to gain greater insight, understanding, and empathy. It is also extremely important to make sure your loved one is comfortable and that you respect his or her wishes if she or he doesn't want to discuss certain things with you. The initial conversation may lead to many subsequent discussions that will help you more fully understand your loved one's gender identity. It is essential that you ask questions designed to increase your understanding of the person's experiences and needs, rather than being intended to satisfy your curiosity.

You might begin by asking what the transitioning person would like to say to you, and then ask whether it is okay to ask some questions. Regardless of whether you take their lead or decide to ask questions first, remember to make the point that you are asking because you care and you will leave it up to them to stop the exchange at any time. You may find it helpful to begin the conversation by saying something like "I don't want to make any assumptions about you or your experience".

Here are a few suggested questions to begin this dialogue with transgender and gender-variant adults and adolescents: **Continued on page 4**

- What name/pronouns would you like me to use when addressing you?
 - What can I do to better support or help you at this time?
 - If someone asks me about your gender identity or gender expression, how would you like me to respond?
 - Do you have support from other friends and family members?
 - Is there anything that you've seen or read that you would like me to see or read?
- Will your loved one be safe?

With love, support, and resources, your loved one should have every opportunity to lead a healthy and happy life, and the sooner parents and guardians, friends, or family members come to terms with accepting their transgender or gender-variant loved one, the better. Being affirmed in one's gender identity and expression can improve self-esteem and relieve the stress of having to hide one's authentic self. Your loved one's safety—in school, in the workplace, in your faith community—can be a legitimate concern.

Know this: the future you envisioned for your loved one may now look different, but it can still be filled with wonderful possibilities. And while coming out or transitioning will not solve all of his/her problems—and may in fact introduce a new set of challenges it may make it easier for her/him to address those challenges. With love, support, and advocacy for his/her wellbeing, your loved one can lead a happy, safe, and productive life. How can I make my home respectful, safe, and welcoming to people who are transgender or gender variant? Your loved one will be most comfortable around you if they know that you love her/him unconditionally and support him/her as they travel their gender journey. You can help ease their possible feelings of vulnerability by creating a respectful space at home where he/she can explore and define her/his gender identity and expression without fear of rejection. For your home to be a respectful and welcoming space it is important to learn the appropriate terminology, show respect for your loved one's new name or pronoun choices, and have a basic understanding of transgender and gender-diversity; reading this publication is a great first step.

Additionally, you might consider which photographs, plaques or trophies, or photo albums you have on display. You can either take action or have a conversation with your loved one in advance. Also, engaging in dialogues with your peers about these issues in a positive, supportive manner and using affirming language conveys your unconditional love and support to those that you speak with, but particularly to your loved one. Further, others will take your lead as they interact with your loved one. Positive language is critical when discussing this topic with others; without it, you may find yourself struggling to demonstrate support. Mindful and authentic intent is important, too: Communicate your feelings with sincerity and honesty, and be sure that, to the best of your ability, your nonverbal cues align with your words.

After all, you can say that you love and support someone, but if your body language and tone belie your words, this can lead to miscommunication, hurt feelings, and a less-than-supportive environment. Learning to advocate for your loved one is certainly a process and may take some time. It may take you a while to feel able to support your loved one: You may fear what others will think or say about you, your parenting, or your family, or you may simply not know how to respond. After all there were no mentions of this as you prepared to become a parent. Over time, you may discover that the source of most of your anxiety derive from your own fears and expectations that may well change as you seek to celebrate your loved one's authentic sense of self.

Ph: (02) 9519 7599

www.gendercentre.org.au

SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION:

The Gender Centre Inc.

41/43 Parramatta Road

Annandale N.S.W. 2038

Phone (02) 9519 7599

Fax (02) 9519 8200

Anti-Discrimination Board

Level 4, 175-183 Castlereagh Street

Sydney N.S.W. 2000

Phone (02) 9268 5544

Fax (02) 9268 5500



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The Gender Centre Inc Ph: (02) 9569 2366 Fax: (02) 9569 1176

Web: www.gendercentre.org.au Email: reception@gendercentre.org.au