

Transgender 101

Transgender? What the heck is that? Here is some basic information to get your started. But please bear in mind, the transgender community encompasses a wide diversity of people, some of whom would surely disagree some of these definitions.

People may identify as transgender if their gender is different in any way from what people normally expect. Gender variations are probably more common than you think, because people usually try to appear the way others expect them to be, because they want to fit in, or they fear being ridiculed, or for safety and security.

Many different types of people identify as transgender. Some terms you may hear include

Male to female (MTF) transsexual — a person born with a male body, who feels she is actually a woman (totally or partially)

Female to male (FTM) transsexual — a person born with a female body, who feels he is actually a man (totally or partially)

Intersex — a person born with a body that isn't clearly male or female

Cross-dresser — a man that dresses in women's clothes, but doesn't want to permanently change his sex (women can cross-dress in men's clothes, but they have a lot more freedom to dress as they want anyway)

Transvestite — a less respectful term for a cross-dresser

Drag queen — a male performer who entertains dressed as a flamboyant, often ribald woman, usually at gay bars

Transsexual people may know their bodies are wrong for their gender from a very early age, or it may take them until middle age or later to figure it out. Some may cross-dress to feel better about themselves for a time. Eventually, however, many transsexual men and women find the conflict of living in the wrong gender to be so painful, they must either transition to their true gender or die.

As part of their transition process, trans people may choose to use **hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery (SRS)** to change their bodies to conform to their true gender. Others live in their true gender without changing their bodies. After transition, trans men and women usually blend into society, looking and acting just like any other man or woman.

Medical care for trans people is governed by the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care. They recommend that trans people should work with a therapist for three months before going on hormones, and that they live in their true gender roles for a full year and receive letters of recommendation from two therapists before being cleared for SRS.

Transitioning (changing sex) can be both an exhilarating and terribly difficult journey. On the positive side, after transitioning trans people feel in touch with their authentic selves as well as with their bodies. They can make closer connections with friends and loved ones, and live happier, normal lives. On the negative side, however, they may be rejected by some family members and friends. They may also face job discrimination, loss of employment, divorce, and restriction or loss of visitation rights for children.

Being transgender is a natural condition, not a physical or mental illness. Although it carries many challenges, it is also a wonderful opportunity to experience the world in a unique way, to make dear friends in the transgender community, and to become a magnificent human being.

For additional information, check out the following Web sites:

www.ifge.org – International Foundation for Gender Education, home of Transgender Tapestry magazine

www.diversitycenter.org – Santa Cruz County LGBT community center

www.tgforum.com – on-line e-zine for the trans community, with an extensive resource library

www.eqca.org – Equity California, an LGBT civil rights and advocacy organization

www.tsroadmap.com – Transsexual Roadmap, provides detailed information about transitioning

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Gender identity, sexual identity, and sexual orientation are entirely distinct things:

Gender identity refers to whether you feel you are a man or a woman—or a little of both, or something completely different!

Sexual identity refers to how you see your body: as male or female—or something in between, or perhaps something else entirely

Sexual orientation is about who you find attractive as sex or life partners; so, whether you are gay, straight, bi-sexual, asexual (not attracted to anybody), or perhaps something else

Only you can say what your gender identity, sexual identity, and sexual orientation are. You can be whatever you want, in any combination, and everybody should respect it. You can even change identities from time to time—who's to say you can't?