

Transgender Identity and Mental Health

by Jennifer Evans, PsyD

Terms and Definitions

Sex: Determined by biological markers such as chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics (intersex, female, male, etc.)

Gender Identity: One's sense of their own gender (man, woman, transgender, genderqueer, etc.), which may or may not be congruent with biological sex.

Gender Expression: Ways in which one communicates and expresses their gender, such as dress, hairstyle, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions.

Transgender (or Trans*): An umbrella term used to describe gender-variant or gender non-conforming people who have gender identities or expressions not traditionally associated with their birth-assigned sex or gender. Examples of some trans* identities are: genderqueer, two-spirit, agender, bigender, transsexual, transman/FtM, and transwoman/MtF.

Gender Dysphoria occurs when there is incongruence between one's gender identity and the gender or sex one was assigned at birth, which causes significant distress or discomfort for the individual. Gender Dysphoria can be a mental health diagnosis. Symptoms include:

- Incongruence between experienced/expressed gender and physical sex characteristics
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- Strong desire to be rid of physical sex characteristics because of incongruence with gender
- Strong desire for sex characteristics of another gender
- Strong desire to be of another gender

- Strong desire to be treated as another gender
- Strong conviction that one has the feelings and reactions of another gender

Mental Health Symptoms

Discomfort with birth-assigned gender or sex can range from minimal, to extremely distressing. Other examples of distress experienced by trans* people may include:

- Regular, everyday stressors or struggles (which may, or may not, be related to gender)
- Confusion or distress about gender identity, gender expression, or gender roles
- Coming out
- Relationship difficulties with family, friends, and significant others
- Social isolation
- Employment difficulties
- Other mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorder, and autism spectrum disorder
- Suicidal thoughts and/or attempts
- Discrimination, harassment, assault and/or violence
- Homelessness
- Difficulty accessing health care

Psychological Services

Those who experience distress may wish to pursue psychotherapy to discuss their experience, explore their identity, get support and resources, and/or receive a referral letter for hormones, and/or surgery. The goal of therapy is to assist transgender individuals in maximizing their overall psychological well-being, quality of life, and sense of fulfillment; **the goal of therapy is NOT to alter a person's gender identity.**

As a trans* client receiving mental health services, you have the right to:

- Access appropriate and respectful care
- Have your gender identity affirmed and respected
- A therapist who is knowledgeable about the health care needs of trans* people
- Receive individualized care that is tailored to your specific gendered needs
- Be informed of risks and benefits of treatment options

Obtaining a Medical Referral

Some trans* people may wish to pursue procedures that will help to better align their sex and their gender, such as hormone blockers, Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) or Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)/ Gender Confirming Surgery (GCS), though not all trans* people wish to do so. For trans* individuals who do wish to pursue SRS/GCS or HRT, meeting with a psychotherapist can be an important step in obtaining these services.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) has published Standards of Care (SoC) to assist health care providers in providing compassionate care to transgender individuals. The most recent version of the WPATH SoC (version 7) states that those who seek SRS/GCS or HRT should meet with a mental health professional in order to receive a health screening and/or assessment and, if appropriate, a referral to a medical provider. While there used to be a requirement for trans* people to attend a specified number of sessions, **this is no longer an absolute requirement.**

For trans* adults, the health screening/assessment with a counselor may consist of:

- Discussing severity and duration of gender dysphoria, as well as impact of symptoms on mental health and functioning
- Obtaining information regarding options for gender identity and expression, such as voice therapy, SRS/GCS and HRT
- Exploring and planning related to gender identity and expression
- Treatment planning for managing any co-occurring mental or physical health symptoms
- Receiving referral letter for SRS/GCS and/or HRT

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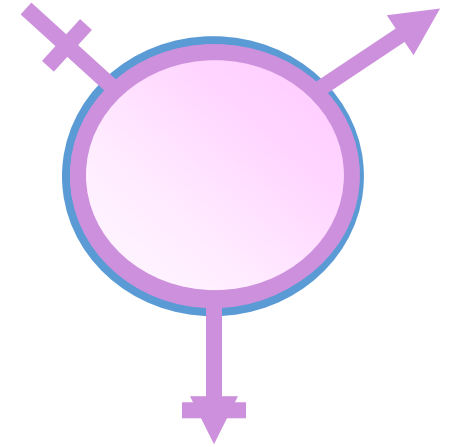
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*Trans*gender Mental Health*



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