

TIPS WHEN WORKING WITH GENDER

- At an appropriate time and manner, ask people directly how they wish to be described. Ask privately whenever possible to reduce discomfort and make sure your client feels able to answer honestly. Respecting a person's wishes regarding use or non-use of pronouns can affirm someone's experience and help them to feel acknowledged.
- A non-binary or trans person's "real" name is the one that they prefer to use. We can use inclusive language by keeping someone's former name, assigned sex and gender history confidential unless we have their clear permission and a clear imperative to disclose. When it is necessary to discuss someone's past, using names and pronouns that match how the person identifies is best practice.
- Remember that people know much more about their own gender identity and feelings than you do. Allow them to be the expert in their own experience and be guided by this, rather than thinking of yourself as the 'gender specialist'. No matter how many trans, gender diverse and non-binary clients you have seen, each person will require a new awareness for you. Instead of generalising, listen and tailor your responses to meet each individual's needs.

- Next time you are filling out any personal information on a standard form, pay attention to the gender options provided and ask yourself whether the options embrace all of the options people may require. If not, how would you feel if your identity was not even provided as an option? What if you wanted to select female but knew that you might be told you should list male? What if you saw yourself as a man, but needed services related to physical characteristics typically associated with female bodies? Would you feel uncomfortable or exposed?
- Be cautious of your own interest and make sure that you're asking questions about identity for the benefit of your client, not for your own curiosity.

GENDER DIVERSITY

A QLIFE GUIDE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Many people assume that gender is binary; that all people are women or men. However, gender can more accurately be thought of as a colour palette, with many possible shades of identity and subtle expressions of gender far beyond only woman or man.



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GENDER DIVERSITY

Many people choose to explore gender possibilities beyond binary expressions of gender, whereas others experience their gender as naturally fluid and shifting across the lifespan. People who don't experience their gender as belonging to the binaries of man and woman are often referred to as 'gender diverse' and/or 'trans'. Gender diversity includes people who identify as agender (having no gender), as bigender (both a woman and a man) or as non-binary (neither woman nor man). Some non-binary people identify as genderqueer or as having shifting or fluid genders.

TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Currently in Australia, people are almost always classified at birth as female or male. A trans person is someone who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is not typically associated with their assigned sex at birth.

In some societies, people choose their own gender when they come of age and/or more than two genders are recognised. For example, the Bugis society of Sulawesi, Indonesia recognises five distinct genders. In societies that recognise more than two genders, people often use a variety of culturally and linguistically specific terms instead of 'trans'. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the terms *sistergirl* (sometimes *Yimpininni* in the Tiwi Islands) to describe people who live partly or fully as women and who were assigned as male at birth. *Brotherboy* describes people who live partly or fully as men and who were assigned as female at birth.

Many trans people consider trans their history or experience and not their identity. They identify their gender simply as women or men. Others identify trans as their gender. A trans individual may or may not have characteristics or attributes that are stereotypically associated with their identified gender. For example, a trans woman who was assigned

as male at birth should not be considered as less of a woman based on whether her mannerisms appear feminine or masculine.

Experiences of gender are independent from sexual orientation. Many trans people identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual, whereas some trans people consider conventional sexual orientation labels inadequate or not applicable.

THE EFFECTS OF GENDER BINARIES

The gender binary is one of the most entrenched social constructs, even though it excludes many people's life experiences and histories. There is a set of embedded gender expectations based on assigned sex at birth that influence how people are told to act in the world. For those people who do not feel aligned to these constructed ideas of gender, there is a difficult process of exploration outside social constructions, which is often met with misunderstanding and discrimination by others.

The deeply embedded social resistance and refusal to respect people's own understanding of their gender is described as *cisgenderism*. *Cisgenderism* is a worldview in which someone's assigned sex and their physical characteristics are seen to determine their gender. *Cisgenderism* recognises only two valid genders and sexes, male and female. It is often unintentional, may not involve hostility or negativity and is often enforced through systems and policies even by individuals who may have affirming views about gender diversity. For this reason, it is particularly important to scrutinise our responses to people whose imposed gender category differs from how they experience themselves.

Trans people who are able to change the gender marker on their identity documents still face barriers where, for example, old documentation carries a name and/or gender that no longer applies. People who are trans and/or gender diverse face unwanted disclosures of gender history or physical characteristics in the course of activities many people consider routine, such as; renting an apartment; going to the bank; seeking voluntary or paid work that requires police checks; and travelling overseas. Trans people who seek medical interventions also have to negotiate often confusing and expensive medical systems which further exacerbates the experience of stigma and adds a unique layer of stress to transition processes.

Although the social visibility and acceptance of trans people has improved dramatically in recent years, trans people are still not as publically celebrated and validated as readily as lesbian and gay people or non-LGBTI people. This means that opportunities for witnessing and mirroring trans people's life experiences are often less apparent, making navigating gender expression outside of the binaries even more difficult.

AFFIRMING GENDER

The term 'sex change' is now considered inaccurate. Many people prefer to describe gender transition as gender affirmation or as affirming one's gender. This is based on increasing recognition that the validity of someone's gender does not depend on whether they have had particular medical interventions. Gender affirmation is not that someone becomes someone else but that, for the first time other people also view them as who they truly are. The processes involved in affirming one's gender are not single-directional and do not have a fixed completion.

Some common experiences people can have when affirming their gender (not necessarily in this order and not relevant for some people):

- Doubts about the suitability of their originally assigned gender;
- Seeking and experimenting with a variety of gender identities;
- Wanting to learn about other trans people and the range of their life experiences;
- Seeking further information, often in online spaces, in vibrant trans communities;

•Telling someone about a changed gender identification or experimenting with being called a new name and pronoun in one or more social settings;

•Researching, planning and potentially affirming a new gender in social, administrative or medical contexts;

•Ongoing disclosure management and adjustment to changes as a result of social, administrative or medical changes, stigma

•Being involved in advocacy in some way.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Inclusive language can be utilised by checking how people identify before using words that assume their gender, such as calling someone a mother or father or a girlfriend or boyfriend. For example, a trans woman and her boyfriend might prefer to be described as a straight couple instead of as a same-gender couple; or a trans man and his boyfriend may like to be described as a same-gender couple not a straight couple. Respectfully asking the individual can increase feelings of inclusion and reduce discrimination and isolation.

It is generally considered inappropriate to assume that someone identifies as trans based on their history or to call someone 'a trans', 'a pre-op transsexual', 'a transgender' or 'tranny'.

Some people with non-binary genders prefer to use she and he interchangeably to signal that they do not fit as either women or men. Other people prefer to be described using only their first name. Using someone's first name instead of a pronoun, one would say "Terry cycles to Terry's corner store." People with non-binary genders often prefer non-binary pronouns such as they. Others may prefer to be described as 'zie' (pronounced zee) instead of she or he. When 'zie' is used, 'hir' (pronounced like the word 'here') is used instead of her or his. Using these words in a sentence, one would say "zie likes to ride hir bicycle."



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