

MENTAL HEALTH GUIDES

UNDERSTANDING

GENDER DYSPHORIA

by Tammy Gagne



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AT A GLANCE

- Gender dysphoria is a state of emotional distress related to one's gender identity. Many transgender people experience this condition because their assigned sex does not match their gender identity. Not every transgender person experiences gender dysphoria.
- Symptoms of gender dysphoria include negative feelings about physical traits that don't match a person's gender identity.
- A mental health provider diagnoses gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is not completely accepted as a medical condition within trans communities.
- Many people with gender dysphoria worry about how others will react to them.



- People with gender dysphoria are likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.
- Although gender dysphoria cannot be cured, it can be treated. Patients can learn ways to manage this condition.
- The support of family and friends can make a big difference in how a person deals with gender dysphoria.

LIVING WITH GENDER DYSPHORIA

“**A**lexis Marie, why aren’t you ready yet?” Alex’s mom still used his full given name whenever he did something wrong. For fourteen years she had seen Alex as her daughter. She was still adjusting to thinking of him as her son.



Family support is important for someone experiencing gender dysphoria.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” she said when she realized what she had done. He knew she meant it. She had tried hard to use his preferred

name ever since he told her that he was transgender. But today she was distracted by his older sister's wedding.

Alex's mom had bought him a suit for the event. But it didn't fit as well as Alex wanted. He thought that he still looked like a girl. The vest was tight around his breasts. He hated his chest. Sometimes when he looked in the mirror, it felt like he was in one of those movies where the main character wakes up in someone else's body. It surprised him that those movies were always comedies. Nothing about this experience felt funny to him.



Someone with gender dysphoria may feel disconnected from their reflection.

Alex had been diagnosed with gender dysphoria a few months ago. He was still learning how to manage the intense feelings he had about his body. He was grateful that his family was supportive. But the way

strangers often looked at him made him uncomfortable. Today he would have to deal with a lot of strangers. He just wanted them to see him the way he saw himself on the inside—like the guy he knew he was.

ABOUT GENDER DYSPHORIA

Gender dysphoria is a state of distress. A person may experience gender dysphoria when their gender identity differs from their assigned sex. Approximately 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as a gender that is different from the sex they were assigned to at birth. Some of these adults experience gender dysphoria. But a



Gender dysphoria can cause extreme distress.

2020 study revealed that most people with gender dysphoria first experienced it as a child. Many kids with gender dysphoria, like Alex, have been dealing with these feelings for a long time.

WHAT IS GENDER DYSPHORIA?

Doctors assign sex at birth based on sex organs. For example, a baby may be born with male sex organs. The parents may give their baby a male name. They may also start raising the child as a boy. But the child might not identify as male while growing up. The child may feel more like a girl. She may want a female name and



Ultrasound technology allows doctors to assign the sex of a child before the child is born.

to live as a girl. Or a baby with female sex organs may later identify as a boy. A child may grow up and not identify with either gender. Identifying as a gender different from one's assigned sex can lead to gender dysphoria. This is when one's gender identity causes emotional distress. It affects

some people whose assigned sex does not match how they see themselves.

EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIETY

Assigned sex is based on physical traits.

But gender is a social construct. This means society created the idea of gender.

INTERSEX PEOPLE

Some intersex people are born with both male and female sex organs. Others may not have clearly defined sex organs. For example, a child may have female sex organs but lack a vaginal opening. Sometimes being intersex is evident at birth. But other times it is not noticed until **puberty** or later. Doctors may perform surgery to make the child's body appear male or female. They do this soon after the child's birth. But this is not medically necessary. And the person may not grow up to identify with that gender.



Some expecting parents host gender reveal parties. Other parents see gender as something for the child to explore as the child grows older.

Society has ideas about what it means to be a man or woman. Society's expectations are different for boys and girls. Many of these ideas come from **stereotypes**. For example, boys are expected to play with trucks. Girls are expected to like dolls.



Society links certain toys, such as building blocks, to gender.

Gender expectations are also present in

clothing. Men are expected to wear pants.

Women are expected to enjoy wearing

dresses or skirts. Society even links certain

colors, such as pink and blue, to gender.

The behaviors linked to a gender

vary by **culture**. But men and boys are

often expected to act tough. They may be expected to protect women and girls. Society may see it as a weakness if a man or boy cries. On the other hand, women and girls are expected to be sensitive. Society often expects them to be more caring than men or boys as well.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is a person's sense of their own gender. It can be different from their assigned sex. Someone born with female sex organs may see herself as a woman. But another person born with female sex organs might identify as a man. A cisgender

person identifies with the gender that matches their assigned sex. A transgender person identifies with a gender that is different from their assigned sex. The term *transgender* can be shortened to *trans*. A trans person may identify with the opposite gender. They may also identify as nonbinary. This means they do not identify as either male or female.

Not all trans people experience gender dysphoria. They may not feel emotional stress because of their gender identity. But many trans people do experience gender dysphoria. The discomfort can be difficult



A blue, pink, and white flag is a symbol of trans pride.

to manage. They often need the help of a mental health professional.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER DYSPHORIA

Gender dysphoria is different for each person who experiences it. Ashlee Marie Preston is a trans woman. She says,

“[Gender dysphoria] is . . . hanging onto your belief that you are who you are despite how others may define you.”¹ Ashlee felt alone when she was younger due to her gender dysphoria. She now realizes many other people have similar experiences.

WELL-KNOWN PEOPLE WHO HAVE GENDER DYSPHORIA

Some famous people have spoken about their gender dysphoria. Former Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner has spoken publicly about her experience with gender dysphoria. Chaz Bono is the adult child of singers Sonny Bono and Cher. Chaz was assigned female at birth. He often appeared on his parents’ variety TV show as a child. He wrote a book about his experience with gender dysphoria.



People of the male sex begin to grow more facial hair during puberty.

A person with this condition often faces many struggles. They may feel uncomfortable in their own skin. The person may dislike body parts that do not match their gender identity. This includes their

breasts or their penis, which instead align with their assigned sex. Discomfort often begins or worsens during puberty. Sex characteristics such as breasts and facial hair become more distinct at this time.

Some of the feelings that arise from gender dysphoria come from other people's reactions. Dani is a trans boy. He has found that using public bathrooms can be challenging. Many people want trans people to use the bathrooms meant for their assigned sex. But Dani looks like a boy. This has led to confrontations in school bathrooms. A girl once hit him with



Someone with gender dysphoria may feel more comfortable using a gender-neutral restroom.

her purse. She thought Dani was in the wrong bathroom. These reactions can make a person with gender dysphoria feel out of place.



Managing gender dysphoria is difficult when one's gender identity isn't respected.

Trans people may feel overwhelmed. They do not feel comfortable living as the gender that matches their assigned sex. Many are bullied when they try to live as the gender they identify with. This adds to the distress a trans person with gender dysphoria already feels. It can also increase the chances that the person will turn to substance abuse. They may use other unhealthy behaviors to cope with their feelings.

HOW DOES GENDER DYSPHORIA AFFECT PEOPLE?

Gender dysphoria occurs when a person's gender identity causes them distress. This may happen when gender identity differs from assigned sex. Symptoms must last at least six months for a diagnosis. Gender dysphoria is



Someone with gender dysphoria spends a lot of time thinking about being a gender that is different than their assigned sex.

not considered a mental disorder. It is a

condition that can be managed.

Dr. Norman Spack works with young

trans patients at Boston Children's

Hospital. Spack describes the distress of

some patients. He shares, “I take care of many children who . . . pray that they’ll wake up in a different body.”²

SYMPTOMS OF GENDER DYSPHORIA

A common symptom is negative feelings about traits that do not match one’s gender identity. A person may wish they didn’t have the sex organs they were born with. Younger trans people may also worry about developing other sex characteristics during puberty. For example, a trans boy might dread developing breasts. A trans girl might fear having a deep voice. Some trans



Assigned males and assigned females are born with different sex organs.

people may want to develop traits that

match their gender identity.

Worrying about how others will react to their gender identity is another common symptom. This worry causes them distress.

They may avoid certain social situations.



Someone with gender dysphoria may constantly worry whether others will accept their gender identity.

A person must show some or all of these symptoms to be diagnosed.

LIVING WITH GENDER DYSPHORIA

Everyday activities can be difficult for someone with gender dysphoria. Going to

school or work can be stressful. Many trans people want to dress to match their gender identity. But they may worry about being bullied if they do so. This worry is extreme. It can make it difficult to focus in class or on the job. Some people drop out of school or lose their jobs because of their distress.

Some studies show that trans people are at a high risk of abusing substances. Trans people may turn to alcohol or drugs to cope. These substances may make a person feel better at first. But this behavior is harmful. It can cause problems such as addiction. Some people misunderstand why

a trans person turns to substances. They may think that being trans drives a person to abuse drugs. But this isn't the case.

Kris T. De Pedro is an assistant professor at Chapman University. He conducted a study on trans students and drug use. He believes **transphobia** from peers increases the risk of drug use.

People with gender dysphoria face risks for mental health issues. Many experience depression or anxiety. Some have suicidal thoughts. Living with gender dysphoria can be emotionally painful. People may think there is no way to end the pain.



Some studies show that transgender students are more likely to abuse substances than cisgender students.

Eating disorders are also common.

These disorders can endanger a person's physical and mental health. They may not get proper nutrients. Getting help from a mental health professional reduces

these risks. And treating gender dysphoria can lessen mental health concerns.

SEEKING A DIAGNOSIS

People struggling with gender dysphoria may seek a diagnosis. This is one way they can get help for their distress. But not all people within the trans community consider gender dysphoria a medical condition. Some people worry that a medical diagnosis is a harmful label. They don't want others to equate being trans with being mentally ill. However, the diagnosis may help people deal with their dysphoria. Their feelings may be difficult to



Some people with gender dysphoria find comfort in receiving a diagnosis. It can be helpful to have a name for their feelings.

manage alone. Seeking mental health care can ease the distress.

Health care providers are able to make a diagnosis. Some people see a family doctor first. This doctor can refer the patient to

a mental health provider. They may see a **psychiatrist**. The doctor may also suggest visiting a counselor or therapist. A diagnosis often comes from a team of caregivers.

Mental health providers also assess the patient for other conditions that can

CHANGING LANGUAGE

Mental health providers use the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. This manual helps them make diagnoses. Gender dysphoria was called gender identity disorder in early editions of the *DSM*. The term changed in 2012. This change was made to reduce **stigma**. Identifying as trans is not a mental illness.



A therapist can help someone with gender dysphoria manage their anxiety.

worsen gender dysphoria. Two of the most common are anxiety and depression. Identifying these problems as early as

possible can be helpful. Treating these conditions can help a patient explore their gender identity.

Mihran Nersesyan has struggled with gender dysphoria for a long time. Nersesyan describes themself as androgynous. This means their appearance is partly male and partly female. Nersesyan explains, “My dysphoria was difficult to identify. . . . I don’t dislike . . . my body. What I experience is . . . that certain [parts] are missing from my body.”³ For a long time Nersesyan had no name for what they were feeling. This made dealing with gender dysphoria



Treating symptoms of anxiety and depression can help someone manage their feelings of gender dysphoria.



More people today are comfortable with expressing their gender identity.

even more difficult. The feelings haven't gone away completely. But Nersesyan has learned different ways to cope with negative feelings when they arise.

INCREASING NUMBERS

About 25 percent of young adults know someone who is trans. Some experts do not necessarily think there are more trans people in the world today. But social acceptance has increased. Experts think this has led to more trans people expressing their gender identities. Many express their gender without experiencing dysphoria.

HOW DOES GENDER DYSPHORIA AFFECT SOCIETY?

Researchers estimate that one in 30,000 people assigned male at birth will experience gender dysphoria.

The condition is less common in assigned females. About one in 100,000 assigned females face this issue. In 2016, a total



People continue to fight for trans rights today.

of 1.65 million adults in the United States identified as transgender. Experts think that people are becoming more comfortable with expressing their gender identity.



Feelings of gender dysphoria may become more intense during puberty.

Not every trans person experiences
gender dysphoria.

GENDER DYSPHORIA IN CHILDREN

Most cases of gender dysphoria begin
during early childhood. Dr. Maurice Garcia

conducted a study on trans people.

He wanted to find out how many had symptoms of dysphoria. He also wanted to know when their symptoms began. He found that about 75 percent of trans people had symptoms of dysphoria by age seven.

Some family members and friends do not take feelings of gender dysphoria seriously. They may tell young people that these feelings will pass. But experts say this experience is not a phase.

Children with gender dysphoria often have a hard time fitting in. Cricket is a trans woman who remembers feeling left out



A parent can help their child through struggles with gender dysphoria by supporting the child's gender identity.

at five years old. “I didn’t want to do what it looked like the guys wanted to do,” she recalls. “The girls didn’t quite accept me. Neither one was fitting for me at the time. I remember . . . just wondering what I am.”⁴

Adults with gender dysphoria may also feel scared and alone. They may not trust that others will accept them. They may try to keep their gender identity secret. Doing this can make people with gender dysphoria feel like they are leading double lives. This only worsens fear and loneliness.

OTHERS' REACTIONS

Nearly everyone worries about what others think of them. But this worry may be constant for someone with gender dysphoria. They may worry about how others will treat them. There is a stigma attached to being transgender.

Some people bully trans people.

Eighty-three percent of young trans people say they have been called names. Thirty-five percent have been physically attacked. No one wants to be the target of this behavior. But it can be especially damaging for someone struggling with gender dysphoria.

Twelve-year-old Zoey points out that bullies sometimes come disguised as friends. She has gender dysphoria. She shares, “Even the kids that do seem like they’re good kids . . . make fun of me.”⁵



Bullying can be especially hurtful for someone with gender dysphoria.



Someone's mental health may suffer if their gender identity is not accepted.

Some of the most hurtful comments can come from family members and friends.

When someone close to a trans person refuses to accept them, the relationship suffers. Family members may try to be

GENDER PRONOUNS

PRONOUNS	EXAMPLE SENTENCES
She/her/hers	She is here. I say hello to her. The phone is hers.
He/him/his	He is here. I say hello to him. The phone is his.
They/them/theirs	They are here. I say hello to them. The phone is theirs.
Ze/ hir or zir/ hirs or zirs	Ze is here. I say hello to hir. The phone is hirs.

Using someone's correct pronouns is important. They and ze pronouns are two examples of gender-neutral pronouns.

supportive. But it can be a big change for them. They do not always know how to act or what to say. They may accidentally use the wrong pronouns or birth name.

This can be hurtful to someone with gender dysphoria.

MAKING A POSITIVE IMPACT

People with gender dysphoria need people who listen to and respect them. They need a place to feel safe to be themselves.

LETTING THEM DECIDE

Many parents are choosing not to assume their children's genders. They encourage their children to choose their own clothes, toys, and interests. Gender-neutral names are more popular now than in the past. These are first names that are used for both girls and boys. Parents hope this will make their kids feel more comfortable with their gender identity.

Loved ones can make a huge difference by showing support.

Family and friends can support a loved one with gender dysphoria in several ways. They can treat a person according to their gender identity. Language is key. They can use the person's correct name and pronouns. They can compliment a person's appearance using words that match the person's gender identity. For example, a trans girl may prefer being called "pretty" instead of "handsome." A person's gender identity should not be shared without their permission.

Supportive family members can be a trans person's biggest allies. Allies are people who support someone's gender identity. They may fight for trans rights on a larger scale. Learning about trans identities can help family members better

LEGAL PROTECTIONS

For many years trans people have faced **discrimination** in the workplace. Many have had a hard time finding jobs. Some were fired because they were trans. In 2020, the US Supreme Court ruled that people cannot be fired for being transgender. About half of the US states already had similar laws. But this was the first national ruling to protect the rights of transgender people.



Friends can be important allies for someone with gender dysphoria.

understand their loved one. Keeping lines of communication open is important. It can help the person deal with bad days or problems such as bullying. For people with



Support from family members can help lessen distress caused by gender dysphoria.

gender dysphoria, this support is critical.

Knowing that home is a safe place can make gender dysphoria easier to manage.

Brian Altman is a director for the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration. He spoke about the importance of family acceptance of

LGBTQ youth. He says, “LGBT youth and young adults whose parents support them show greater well-being . . . [and] decreased risk for suicide, depression and substance abuse.”⁶

HOW IS GENDER DYSPHORIA TREATED?

There isn't a cure for gender dysphoria.

But the condition can be managed.

Patients work with mental health providers to create a treatment plan. What works well for one person may not work for someone else. Treatment plans vary depending on the person.



A patient works with a therapist to manage distress caused by gender dysphoria.

PSYCHOTHERAPY

One of the most common treatments for gender dysphoria is psychotherapy. This involves regular meetings with a mental health provider. The goal is to lessen the

patient's distress. The treatment is also called talk therapy. Sessions may be one-on-one with the provider. Therapy may also be done in a group. Sometimes family members take part in therapy.

Therapists help people with gender dysphoria explore their gender identity. Many people find behavioral changes helpful. For instance, a trans girl may start by wearing dresses. She may choose a name that matches her gender identity. Sometimes it can be easier for the person to make these changes slowly. For example, at first she may feel comfortable wearing



Some therapy sessions may involve all members of the family.

dresses only when she is at home. Other people may feel comfortable sharing their gender identity right away.

Gender can be expressed in a variety of ways. Embracing a gender identity might mean taking part in new activities. A child

who identifies as a girl may enjoy playing with dolls. Someone who identifies as a boy may want to play with a football. But not everything a trans person does has to match other people's idea of gender. Zawn Villines is a journalist who writes about mental health. She states, "[A] trans girl does not need to . . . 'prove' she is a girl.

LITTLE WORDS WITH BIG MEANING

A cisgender person might not think about his or her pronouns. But pronouns can make a big difference to someone who is trans. Using someone's preferred pronouns is a simple way to show support. A person with gender dysphoria may feel hurt when others use the wrong pronouns. This is especially true if it is done on purpose.



Doctors may prescribe hormone therapy to help a patient's body develop according to their gender identity.

No toy or clothing should be off limits . . .

because of gender.”⁷

HORMONE THERAPY

Talking to a therapist or changing behavior helps for some people. But these actions don't always lessen distress. In many cases,



Hormones may be given through a pill.

hormone therapy can help. Hormones are chemicals within the body that affect a person's mood and appearance. They trigger changes in the body during puberty. They cause a person to look more like their assigned sex. Scientists can make hormones in labs. Doctors can then give certain hormones to people with gender dysphoria. These make people look and feel more like their gender identity.

A trans man may not want to have a menstrual cycle. Taking a hormone called testosterone can stop him from getting a period. People of the male sex produce

more testosterone than people of the female sex. The hormone also stimulates the growth of facial hair. A trans woman may not want facial hair. Taking a hormone called estrogen can stop this hair growth.

BLOCKING PUBERTY

Puberty can be an especially difficult time for someone with gender dysphoria. Their bodies develop characteristics that are different from their gender identity. Some doctors treat gender dysphoria in young people with drugs that block puberty. Puberty blockers should not be taken for longer than four years. The medication can cause health issues if taken for too long. Stopping the physical changes can lessen distress.

On average, people of the female sex make more estrogen than people of the male sex.

Hormones should only be taken under the care of a doctor. It is important that the person takes a safe amount. Doctors will also screen patients for risk factors. It may not be safe for people who have had certain diseases to take hormones. Most patients who receive hormone therapy are at least sixteen years of age. Doctors do not usually recommend this treatment to children.

GENDER AFFIRMATION SURGERY

In severe cases of gender dysphoria, doctors may recommend gender



Patients should speak with a doctor if they are thinking about gender affirmation surgery.

affirmation surgery. This type of surgery physically changes the body. Surgery can change a person's sex characteristics to match their gender identity. A trans man may decide to have his breasts removed. A trans woman may want surgery to make her chest look more feminine. Other surgeries affect the sex organs. These surgeries can involve removing the ovaries or testicles.

Gender affirmation surgery is a major surgery. Doctors require patients to take time to consider it carefully. They must prepare both mentally and physically for the surgery. Hormone therapy can help

prepare the body for physical changes.

Talk therapy can help patients prepare emotionally. Patients also need to plan for the cost. These surgeries are expensive.

Some insurance policies do not cover them at all. Patients may need to pay the entire fee. Other insurance policies will pay only a small amount.

Surgery cannot make gender dysphoria go away completely. Lily Carollo had a positive experience with her surgery.

But she worries that people might see the surgery as a cure-all. She still



It may take several weeks to several months to fully recover from gender affirmation surgery.



Support from society is important for trans people and people with gender dysphoria.

experiences dysphoria. The distress

worsens when she is stressed.

No matter how gender dysphoria
is treated, the acceptance of others

is important. Having supportive family and friends makes it easier to manage the condition. Psychology professor Shawn M. Burn thinks that support from society could make a big difference. She states, "Perhaps it is not [transgender] people that are in need of fixing. Rather, what needs fixing is how we think about gender identity and gender identity expression."⁸

GLOSSARY

culture

the customs of a particular place or group of people

discrimination

the act of treating someone differently based on a person's gender identity, sexuality, or other characteristics

LGBTQ

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning

psychiatrist

a doctor who treats mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders

puberty

a period during adolescence when a person becomes sexually mature

stereotypes

widely held, oversimplified beliefs about a person or group of people

stigma

a societal attitude about something that creates shame around it and makes people feel embarrassed to be associated with it

transphobia

dislike of or prejudice against transgender people

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WEBSITES

Gender Spectrum

www.genderspectrum.org

Gender Spectrum is an organization that is dedicated to creating gender-safe spaces for children and teens.

Human Rights Campaign: LGBTQ Youth

www.hrc.org/resources/lgbtq-youth

The Human Rights Campaign strives to end discrimination against the LGBTQ community. It provides information for transgender youth and parents.

The Trevor Project

www.thetrevorproject.org

The Trevor Project provides crisis and suicide intervention for LGBTQ youth.

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Tammy Gagne has written dozens of books for both adults and children. Some of her recent books have been about gaming disorder and anxiety. She lives in northern New England with her husband, son, and a menagerie of pets.