

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

LIVING WITH GENDER DYSPHORIA

by Rachel Kehoe



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AT A GLANCE

- Someone who is transgender identifies as a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth. Sometimes, this physical mismatch causes extreme distress. This condition is called gender dysphoria. People can express their gender in many ways. Not all trans people experience dysphoria.
- Social transitioning can involve changing pronouns, names, style, and social activities.
- Testosterone and estrogen are chemical messengers called hormones. They cause sexual characteristics such as facial hair or breasts to develop.
- Medical treatments can help change a person's physical appearance. Young people may decide to take puberty blockers. These medications prevent the release of hormones such as testosterone and estrogen.



- Hormone therapy is another option for people with gender dysphoria. It changes the levels of testosterone and estrogen in the body. It helps a person's body better match their gender identity.
- Gender affirmation surgery can also reduce gender dysphoria. Top surgery and bottom surgery are gender affirmation surgeries.
- Gender-affirming health care is lifesaving. It can improve mental health and lower the risk of suicide.

INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING

GENDER

DYSPHORIA

Growing up, Jessie wanted to be a figure skater. Her family took her to the ice rink. Jessie was excited. She knew they rented figure skates. She ran up to the counter. But the cashier handed her a pair of hockey skates. “Boys wear these,” he said.

Jessie felt hurt and disrespected. But her parents stood up for her. They got the cashier to give Jessie figure skates.

Jessie was assigned male at birth. But she knew she was a girl. She liked to wear dresses and jewelry. Jessie always

Society has expectations for how people of different genders should behave. For example, girls may be expected to like pink and prefer figure skating over hockey.



connected with female characters in books and movies.

Then Jessie reached **puberty**. Her body began to change. Her voice deepened. She started to grow facial hair. These changes made Jessie feel very uncomfortable. She started to feel depressed. She began to experience more situations like the day at the ice rink. Some people refused to see her as a girl. Jessie told her parents she didn't like how her body was changing. Her parents took her to see a doctor.

The doctor gave Jessie puberty blockers. This medicine paused the development of



People with gender dysphoria may feel depressed or anxious about their appearance.

masculine traits. Jessie started **hormone** therapy when she got older. Hormones are chemical messengers. Some hormones influence growth and development. The hormones Jessie took gave her a more

feminine appearance. She started to feel more confident. She was happier in her body.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity is the way people see themselves. Someone who is nonbinary does not identify as male or female. A cisgender person identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth. A trans person has a different gender identity than their assigned sex.

Gender dysphoria occurs when this mismatch causes distress. Not all trans



Access to gender-affirming health care helps many teens and young people cope with gender dysphoria.

people experience this. Gender dysphoria

can cause other mental health problems.

But there are ways to affirm, or support, a person's gender identity. Gender-affirming health care helps with gender dysphoria.

1

WHAT IS GENDER DYSPHORIA?

Gender dysphoria is a feeling of extreme distress. It can occur when someone's appearance does not match their gender identity. It can result when people are not treated in a way that matches their gender identity.

People experience gender dysphoria differently. Some people may have a strong dislike of their sexual features. These features do not match their gender identity. They cause severe discomfort. People with gender dysphoria may want to get rid of these features.

Puberty can be a difficult time for people with gender dysphoria. Their bodies may change in ways that do not match their gender identity.





People can say their pronouns when introducing themselves to someone new.

People with gender dysphoria want to be treated in ways that match their identities.

Symptoms can occur when a trans person is misgendered. Misgendering is when a

person is mistaken for a gender that does not match their gender identity. People may use the incorrect pronouns. *She*, *he*, and *they* are examples of pronouns.

Deadnaming can also be harmful. It can worsen dysphoria. A trans person may change their name to match their gender identity. Their deadname is the name they were given at birth. Deadnaming can be **traumatic**. Jason Lambrese works with LGBTQ youth. “The person who they once were is dead,” he explains. “But the new person is alive, so their current name should be used.”¹



Trans youth are six times more likely to experience bullying than their cisgender peers.

Gender dysphoria is a mental health condition. People must experience distress about their gender for at least six months. Then they can be diagnosed. People may also have depression or anxiety.

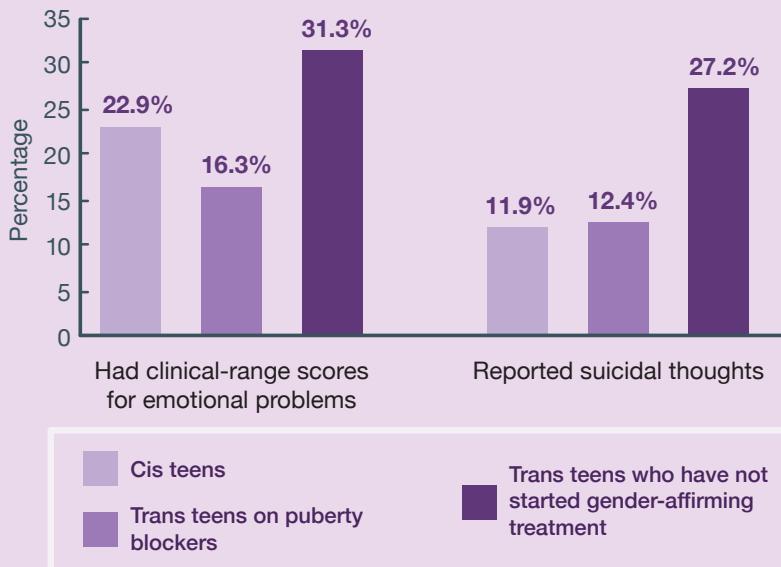
Treating these conditions makes it easier to treat dysphoria.

DISCRIMINATION

Untreated gender dysphoria can lead to poor mental health. A lack of gender-affirming treatment can increase suicide risk. People with gender dysphoria often experience anxiety. These feelings are made worse when people are rejected by friends and families.

Many trans people face **discrimination**. Trans youth are often bullied. They have higher rates of depression than their cis

GENDER-AFFIRMING HEALTH CARE AND MENTAL HEALTH



Source: "Differences in Mental Health Among Dutch Adolescents," Adolescent Health, 2020. www.sciencenews.org.

A study published in 2020 showed that receiving gender-affirming health care improved mental health and reduced suicidal thoughts in trans youth.

peers. They also are more likely to think about suicide. A 2017 study found that 7 percent of cis youth had attempted

suicide in the past year. Thirty-five percent of trans youth had a suicide attempt.

Emma Woodward is a clinical psychologist. She talked about mental health disorders that can occur with gender dysphoria. “We see a lot of anxiety and depression,” she says. “It’s often affecting every part of their life: in school, in friendships, in family life.”²

MISINFORMATION

Misinformation also creates difficulties for trans youth. Some people think that children are too young to know they are trans.

Gender specialists disagree. Research shows that children as young as three understand their gender. Diane Ehrensaft researches gender in youth. She says that trans youth are consistent in their identity. “A child will say. . . . Let me wear my dresses. Please call me she.” She explains, “That’s a child making a clear statement.”³

People may have incorrect ideas about gender-affirming health care. They may think that it requires surgery. But many trans people do not want surgery. There are other ways to transition, or live as a different gender. Social changes can support

gender identity. A trans person can change their pronouns. They may start to wear different clothing.

Some people worry that a trans person may detransition. This means that they stop transitioning. This is rare. And most people who detransition do so because of discrimination.

GENDER IDENTITY VS. SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation is not related to gender identity. *Straight, gay, lesbian, and bisexual* describe sexual orientation. These words describe the gender a person is attracted to. Gender identity is a person's own sense of gender.

2

SOCIAL TRANSITIONING

Some people take medicine when they transition. They may get surgery. Other people may transition only socially. Social transitioning is not medical. It allows trans people to express their gender identity. It includes things like changing pronouns and wearing different clothing. People may

begin to use a different restroom. They may switch to a sports team that matches their gender identity. People may try new hobbies. Social transitioning helps with gender dysphoria.

Coming out is one step in social transitioning. This is when a person tells others in their life that they are trans. This can be a difficult process. People learn

Clothing is one way to express gender identity.



to accept their own gender identity. It is a personal journey. Sometimes it is not safe for a person to come out. Others may respond violently.

There is no official guideline for social transitioning. People should make changes they feel comfortable with. A therapist can help people reflect on changes. They can

RESTROOMS

Social transitioning may involve using a different restroom. Some states have laws that allow trans people to use the restroom they feel safest in. As of 2022, there was no federal law that addressed what restroom trans students should have access to.

work together to create a plan that helps with dysphoria.

Children are too young to medically transition. But social transitioning is helpful. Some studies show that early social transitioning has long-term benefits. Matt Goldenberg works at the Seattle Children's Gender Clinic. He said, "Socially transitioning youth are [simply] making the same 'decisions' that cisgender children are making, in that they are seeking clothes, hairstyles, names . . . that reflect their gender identity and the resources in their community."⁴



People may have hobbies that do not match society's expectations of their gender identity.

PRONOUNS AND NAMES

Pronouns are a way to express gender identity. People may use different pronouns as they transition. Some people respond to multiple sets of pronouns. Using the incorrect pronouns can be hurtful. It can be difficult for friends and family to begin using

different pronouns. They should correct themselves and apologize. They should not make a big deal about it. These actions can help them make sure their loved one feels respected.

Asking about pronouns is important. People should not assume a person's pronouns based on their appearance. Using the wrong pronouns can worsen gender dysphoria.

Trans people can also change their name. Changing names can feel like a fresh start. "Getting to pick your own name is very powerful," says Anders van Marter.

“It’s a way of taking ownership of your own identity.”⁵

People in some states can change the gender on their birth certificate. They may also be able to change it on their driver’s license. These are ways to affirm gender identity. These changes can help with gender dysphoria.

GENDER-NEUTRAL PRONOUNS

Some people may not identify as male or female. They may identify as nonbinary, genderfluid, or agender. They may use pronouns like *they* and *them*. There are other gender-neutral pronouns. These include *ze/hir* and *xe/xem*.

APPEARANCE

People with gender dysphoria may not like their appearance. They may think their bodies do not match their identity. Social transition can help these feelings. For example, people may wear a wig. They may begin to wear makeup or remove facial hair. A change in style allows them to show their gender identity.

Some people experience dysphoria about sexual features. These include the penis and breasts. There are accessories that help with dysphoria about these body parts. A binder flattens the chest. Packers

and gaffs change the appearance of the **genital** area. People should make sure to use these accessories safely. Incorrect usage can cause long-term damage.

BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK

A strong support system can help with gender dysphoria. A therapist can help with transition. Friends and family can offer support. Respect makes transition easier. People can help affirm a person's gender. People can also find support online.

The Trevor Project is an organization that supports LGBTQ youth. It offers



Support from family and friends can help someone deal with distress from gender dysphoria.

resources to help trans youth and **allies**.

It has an online community where LGBTQ people can connect. They can support one another.

3

HORMONE TREATMENTS

Hormone levels change during puberty. This causes changes in the body. These developments can worsen gender dysphoria.

Testosterone causes the testicles to grow. It also leads to more body hair.

Estrogen is a hormone that influences breast development.

Young people can take puberty blockers. These prevent puberty from happening. They block the effects of testosterone and estrogen. Puberty blockers are usually **prescribed** during the early stages of

The hormone testosterone is responsible for the growth of facial hair and other masculine characteristics.





Most people who take puberty blockers begin doing so when they are about ten or eleven, when puberty typically starts.

puberty. A parent or guardian must agree to let their child take the medicine.

The effects of puberty blockers are temporary. They can give a person more time to decide what to do next. A trans person may want to medically transition.

Or they may decide to let their body develop according to their assigned sex.

Puberty blockers can prevent the need for future surgeries. For example, they stop the breasts from developing. A trans man will not need surgery to remove his breasts.

Puberty blockers are given in two ways. Some people receive shots. They must get regular **injections** to maintain the effects. Other people have an implant placed under their skin. It is usually put in the arm.

Delaying puberty can reduce anxiety for people with gender dysphoria. They are less likely to self-harm. Puberty blockers

can improve mental health. They can help kids feel more comfortable around others.

These drugs have long-term benefits. They can prevent people from having dysphoria about unwanted features.

People may experience side effects from puberty blockers. They may have a headache or feel tired. They may experience changes in mood. Some people lose bone density. But exercise and dietary changes help prevent bone loss.

In general, puberty blockers are safe. “Medications are rarely without side effects,” Dr. Jessica Kremen says. She works



Trans and nonbinary youth who received puberty blockers or hormone treatment had lower risk of depression compared with those who did not.

with trans youth at the Boston Children's

Hospital. "These medications have

enormous benefits for the population that

we care for."⁶

HORMONE THERAPIES

People with gender dysphoria may want

to change their bodies. They want their

appearance to match their gender identity.

Hormone therapy is one way. It is an option

for people over the age of eighteen. People

who are younger need to have a parent

agree to treatment.

Some trans people take hormones

throughout their lives. Others may stop

taking hormones. Hormone therapy

is partially reversible. Some physical

changes go away once people stop taking

hormones. But breast development and increased body hair cannot be reversed.

It takes time for people to see the effects of hormone therapy. Some characteristics change within a couple of months. A deeper voice is an early development. Other changes take more time. It can take several

TEENS AND HORMONE THERAPY

Specialists study how best to treat gender dysphoria in teens. Guidelines released in 2021 stated that teens needed to experience dysphoria for several years before they could start hormone therapy. Some specialists believe this is necessary. They think these guidelines reduce the risk of detransition. Others disagree. They think earlier access to treatment improves mental health.

years for changes in muscle mass to take full effect.

People who want to have a more masculine appearance take testosterone. This hormone stops people from getting periods. It also reduces the amount of estrogen produced. The voice deepens as a result. People begin to grow more facial and body hair. Their body fat distribution changes over time. They see an increase in muscle.

Testosterone is typically given as an injection. A gel or patch on the skin can also release testosterone. People start by taking



Testosterone is responsible for muscle growth, which is why it is more difficult for people assigned female at birth to gain muscle mass.

a low amount of testosterone. Doctors increase the amount over time.

Estrogen is given to people to make them appear more feminine. The hormone causes the testicles to shrink. It helps the breasts grow. People who are taking



It is important to take hormone pills and other medication only as prescribed.

estrogen lose muscle mass. They also have less facial and body hair over time.

People can take estrogen in several ways. It comes as a pill. Estrogen can also be received as an injection. It can be given through a patch. People need to take other

medicines before starting estrogen. They take a drug that lowers testosterone levels. They take this medicine for one to two months. Then they can take estrogen.

BENEFITS AND RISKS OF HORMONE THERAPY

Studies show that hormone therapy improves mental health. People report a better quality of life. Starting hormone therapy as a teen can be especially helpful. It can lower the rate of suicidal thoughts. It can also reduce the risk of developing mental health disorders. Adults who



People can talk to their doctors if they have concerns about hormone treatments.

received hormone therapy also had improved mental health.

But hormone therapy can have side effects. Doctors may advise against this treatment because of a person's medical history. Hormone therapy can cause

changes in blood pressure. It can increase the risk of blood clots.

Hormone therapy may lead to infertility. This means a person cannot become pregnant. People may not be able to have children even after stopping treatment. They may ask a doctor to freeze their eggs or sperm. This saves the eggs and sperm for future use.

4 GENDER AFFIRMATION SURGERIES

Some people with gender dysphoria get gender affirmation surgery. This permanently changes their appearance. It allows trans and nonbinary people to express their gender identity. These surgeries are available only to adults.

There are several types of gender affirmation surgery. Facial surgery is one option. Top and bottom surgery are also common.

The vast majority of people who get gender affirmation surgery are happy with the results. These surgeries can improve mental health. But all surgeries have

Approximately 25 percent of trans and nonbinary people get gender affirmation surgery.



risks. People may experience bleeding or infection. There can be other complications. Some people suffer nerve damage. There may be injury to the urinary tract. This can make it difficult to urinate.

Cost is another factor. Gender affirmation surgeries can be very expensive. Top surgeries can cost up to \$10,000. Bottom

FINDING A SURGEON

People should do research before selecting a surgeon. This helps make sure they will be happy with the results. A patient can ask their doctor for a referral. They may ask other people who have had the surgery for advice. They can look at photos of a surgeon's work. They should choose a surgeon who has a lot of experience.

surgeries cost about \$25,000. It also takes time to recover. Recovery times vary depending on the surgery. Most people resume normal activities six weeks after an operation.

FACIAL SURGERIES

Facial surgery can help with gender dysphoria. These surgeries change the shape of the face. They help affirm one's gender. There are many types of facial surgery. People may get only one surgery. Or they may get several.

Facial surgery can give a more masculine appearance. Surgeons can insert implants to the cheeks and chin. This creates a sharper jawline. Surgery can also be done to make the nose broader. People may want a flatter brow line. Surgeons can create an Adam's apple.

Other facial surgeries give a feminine appearance. People may get surgery to lift their brow line. They may want a narrower nose. Surgery can be done to reshape the jawline and chin. Surgeons can reduce the size of the Adam's apple.



People may get surgery to change the shape of their jawline and reduce symptoms of gender dysphoria.

Pain and swelling are common during recovery. People may have bruises that last for about a month. Surgeons may put gauze or splints on the surgical area. These can help with swelling. They should be removed only by a doctor.



Doctors meet with patients at checkups to monitor recovery following a surgery.

TOP SURGERIES

Some people experience dysphoria about their chests. They may get top surgery.

Breast tissue is removed for a masculine appearance. Surgery can help define the muscles in the chest. The nipples may be moved and made smaller.

The breasts are made larger for a feminine appearance. This can be done by inserting breast implants. Fat can also be added to the chest. Sometimes implants and fat are both used.

It takes about a month to recover from top surgery. People should not lift their arms over their heads during recovery. They also should not carry or move objects that weigh more than 5 pounds (2.3 kg). Top surgery causes scarring. Not following these instructions can cause difficulties with healing. It can cause scars to stretch and become bigger.

BOTTOM SURGERIES

Bottom surgery affects the genital region.

This area may be a source of distress.

A trans man may get bottom surgery to construct a penis. Surgery can remove female parts.

A trans woman may have her testicles removed. She may also choose to get a surgery that creates a vagina. Skin from the penis is used to make the vagina.

People remain in the hospital for three to six days after bottom surgery. They should avoid high levels of physical activity for about six weeks. People may need to use a



Patients will need to rest and avoid difficult activity in the weeks after getting bottom surgery.

catheter after some bottom surgeries. This device helps them urinate during recovery.

LIFE AFTER TRANSITION

Some states have introduced bills to limit access to health care for trans youth. Health insurance plans do not always cover gender affirmation surgery. But gender-affirming

health care is lifesaving. It can improve mental health. It reduces the risk of suicide. It is medically necessary.

Approximately 300,000 US teens identified as trans in 2022. Most people who experience dysphoria first have symptoms in childhood. Living with gender dysphoria is difficult. Social transitioning and gender-affirming health care help.

GENDER EUPHORIA

Gender euphoria is a feeling of joy. It is when a person's body matches their gender identity. People feel confident. They have improved mental health. Gender-affirming health care can help people achieve gender euphoria.

Ada Powers is a trans woman. She shared her experience with transitioning. “Nothing feels more exciting, scary, and wonderful than deciding to really move into yourself,” she said. “I like people to know just how much happiness was waiting for me after my transition.”⁷

GLOSSARY

allies

people who support LGBTQ people but are not LGBTQ themselves

discrimination

unfair treatment of people based on some aspect of their identity, such as gender

genital

relating to the sexual organs

injections

shots or medication given through the skin

prescribed

formally given as a medicine

puberty

a developmental period during which the reproductive system matures

symptoms

signs of a condition or disease

traumatic

extremely stressful

SOURCE NOTES

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WEBSITES

GLAAD: Transgender Resources

www.glaad.org/transgender/resources

GLAAD works to promote LGBTQ voices and stories. It also has resources and information for trans people.

National Center for Transgender Equality

<https://transequality.org>

The National Center for Transgender Equality was founded by trans activists in 2003. The organization works to amplify trans voices and support policies and laws that promote equality for all genders.

The Trevor Project

www.thetrevorproject.org

The Trevor Project is the world's largest LGBTQ suicide prevention and crisis management organization.

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