

A gender primer for psychiatrists

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Psychiatrists have a long tradition of supporting LGBTQAI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, asexual, intersex, and others) persons. In professional and public settings, we are educators, role models, and advocates for self-expression and personal empowerment. By better educating ourselves on the topic of gender and its variations, we can become champions of gender-affirming care.

Sex vs gender

A person's sex is assigned at birth based on their physiological characteristics, including their genitalia and chromosome composition. Male, female, and intersex are a few recognized sexes. Gender or gender identity describe one's innermost perception of self as a man, a woman, a variation of both, or neither, that may not always be visible to others. When sex and gender identity align, this is known as cisgender.¹

Gender identity

Gender identity is best described as a spectrum rather than a binary. Terms that fall under a gender binary include man, woman, trans man, and trans woman. A nonbinary gender identity is one outside the traditional binary of men or women. Being transgender simply means having a gender identity different than the sex assigned at birth. This includes persons whose gender identities cross the gender spectrum, such as trans men or trans women, and those who fall anywhere outside or in between genders. In this way, nonbinary persons are transgender.¹

The nonbinary spectrum

The term nonbinary encompasses many gender-nonconforming identities, such as agender, bigender, demigender, genderfluid, genderqueer, intergender, or pangender. Agender people have little connection to gender. Bigender individuals identify as 2 separate genders. Demigender persons feel a partial connection to a gender. Genderfluid individuals have a gender experience that is fluid and can change over time. Genderqueer people have a gender identity that falls in between or outside the binary. Intergender people have a gender identity between genders or identify as a combination of genders. Pangender people identify with a combination of genders. Note that patients may use some of these terms interchangeably or ascribe to them different meanings.² As the language around gender continues to evolve, psychiatrists should ask patients from a place of nonjudgmental curiosity what gender terms they use, how they define them, and what their gender means to them.

Gender expression and transitioning

Transitioning is what a transgender person does to align their gender identity



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and expression.³ Gender expression is the external manifestation of gender, including names, pronouns, clothing, haircuts, behaviors, voice, body characteristics, and more.¹ Transgender individuals can transition using a combination of social (name, pronouns, dress), legal (changing sex on legal documents, name change), or medical (surgeries, hormone therapies, puberty blockade) means. Transitions often help ease gender dysphoria, which is the clinically significant distress a person experiences when their sex assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity.³ Note that not all transgender persons choose to change their gender expression, and not all transgender individuals experience gender dysphoria. In this case, the proper medical term is gender incongruence, which is simply when someone's gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth.⁴

Names and pronouns

For many transgender persons, names and pronouns are an important part of their gender transition and expression.² Most of us have gotten into the habit of assuming pronouns because of socially established gender roles. This assumes that a person's physical appearance matches their gender identity, which is not always the case.¹ To be more affirming, psychiatrists and other health care professionals should try to break the habit of assuming pronouns. Often, an easy way to learn someone's pronouns is to introduce yourself with yours.

For example, "I am Dr. Agapoff. I use they/ them/theirs pronouns. It is nice to meet you." This creates a safe and open space for the other person to share their gender identity if they choose.

Why it's important

One does not have to be a gender specialist to deliver gender-affirming care. As psychiatrists, having a basic understanding of the differences between sex, gender identity, and gender expression can help us build rapport and support our patients who are transgender. Based on the many kinds of gender identity and expression, judging someone's gender based solely upon physical appearance is misguided at best and harmful at worst. Even people who are cisgender have many kinds of gender expression. For this reason, psychiatrists should approach gender with the same openness and curiosity as sexual orientation or other important considerations of emotional and physical health. Gender-informed care starts with us.

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Approach gender with the same openness and curiosity as any other important consideration of health