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# TRANS 101: A BASIC INTRODUCTION TO TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

## TERMINOLOGY

- **Sex Assigned at Birth (SAAB):** the sex classification people receive at birth, typically based on external reproductive anatomy. In the United States, this can be either male or female.
- **Biological Sex:** a person's chromosomal makeup, genitalia and reproductive anatomy, hormone levels, and secondary sex characteristics (such as facial hair and breasts).
- **Gender Identity:** a deeply held, internal sense of one's gender.
- **Gender Expression:** how a person communicates their gender to the world (including hairstyle, clothing, and personality characteristics).
- **Gender Dysphoria:** emotional distress associated with the incongruence between a person's gender identity and their sex assigned at birth and/or between a person's gender identity and their biological sex.
- **Transgender:** an umbrella term, sometimes abbreviated as "trans," which indicates that a person has a gender identity that is different from their sex assigned at birth.
  - Being transgender has nothing to do with sexuality or sexual orientation, which are related to whom a person is attracted to. Transgender people may be attracted to women, men, and/or genderqueer/non-binary-identified folks; they may be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, etc.
  - Transgender is an adjective, not a noun, so you could say "transgender person," but it would be improper to say "a transgender" or "transgenders."
  - Transgender isn't a verb, so a person cannot transgender or be "transgendered." An appropriate verb for this is *transition* (see below).
- **Transgender woman:** a woman who has a female gender identity and was male assigned at birth (MAAB). Sometimes people use the term male-to-female (MTF) to refer to transgender women, but this is less accurate and less affirming of their gender identity.
- **Transgender man:** a man who has a male gender identity and was female assigned at birth (FAAB). Sometimes people use the term female-to-male (FTM) to refer to transgender men, but this is less accurate and less affirming of their gender identity.
- **Cisgender:** an adjective describing a person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth (e.g., Michael Jordan is a cisgender man).

- **Genderqueer:** an adjective describing a person whose gender identity is neither male/man nor female/woman. Genderqueer can also describe a person who identifies as a gender that is a combination of man and woman, or someone who has a more fluid identity that shifts across time.
- **Non-binary:** an adjective describing a gender identity that is neither male/man nor female/woman, or is a combination.
- **Intersex:** a person whose natal biological sex characteristics do not completely align with typical male or female characteristics. This is most often due to chromosome combinations that are neither XX nor XY (e.g., XXY).
- **Pronouns:** the words we use in place of people's names when referring to them. In English, these are typically gender-specific: he/him/his for men and boys and she/her/hers for women and girls. There are also gender-neutral pronouns, including they/them/theirs and ze/hir/hirs. Using the pronouns a person uses for themselves is an important way of affirming their gender identity.
- **Gender transition:** the process a transgender person undertakes to align their gender expression and/or biological sex with their gender identity. This can be social, in which a person may change their name or pronouns or change their gender expression to be more masculine, more feminine, or more androgynous; medical, in which a person uses physical interventions, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and/or surgery to alter biological sex and secondary sex characteristics; or it can involve in both. Many transgender people undergo social and medical gender transitions, but not everyone has the ability or desire to do so.
- **Transsexual:** an outdated term historically used to refer to a person who had a binary gender identity that differed from their sex assigned at birth and who sought surgical intervention as part of their gender transition. Unless a person identifies themselves as transsexual rather than transgender, this term should not be used.
- **Cross-dresser:** a term used to refer to someone who alters their gender expression in order to present as a gender different from their assigned sex at birth, but maintains a gender identity that matches their sex assigned at birth. This can include individuals who cross-dress for performative purposes, such as drag queens and drag kings. Transvestite is an outdated term historically used to describe people who cross-dress.
- **Gender binary:** the gender classification system we have in Western culture that provides only two, discrete gender options (man and woman), which are associated with specific gender expressions: masculine and feminine, respectively. Typically the gender binary is further enforced by a *cisnormative* assumption that gender is predetermined by a binary biological sex and matches sex assigned at birth. In other words, in our gender binary system, it is assumed

that a person is either a man or a woman, and if they are a man, they have male biological sex characteristics, were male assigned at birth, and are masculine; if they are a woman, it is assumed they have female biological sex characteristics, were female assigned at birth, and are feminine.

- **Gender diversity:** A term that highlights the natural diversity of biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression across the population. Gender diversity manifests in not only the variance of where people fall along spectra of biology, identity, and expression, but also in the variety of combinations of each construct (e.g., there are masculine/butch trans men, feminine/femme cisgender men, masculine/butch trans women, feminine genderqueer people, etc., etc.). Gender diversity runs counter to the gender binary system.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT TRANS PEOPLE

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE AREN'T CONFUSED

- Research indicates that transgender children are as certain about their gender as cisgender children.<sup>1</sup>
- Most transgender people (studies report estimates around 98%) believe their lives improved due to transitioning and report satisfaction with gender transitions.<sup>2,3</sup>

### BEING TRANSGENDER IS MORE COMMON THAN ONCE THOUGHT, BUT WE STILL DON'T HAVE A SOLID COUNT

- We don't know exactly how many people are transgender, and this is due to a lot of factors<sup>4</sup>:
  - National census surveys don't ask about transgender identity.
  - Different surveys and studies define being transgender differently.
  - For safety and identity reasons, some people who fall under the transgender umbrella, don't identify themselves as transgender.
  - For a multitude of reasons, the transgender community is not very visible and is hard to collect data on.
- Studies suggest that the percentage of people who are transgender is at least 0.3 to 5%. This means, in the United States, there are at least 700,000 transgender people.

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE ARE A DIVERSE CROWD

- Demographic snapshots of transgender people show a wide variety of ethnicity, religion, education level, sexual orientation, gender identity, geographic location, and community type (i.e., urban, suburban, rural).<sup>5,6,7</sup>

- It appears that transgender people are pretty evenly divided between individuals who were male assigned at birth and female assigned at birth. People who identify as genderqueer are more likely to have been female assigned at birth.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE'S TRANSITION TIMELINES VARY

- When researchers ask transgender people about milestones, there is a great deal of variance in timeline. People's awareness of the incongruence between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth can happen in early childhood or later into adulthood. People may decide and be able to transition in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, or late adulthood. There is no single narrative or timeline for gender transitions!
- A study in 2008 found that on average (though again, there was a LOT of variation), transgender people experience themselves as transgender in childhood, before they even know the term transgender; identify personally as transgender at some point in adolescence; come out to others as transgender in late adolescence and early adulthood; and begin transitioning in late adolescence and adulthood (mean age for transgender men and genderqueer people is approximately 18 y.o.; for transgender women it's approx. 30 y.o.).<sup>5</sup>
- As awareness of transgender people has increased in Western culture, it is likely that these milestones are happening, on average, younger for transgender people today. Certainly, news coverage of children coming out and transitioning has increased greatly in the past seven years.

### GENDER TRANSITIONS ARE SAFE AND EFFECTIVE WAYS OF DECREASING GENDER DYSPHORIA

- Being further along in the transition process is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>8,9</sup>
- A longitudinal study found that transgender men's psychological health significantly improved after starting testosterone.<sup>10</sup>
- This is true for transgender youth, as well.<sup>11</sup>
- Little research has been able to examine the safety of hormone treatment in transgender people, but the research that does exist has found that it does not carry significant health risks.<sup>12</sup>

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE EXPERIENCE A LOT OF DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT

- 63% of transgender people report at least one severe instance of discrimination, such as losing a job, due to their gender identity or expression.<sup>7</sup>
- 50% report gender-related harassment by coworkers and/or employers.<sup>7</sup>

- 82% of transgender students report feeling unsafe at school, and 46% reported missing school due to safety concerns.<sup>13</sup>
- 87% of transgender students have been verbally harassed due to their gender expression or identity; 55% report this harassment occurs often or frequently.<sup>13</sup>
- More than half (53%) of transgender students report having been physically harassed at school for their gender expression and 44% report being physically assaulted at school in the past year.<sup>13</sup>
- 76% of transgender students report being sexually harassed at school.<sup>13</sup>

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE DON'T HAVE EQUAL RIGHTS

- Less than half (20) the states have transgender-inclusive non-discrimination laws. 225 cities and counties include gender identity in their non-discrimination laws, but a huge portion of the population still lives in places without protection from transgender discrimination.<sup>14,15</sup>
- 70% of states exclude transgender people from hate crime laws.<sup>16</sup>
- It is very difficult to get IDs and documents that reflect a transgender person's actual gender identity and/or presentation.<sup>17,7</sup>
- It is unclear what marriage rights transgender people have in states without legal same-sex marriage.<sup>18</sup>

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE ARE AN AT-RISK POPULATION

- Transgender people are more likely than the general population to struggle with depression and/or anxiety.<sup>8</sup>
- In a recent study, 41% of transgender people surveyed reported having attempted suicide in the past, compared with 1.6%.<sup>7</sup>
  - Suicide risk increases substantially when transgender people experience discrimination, harassment, and family rejection.
- Transgender people have alarmingly high rates of HIV infection.<sup>7</sup>
- Transgender people are four times more likely than the general population to live in poverty. Across education levels, they are at increased risk of having an income of less than \$10,000.<sup>7</sup>
- 19% of transgender people have experienced homelessness.<sup>7</sup>
  - The majority of transgender people who have sought refuge at homeless shelters report harassment, discrimination, or outright denial of services.

### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE EXPERIENCE MAJOR BARRIERS TO GETTING HEALTH CARE

- Many trans people report experience mistreatment by doctors and 19% report being refused medical care due to their transgender or gender non-conforming identity.<sup>7</sup>
- 50% of transgender people report having doctors that are uneducated about transgender people and issues.<sup>7</sup>
- Many insurance plans don't cover transition-related health care services, including psychotherapy.<sup>7</sup>

#### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE ARE OFTEN REJECTED BY THEIR FAMILIES, BUT FAMILY SUPPORT IS A CRITICAL PROTECTIVE FACTOR

- 57% of transgender people have experienced significant family rejection (in which most family ties were severed due to disapproval of transgender identity).<sup>7</sup>
- The 43% of transgender people with mostly supportive families experience less homelessness and substance abuse, engage in less suicidal behavior and sex work, and have lower HIV rates.<sup>7</sup>
- Multiple research studies have established parental and familial support as a predictor of higher quality of life and as a protective factor against depression and negative outcomes (including suicide) for transgender youth and adults.<sup>19,20</sup>

#### DESPITE A BAN ON OPEN TRANSGENDER MILITARY SERVICE, MANY TRANSGENDER PEOPLE SERVE IN THE ARMED FORCES

- The repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell did not lift the ban on transgender military service; transgender people are discharged when chain of command learns they are transgender.
- 20% of transgender people report having served or currently serving in the armed forces, a rate times higher than the general population.<sup>21</sup>

#### TRANSGENDER PEOPLE HAVE A LOT OF GOOD STUFF GOING FOR THEM, TOO!

- Transgender people are incredibly resilient, and in the face of immense discrimination, bias, and risk, the majority survive and many thrive.
- Research has tied this resilience to identity work, connection to the trans community, social support, and engagement in activism, among other factors.<sup>22,6</sup>
- Research<sup>23,24</sup> has found that transgender people identify many positive aspects related to transitioning and being transgender, including the following:
  - Congruency of self
  - Personal growth and increased resiliency
  - Increased empathy
  - Unique perspective on people of all sexes

- The benefits of living/seeing beyond the gender binary
- Increased activism and purpose
- Connection to the trans and LGBTQ communities
- Authentic experiences of pride
- Feeling alive
- Increased comfort and confidence
- Many online communities and websites, like [www.wehappytrans.com](http://www.wehappytrans.com), highlight the positive aspects of transgender lives.

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