

## Understanding Trans

“Trans” is an inclusive term used to describe people whose gender identity and/or gender role does not conform to “traditional” sex-role stereotypes: cross dressers, transsexuals, intersex people, drag queens and kings, transgenderists, androgynes, and gender benders of all sorts. As gay men, lesbians and bisexuals challenge heterosexual norms by loving members of the same sex, transpeople challenge gender norms by not conforming to traditional gender roles and in some cases by modifying their bodies to conform to their internal sense of gender.

## Defining Trans Terms

**Transsexual:** A person whose internal sense of gender does not match the anatomical sex that s/he was born with. Transsexuals have an internal image of themselves as the opposite sex and therefore desire to change their bodies to match their internal gender identity.

**Transgenderist:** A transgendered person lives full-time (or mostly full-time) as a member of the opposite sex, but without the desire/need for sex-reassignment surgery. Some transgenderists identify as members of the other sex, while others identify as a “third gender.” A transgendered person does not experience the extreme feeling of being “born in the wrong body” as a transsexual does.

**Cross dresser (transvestite):** Cross dressers periodically dress up as members of the opposite sex, but do not desire to change their birth sex. They dress up for a variety of personal reasons including self-expression, personal enjoyment, and/or sexual gratification. Statistically, the majority of cross dressers are heterosexual males.

**Drag Queen and Drag King:** People who dress as members of the opposite sex periodically for the purpose of entertainment, making a political statement, and/or expressing their own masculine or feminine side. Drag queens and kings usually identify as homosexual. They do not identify as the opposite sex (while they may refer to themselves as someone of the opposite sex when in drag).

**Gender dysphoria:** The feeling of being extremely distressed or depressed about one’s birth sex. Gender dysphoria is experienced by transsexuals (and some transgendered people as well) prior to hormone replacement and/or sex-reassignment surgery. Gender dysphoria may be so severe as to result in suicidal feelings or other self-destructive behavior.

**Gender Identity Disorder (GID):** The clinical description of gender dysphoria and transsexualism as listed in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, IV (1994). This is the diagnosis by which transsexuals obtain hormones and sex-reassignment surgery. GID has several components, including “a strong and persistent cross-gender identification” which causes “clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.” The diagnostic criteria state that GID is not to be confused with nonconformity to gender-role stereotypes, as in “tomboyish” girls or “sissy” boys.

**Intersex (hermaphrodite):** A person who is born with genitals and/or reproductive organs which show the characteristics of both sexes. Many are given arbitrary sex assignment surgery at infancy, usually altering their genitals to those of a female, based on the belief that gender identity is solely a learned behavior. This belief is contradicted by the experience of many intersex people who experience profound confusion regarding their gender identity despite their upbringing as a girl (or a boy).

## Queer Issues for Transpeople

As with non-transpeople, one's gender identity does not predict one's sexual orientation. Transpeople can be gay, straight, bisexual or asexual. It is important to make the distinction between one's gender identity and one's sexual orientation. For the transperson the central question is not about who one is attracted to emotionally and physically, but rather the internal sense of self and how to bring that sense of personal identity into the world. Although not all transpeople identify as part of a larger queer community, many do, and certainly the general public does not consider transpeople heterosexual, regardless of how they identify themselves.

Almost all transpersons and intersex persons grow up with a deep sense of internalized shame. Transpeople do not choose to be trans any more than do gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals; in fact, many Transpeople struggle to suppress their true natures, desperately seeking to fit into gay and straight cultures. As with homosexuals, the "coming out" process for transpeople can result in loss of support of family, friends, and employment.

Discrimination against transpeople is extreme - even greater than for homosexuals. A disproportionate number of "gay bashings" are directed at transpeople, who by their very nature are the most visible members of the queer culture.

Laws which negatively impact gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals affect transpeople in the same manner. Transpeople's rights to marry, to hold jobs, to safe housing, to receive appropriate medical care, and to otherwise fully participate as citizens are as jeopardized as those of homosexuals. And yet without specific trans-inclusive language in bills like ENDA (The Employment Nondiscrimination Act), transpeople can be excluded from protection.

## Selected Readings on Trans Issues

*Confessions of a Gender Defender: A Psychologist's Reflections on Life Among the Transgendered*  
by Dr. Randi Ettner.

*Gender Outlaw* by Kate Bornstein.

*Information for the Female-to-Male Cross-Dresser and Transsexual* by Louis Sullivan.

*In Search of Eve* by Anne Bolin

*Lesbians Talk Transgender* by Zachary Nataf.

*She/He* by Minnie Bruce Pratt.

*The Uninvited Dilemma: A Question of Gender* by Kim Elizabeth Stuart.

*Transgender Nation* by Gordene Olga MacKenzie.

*Transsexuals: Candid Answers to Private Questions* by Dr. Gerald Ramsey.

*True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism for Family, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals*  
by M. Brown and C.A. Rounsley.