



Between and Beyond: common questions about transgender identity

The Basics

Gender

Our culture tends to limit its understanding of gender to man and woman. OBGLTC believes there are more than two genders. OBGLTC uses the word “transgender” in its title as an umbrella term to describe the following people: crossdressers/transvestites, genderqueer, intersexuals, third gender, transsexuals, and any self-identified trans people. But even this is not necessarily completely accurate. Read on!

Sex and Gender

People are assigned a biological sex (Male, Female, Intersex)
People define their own gender (Man, Woman, Transgender)

Gender Identification and Sexual Orientation

Gender identification expresses how you identify your gender. Sexual orientation refers to whom you are sexually, affectionally, or romantically attracted. A trans person can be of any sexual orientation. These are often lumped together, despite being different, because of societal expectations around sex and gender. Women and men are expected to look and act a certain way and to be attracted to the “opposite” sex. Bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people do not always meet this expectation.

Gender identity refers to an individual’s sense of being a man or a woman.

Gender expression describes how people manifest feeling masculine or feminine through their appearance, behavior, or dress.

Common Questions

Crossdressers

Are people who crossdress gay?

Most of the people who crossdress are men who identify as heterosexual, though this is not exclusive. Women have greater leeway in dress than men, according to most cultural norms in the West and women who identify as crossdressers tend to be extreme in their crossdressing. People who crossdress may completely crossdress or crossdress partially, for instance only with undergarments.



Why do people crossdress?

There is no one reason why people crossdress. The best thing to do is to ask without judgment. Generally, but not exclusively, straight men who crossdress do so because it makes them feel better. Gay and bisexual men, performing in drag, often do it for entertainment, fun, and to earn money. While there are some who believe that drag queens are making fun of women, OBGLTC believes that drag queens are more likely making fun of men and what it means to be a man. Women who crossdress can be referred to as DRAB Kings, though “drag” is often used now for both genders.

Is there any difference between transvestites, crossdressers, and female impersonators?

Usually it's a matter of personal preference, though “crossdresser” seems to be the current favored term. Female impersonators are generally people wishing to entertain and earn money. Some see “transvestite” now as a derogatory term, though there are some who are trying to reclaim the word with pride.

Where did the word “DRAG” and “DRAB” come from?

DRAG = Dressed As a Girl DRAB = Dressed As a Boy

Genderqueer/Third Gender/Transgender

How many genders are there? Two? More?

OBGLTC believes there are more than two genders. Some make the argument that there are as many genders as there are people. Our society is conditioned to believe in only two genders (and two sexes) and this can be quite harmful to many, not only those who identify as transgender (and intersex).

What pronouns do we use with a transgender person?

The best thing to do is to ask the person which pronouns are preferred. Often used pronouns for transgender people are “ze” and “hir”, though there are others, and again, it is always best to ask the individual.

What do genderqueer/third gender/transgender people believe about their gender?

Many believe their gender does not fit into the categories of “man” or “woman”. Some believe it fits into both. Some identify as a gender that transcends these two commonly known identities of “man” and “woman.”

Isn't “transgender” an umbrella term for all of these categories? What about the word I've seen in print - “transgendered”?

“Transgender” can be and is used as an umbrella term, although there are many trans people who do not like it used in this way. Currently, OBGLTC uses it as an umbrella term. OBGLTC also uses “transgender” as a noun equivalent to “man” or “woman”. We would not say a person is “manned” or “womanned”; OBGLTC does not, similarly, use “transgendered”. Not all of the trans community is in agreement about the use of “transgender” and “transgendered”; OBGLTC continues to recommend using “transgender”.



Intersex

Isn't this term the same as hermaphrodite?

“Hermaphrodite” used to be the common term, but now it is out of favor. Technically, “hermaphrodite” means fully having both sexes in one organism, or, in this case, person.

How common is intersex?

That's not easily answerable. Somewhere between one in 1,500 and 2,000 births does a specialist in sex differentiation get consulted. This does not necessarily mean all of these babies are intersex or that this covers all intersex people. Some sexual variations show up later in life. (There are nearly 11,000 births per day in the US alone.)

When a child is born and appears to be intersex, what does happen and what should happen?

Often the doctor sees the child, tells the parents, and they panic. A gender, via surgery, is assigned. It is often inaccurate. The concealment method of assigning surgery is often wrong and difficult to undo. The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) recommends assigning a gender without surgery, using hormonal, genetic, and radiological tests. Medical procedures should be performed to sustain good physical health. The child can later decide what makes the best sense for hir.

Don't some groups separate intersex from transgender concerns?

Yes, they do. OBGLTC provides the information here as it often comes up when discussing gender identity. And ISNA does not advocate a separate sex for people born intersex at this time. As we do with other groups, we will continue to follow their lead.

Transsexual

If a person transitions, what is involved?

Many people think a transsexual person is one who has sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), but this is not always the case. Transitioning from one sex to another involves, at present, following the Benjamin Standards, which means several years of psychiatric care while living as the gender one understands themselves to be. It also, in addition to surgery, involves hormone therapy and treatment.

Can people transition both ways?

Yes. There are Male-to-Female (MtF) transsexuals and Female-to-Male (FtM) transsexuals. People who have not had SRS are said to be pre-operational. People who have had surgery are post-operational and may no longer consider themselves to be transsexual but the sex and gender they understand themselves to be. Some people cannot have surgery and are non-operational (this is often due to the great expense and lack of insurance coverage or a pre-existing medical condition like breast cancer). The surgery part of the transition is easier and far more successful for MtFs. There is some thought that the psychological transition is easier for FtMs, since these people, upon becoming seen as men, gain power in our society, while MtFs often give up the societal power given to men when they transition.



What is “passing”? What is “stealth”?

“Passing” refers to a pre-operational or non-operational trans person presenting and being believed as their desired non-biological gender. “Stealth” refers to people who have transitioned and choose not to disclose their gender history to some or all people.

Is transsexual different from transgender?

It depends on how you use the words. If you use “transgender” as an umbrella term, then a person who is transsexual would be part of the transgender umbrella. If you use “transgender” to describe people who are “third gender” or “genderqueer”, then transgender and transsexual are very different. As noted before, the use of “transgender” as an umbrella term is disliked by some transsexual people. Although OBGLTC uses “transgender” in this way, we are quite aware of the inadequacy of language. We also know that the definitions and understandings are evolving and deepening and that this information will undoubtedly be modified in time.

Transgender Concerns and Unitarian Universalism

Where have we experienced problems around transgender issues?

The earliest concerns voiced by those in the trans community were about not being seen and not mentioned in the UU community. No resolution around bisexual, gay, and lesbian issues included transgender-inclusive language until 2007. No resolution specific to transgender issues was introduced or passed at a UUA General Assembly until 2007.

Additional concerns have been about the inclusion/exclusion of transsexual women in women’s groups, though nearly every group eventually was inclusive.

Rest rooms are perhaps the biggest ongoing concern in our congregations and how to be inclusive.

Most of our congregations do not have more than one or two openly identified trans people in their congregations.

There are still many UUs who have a huge fear that any minister who is transgender will be a single-issue minister.



How to be More Understanding and Welcoming of Transgender People

10 BASIC ACTIONS

1. Respect a person's identity and self-label.
2. Create single stall bathrooms.
3. Say the words: Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender.
4. Do not use "-ed" at the end of "transgender".
5. Make no assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation.
6. Do not assume a trans person is all-knowing and/or wants to speak about trans issues.
7. Do not assume a trans person can speak only about their trans identity, nor that it is or is not an issue at all.
8. Hand out "Between and Beyond" wherever possible and refer people to this web resource.
9. Use the word "children" instead of "boys and girls", "people" instead of "women and men".
10. Create/include a "Transgender" option, as well as a box for "Other" on forms where gender is requested. Also, ask for "gender", not "sex".

10 ADVANCED ACTIONS

11. Ask questions about transgender issues.
12. Do not tokenize persons who are trans.
13. Talk to children about transgender issues.
14. Talk about gender roles you grew up with.
15. Review member policies for your men's and women's groups—do they make room to include trans folks?
16. Realize that learning about gender is a life-long process.
17. Do not divide groups (including in worship) into groups of men and women.
18. Do not ask the gender of a newborn child.
19. Experiment: Spend a day or week avoiding using pronouns when referring to someone important in your life.
20. Learn about the local laws regarding:
 1. hate crimes
 2. name changes
 3. changing gender
 4. discrimination (employment, housing...)
 5. impersonation of a gender



Recommended websites for more information

www.ftmi.org (Female to Male International)

www.gpac.org (GenderPAC)

www.ifge.com (International Foundation for Gender Education)

www.isna.com (Intersex Society of North America)

www.nctequality.org (National Center for Transgender Equality)

www.transfaithonline.org (TransFaith)

www.gender.org/remember/day/what.html (Transgender Day of Remembrance)

www.transgenderlaw.org (Transgender Law and Policy Institute)

www.transgenderlegal.org (Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund)