

## Understanding Transgender & Non-Binary Identities 101

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Transgender and non-binary are terms that describe someone whose internal sense of self is different from the gender they were assigned at birth. To understand this better, let's first look at what sex and gender are. Sex is typically described as male or female and is determined or assumed by looking at a person's anatomical reproductive system. Usually, doctors label this for us when we are born. We often ascribe different behaviors and lifestyles to individuals who are male compared to females. For example, males are often assumed to be strong, interested in sports, and less focused on their outward appearance. In contrast, females are assumed to be less interested in sports, more focused on their appearance, and more nurturing. These assumed traits are socially constructed by the culture we live in and have less to do with our actual physiological makeup. This leads us to gender. Gender describes our innermost sense of self in relation to what we might say is male and female. Someone may be assigned female at birth but identify as male and thus might seek to have their outward appearance match how they feel on the inside. Someone might identify with both male and female or as neither.

Young people are more likely to explore their gender identity through the way they dress, or may use different names, or the use of pronouns such as they/them or she/them. Now, it is worth mentioning that not all young people explore their gender

outwardly or consciously. For many youths whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth, there may be no need to explore gender, while some may explore their gender identity and expression and may identify that their gender assigned at birth aligns with who they are.

Transgender and non-binary youth typically conclude that they are trans after a lot of self-exploration and contemplation, which often includes the help of mental health professionals. They may then want to work towards aligning their physical appearance with their gender identity, which most often looks like hormone replacement therapy (HRT). **Being transgender is not a mental disorder.** According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Five (DSM-5tr), trans individuals experience psychological distress when their gender differs from the sex assigned at birth. This psychological distress can be remediated when the physical body aligns with the gender identity.

So, to sum it all up. Transgender and non-binary identities refer to anyone whose innermost sense of self (gender identity) differs from what is assigned at birth (sex). It is normal for youth to explore their gender identity or expression. The DSM-5tr notes that not aligning with one's sex assigned at birth can cause significant psychological distress, which can be addressed by making necessary efforts to establish congruency between one's gender identity and sex.