

A Primer on Transgender

1. What Does “Transgender” Mean? A “transgender” person is someone whose gender identity differs from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Their gender identity differs from their biological sex as assigned at birth. Transgender people are born this way and have no choice in who they are.

2. Who Are Transgender People? Transgender individuals include pre-operative and post-operative transsexuals; transgenderists (people living full-time in a gender different than their birth sex with no desire to pursue surgery); crossdressers (people whose gender expression occasionally differs from their birth sex—the preferred term to “transvestites”); and “mannish” or “passing” women (people whose gender expression is masculine and who are often assumed to be lesbians, though this is not necessarily the case). Transsexuals and transgenderists can be female-to-male (transsexual men), as well as male-to-female (transsexual women).

3. Are Transgender People Gay? Most transgender individuals identify themselves as heterosexual. Their intrinsic difference is their gender identity, not their sexual identity: these are two different concepts altogether. However, transgender people are perceived by most people as lesbian or gay, and thus are discriminated against in similar ways.

4. How Are Transgender People Discriminated Against? Like gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, transgender people face employment and housing discrimination. They are also denied public accommodations and access to health care. They are also potential targets for hate crimes: verbal harassment, threatening telephone calls and emails, and acts of violence committed by the same people who hate lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Transgender people, though, are much more likely to fall victim to discrimination and hate crimes than LGB individuals, because they often possess physical or behavioral characteristics that readily identify them as transgender.

5. What Are the Different Types of Transgender People? The largest subgroup of transgender people are crossdressers, most of whom are heterosexual men, although a number of women also crossdress. Unlike transsexuals, crossdressers wish to remain in their biological sex, and apart from their occasional crossdressing, often lead lives that are little different than other people. Most crossdressers are married and many have children, so they have much to lose from their transgender identity being disclosed.

6. What About Transsexuals? Transsexuals and transgenderists (non-operative transsexuals) differ from crossdressers in that they feel that they cannot live their lives in the gender assigned to them at birth.

7. Why Do They Feel that Way? The general psychological term is called “gender dysphoria,” an intense feeling of pain, anguish, and anxiety from the mis-assignment of a transgender person’s sex at birth. The feeling is most acute for transsexuals and transgenderists, and may lead to depression, anxiety, chemical dependencies, marital and other family problems, and even suicide. In order to seek relief from their gender dysphoria, transsexuals and transgenderists “transition,” or begin living their lives in their “true” genders. This means that they must disclose being transgender to everyone they know—from friends and family members, to employers and coworkers, to the neighbors and the mail carrier.