



Understanding & exploring
gender identity

Understanding gender, sex and identity

It is common for people to confuse sex, gender, and gender identity. Although these are all related, they are actually different things.

Sex is a label that you are assigned by a doctor at birth based on your body parts and chromosomes. Most people are assigned male or female. People whose bodies fall outside of the male/female binary are described as intersex.

Gender is more complex and difficult to define but can refer to a set of expectations from society, known as gender roles. Each culture has standards about the way that people should behave based on their gender.

Gender identity is a way to describe how you feel about your gender. There are many different ways that people might define their gender identity.

A binary view of gender

Traditionally, Western society views gender as binary, with two gender categories: male and female. This categorisation has been influenced by societal understandings of gender, such as what it means to be male and female, and the idea that gender is determined by our body parts.

Western society's normative gender expectations:

- A person's biological sex determines their gender identity and experience
- A person can only be a man or a woman
- Gender remains the same throughout life, based on what it was assumed to be at birth
- Women are feminine, and men are masculine

This current understanding of gender is present in many areas of our lives and impacts other factors which influence our developing gender identities. Some of these factors include:

- Family systems
- Culture
- Community
- The media
- Certain laws

“Our current understanding of gender is present in many areas of our lives and impacts other factors which influence our developing gender identities.”

Our first exposure to gender roles typically comes from our families. Family units may consciously or unconsciously reinforce traditional gender roles from birth. For example, encouraging children in gender stereotypical play, such as boys playing with trucks and girls playing with dolls. Disapproval of behaviour which fails to comply with gender norms can lead to internalised beliefs about what is acceptable or not in terms of gender identity and expression.

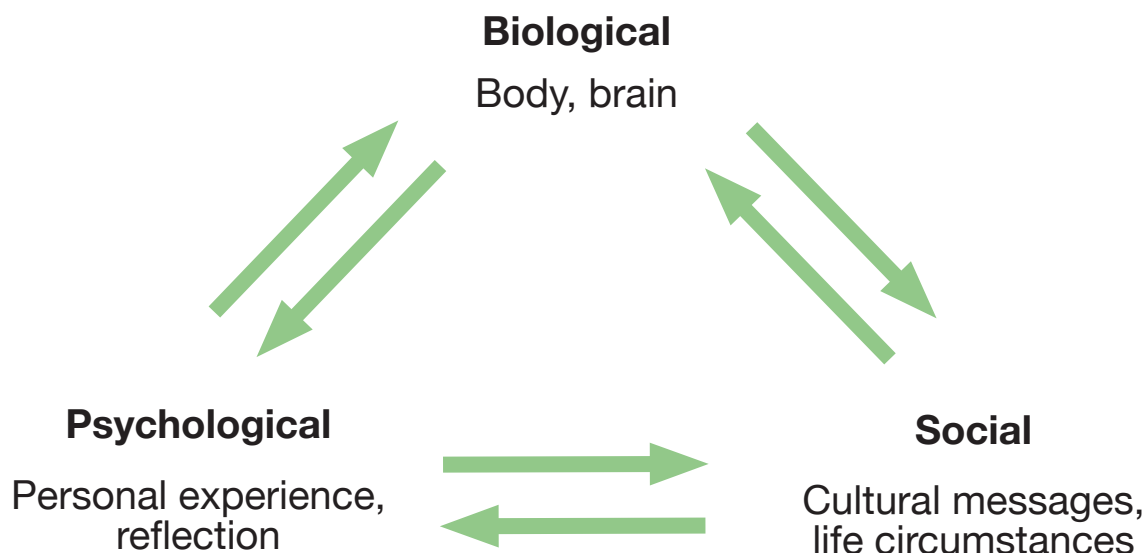
This binary understanding of gender can have a significant impact on our developing gender identities and mental health. As this understanding excludes people who do not fit typical binary ideas of male and female, this can lead to stigma and discrimination which makes self-understanding and self-acceptance difficult.

A biopsychosocial understanding

Gender diversity expert Meg-John Barker (2019) offers a biopsychosocial understanding of gender which shows how all aspects of our biology, psychology, and social context shape each other. Our bodies and brains are shaped by our gendered experiences, such as physical interventions (e.g. hormonal, surgical) and the gendered ways we navigate the world. This provides a different understanding which disputes the common assumption that a person's biological sex determines their gender identity and experience.

Gender concepts around the world

Although a binary way of thinking about gender has been prevalent in Western society, there are many non-Western cultures which have different gender systems. For example, in some Indigenous Native American cultures they use the term "two-spirit" to refer to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit.



What factors have influenced your understanding and experience of gender – your own and others?

Key points

- There are many different gender identities which exist outside of male and female.
- Your biological sex does not determine your gender identity and experience.
- Many different factors influence our experiences of gender.

Definitions of gender

There are lots of terms that people use when talking about gender. Gender identity is very personal, so people will use a variety of different labels or terms.

Some of the terms that people might use are:

Agender

Someone who identifies as having no gender. They may describe themselves as being genderless or gender neutral.

Cisgender

A person whose gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth are the same. For example, being assigned male at birth and expressing their gender as male.

Gender fluid

A person who feels as though their gender is not fixed and varies over time.

Genderqueer

Those who do not identify with being a man or a woman. This may also be used as an umbrella term for many gender non-conforming or non-binary identities.

Intersex

A person born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside.

Transgender

A broad umbrella term for all those who do not remain in the gender that was assumed when they were born.

These are just a few of the terms that people might use to describe their gender identity – please be aware that there are many more and that some people might not wish to label their gender identity at all!





Your gender identity

Everyone has a gender identity which they express in unique and personal ways. No one can tell you what your gender identity is as this is determined by how you feel. You should never feel pressured to fit in with other people's ideas or to label yourself. Everyone's journey with their gender identity is different and unique; some people know from a young age that their gender identity feels different from the gender they were assigned at birth, and some people might take a while to figure out their gender identity.

Some people experience a feeling of emotional distress, called gender dysphoria, because their gender identity does not match the sex that they were assigned at birth. Not everyone who is questioning and exploring their gender identity will experience gender dysphoria, but some transgender or gender-nonconforming people might experience gender dysphoria at some point in their lives.

If you are experiencing gender dysphoria, you might feel:

- That your gender identity conflicts with your assigned gender
- A strong desire to hide or get rid of physical signs of your assigned gender, such as facial hair or breasts
- Comfortable only when in the gender role of your preferred gender identity

These feelings may affect your emotional and psychological wellbeing, so it is important to reach out to your GP and people you trust for support if you are experiencing any of these.



Pronouns

Gender pronouns are the words we use to reference someone's gender. It is important to respect people's pronouns as this is a key way of acknowledging and affirming their gender identity. Respecting someone's self-identification means using the gender pronouns with which they most identify. You cannot always know what a person's pronouns are by looking at them so you need to ask them, and to share your own pronouns if you feel comfortable doing so.

Common gender pronouns: she/her/hers; he/him/his; they/them/theirs. She/her/hers pronouns have often been called 'female/feminine' and he/him/his pronouns 'male/masculine'. However, not everyone who uses 'she' feels like a 'female' or 'feminine'. They/them pronouns are an example of gender-neutral pronouns.

Deciding which pronouns feel most comfortable is a very personal process. It is completely fine to try out different names and pronouns and then change your mind.

When someone is referred to as the wrong pronoun, this can make them feel dismissed, disrespected, invalidated or dysphoric. If you make a mistake with someone's pronoun, it's okay, these things happen. The best thing to do is to apologise or say "thank you for correcting me" and use the right pronouns from then on.

There are lots of different pronouns that people may use, so always be sure to ask!



Gender expression

Gender expression is the ways in which we express our gender identity in the world. Gender expression can include our appearance, the way we dress and our behaviour. Some people have the same gender expression all the time, while others may change their expression over time or based on circumstances. For instance, we might express our gender differently when at work with colleagues, out with friends, or at home by ourselves. Everyone has different ways of expressing their gender and only you can know what feels like the right expression for you.

Gender expression can include our appearance, the way we dress and our behaviour

Different ways of expressing gender might include:

Physical expressions

- Clothing and accessories
- Hairstyle
- Make-up
- Tattoos
- Piercings

Social expressions

- Name and pronoun choice
- Mannerisms
- Body language
- The way you occupy different spaces such as public transport, changing rooms, and toilets

Experimenting with your gender expression

Gender expression is something which is not fixed and can be explored and experimented with, if you wish.

One way you could start exploring your gender expression is imagining different ways you might like to express your gender across different situations. Think about how you might feel in these different situations. Excited? Scared? Relieved? Embarrassed?

This can help you think about how you might want to begin experimenting with your gender expression.

If you want to, you can try experimenting with different ways of expressing your gender, beginning with the easiest ones on the scale.

Write down a few different ways you would like to try expressing your gender:

Rate each of these from 1 (easy) to 10 (really scary!)

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TIP

It is important to think about how ready and safe you feel to experiment with your gender expression, so that you feel comfortable and supported.

What would your experiment be?

Where would you do this?

Who would be with you, if anyone?

Communicating your preferences with others

Asking for what we need or want in relation to our gender and how other people treat us is important because this establishes what is okay and not okay and creates a basis for healthy relationships where you can be yourself. This can feel difficult when we haven't been taught how to ask for what we want or need, so remember to be gentle with yourself if you find this challenging.

There are different ways that boundaries might be crossed in relation to gender identity, and this will be different for everyone. Some examples might include:

- Being asked invasive and personal questions about your gender identity or expression
- Having your gender identity revealed to others without providing consent
- The wrong name or pronoun being used

TIPS

- If you are challenged when asserting your preferences, remember that this is not your fault, and it doesn't mean that you shouldn't have tried to set these boundaries
- If someone keeps crossing your boundaries because they are lacking in knowledge or understanding, direct them towards resources that might help them understand – you don't need to do all the work!

Steps for building healthy boundaries	Example: the wrong pronoun being used
1. Give yourself permission to set boundaries	1. Remind yourself "I have the right to set this boundary"
2. Tell the person how their action made you feel	2. "When you referred to me with the wrong pronoun, I felt uncomfortable"
3. Be direct in expressing your needs	3. "I need the correct pronouns to be used so that my identity feels acknowledged and affirmed"
4. Be clear and concrete about what you want	4. "It's respectful to use they, them and their when you refer to me, please use these pronouns"
5. Make sure the person understands your request	5. "Is that clear?"

Consider if there have been any times when you felt as though your boundaries have been crossed in relation to your gender identity or expression? What did that feel like? How would you like things to be different?

Write down your
thoughts here

Noticing and managing triggers

An important part of looking after ourselves is developing and using self-awareness. It can be helpful to be aware of the things that trigger difficult feelings or behaviours or make existing feelings worse so that we learn how to manage these.

Triggers will be different for everyone in relation to gender, but might include:

- Being misgendered or someone using inappropriate pronouns
- Being referred to with gendered terms such as “son, dude, madam, miss”, etc
- Remembering a painful memory

When you feel triggered, focus on what you can do in that moment, be kind to yourself and remember that these feelings will pass. Think about things that make you feel better, such as calling a friend, playing music you love, eating your favourite food, going for a walk – find what works best for you.

5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique

Focus on your breathing, then identify:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

What are your triggers?

What can you do when you feel distressed?

Where to go now

If you would like to understand and explore your gender identity further, here are some further resources and suggestions.

Find your role models through social media

- Look for resources online where you can get advice, discover role models, and become part of a supportive community
- This is a good way to remind yourself that you are not alone and that there are other people out there who share your experience
- Remember to be careful with navigating the comments sections on websites or profiles discussing gender identity issues as some people might leave comments which could be distressing

UK charities offering support, advice, and information

- LGBT Health and Wellbeing <https://www.lgbthealth.org.uk>
- Gendered Intelligence <http://genderedintelligence.co.uk>
- Mermaids <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk>
- Stonewall <https://www.stonewall.org.uk>

Further resources

Website offering various free resources: <https://www.rewriting-the-rules.com/>

Podcast: *Gender Stories* with Alex Iantaffi

Books

Life Isn't Binary: On Being Both, Beyond and In-Between by Meg-John Barker & Alex Iantaffi

Gender: A Graphic Guide by Meg-John Barker

How to Understand Your Gender: A Practical Guide for Exploring Who You Are by Alex Iantaffi & Meg-John Barker

Therapy

Therapy may be beneficial in facilitating the exploration and affirmation of your gender identity.

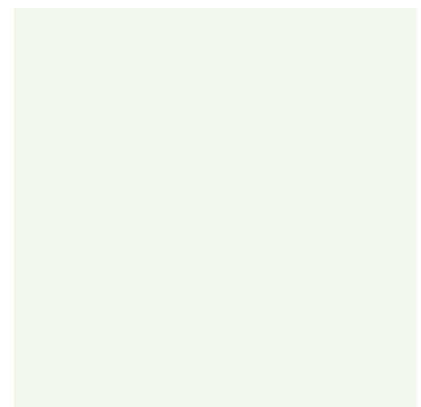
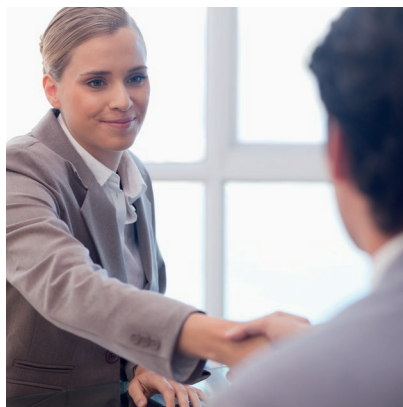
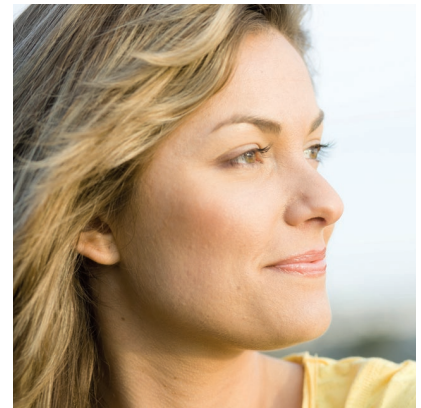


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