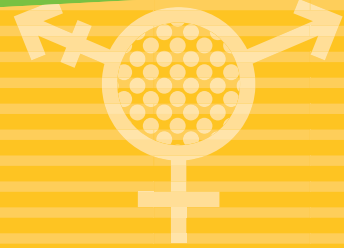




Gender identity and mental health



About gender identity

Gender identity is generally developed very early in life. It's about how you experience or perceive your gender, how you show this to others, and how you want others to treat you.

The physical features that you were born with (your biological sex) do not necessarily define your gender. Although gender has traditionally been divided into "male" and "female", it is now widely recognised that gender is not that simple. The gender spectrum includes numerous identities including male, female, a mixture of both, no gender, a fluid gender, or another gender. Whilst people who experience gender diversity identify with a range of different terms, "trans and gender diverse" is often used

as an umbrella term to describe people who identify with a gender that is different to the one assigned to them at birth.

If a young person has confided in you about their gender diversity be sure to respect their privacy and ask before sharing their information with anyone else. They may not be comfortable in letting other people know yet and it is very important that the young person remains in control of their personal information.

What are the early signs suggesting a possible mental health problem?

Things to look out for in the young person include:

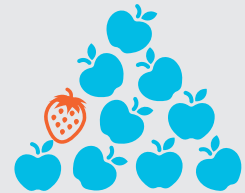
- **Changes in mood** – feeling sadder, more anxious, or more irritable than usual
- **Changes in behaviour** – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive
- **Changes in relationships** – falling out with friends or their partner, or conflict with family
- **Changes in appetite** – eating more or less than usual, or losing or gaining weight rapidly
- **Changes in sleep patterns** – not sleeping enough, or sleeping too much
- **Changes in coping** – feeling overwhelmed or tired of life
- **Changes in thinking** – more negative thoughts, or thoughts of self harm or suicide.

Common experiences

Most trans and gender diverse young people experience the same range of mental health concerns as their gender conforming peers. Gender diversity in itself does not cause mental health problems. Trans and gender diverse young people may be more likely to experience a range of stressful occurrences however that contribute to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, self harm and suicide.

Some common experiences that can affect the wellbeing of a trans and gender diverse young person include:

- **Feeling "different"** from other people around them
- **Transphobic bullying**, about their gender identity, whether verbal or physical
- **Feeling pressure** to deny or change their gender identity
- **Feeling worried** that their gender identity will not be accepted by friends and family, along with the possibility of being rejected or isolated
- **Feeling unsupported** or misunderstood by family, friends, fellow students or workers



- **Feeling stressed** and anxious in relation to the pressure to conform with their biological sex
- **Experiencing insensitivity** when seeking support from medical and other support services.

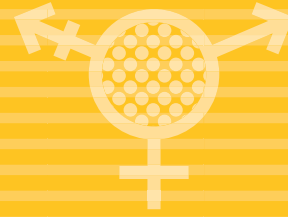
These pressures can be very stressful, especially when combined with all the other issues associated with growing up, such as managing school or university, finding a job, forming relationships and making sense of their identity and place in the world.

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It's normal to experience some of these changes from time to time. When these changes last longer than expected and begin to interfere with a young person's life, their study, work and friendships, talk to them about seeking help. A good place to start is their general practitioner (GP), their local headspace centre or eheadspace (online or by phone).

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Gender identity and mental health



The role of family and friends



Families can have a major impact on the wellbeing of trans and gender diverse young people. Young people that experience conflict with, or rejection by, their families and loved ones are at higher risk of developing depression and anxiety. They are also more at risk of being affected by homelessness, economic instability, self harm and suicide¹.

Trans and gender diverse young people who come from families that fully accept their gender identity have better overall health, mental health, higher self-esteem, and are more likely to believe they will

have a good life as a gender diverse adult². The research also shows that small amounts of change from families can reduce risk – so being slightly less rejecting and slightly more supportive (e.g. use

of preferred name and pronouns) can make a difference to the young person's risk of suicide, self harm, general and mental health, and substance use concerns².

How to support a trans and gender diverse young person

- Improve your own understanding and knowledge of gender identity issues through research, reading and contacting support groups.
- Talk in an open, non-judgmental way about their identity.
- Express acceptance and provide support.
- Require that family members and other people respect their gender identity and expression, including using their preferred name and pronouns. Young people may go through a process of exploring their gender identity and it is important to allow space for a young person to change the way they express or define their gender.

- Welcome any friends or their partner, regardless of gender or sexuality, to family events.
- Believe they can have a full, happy future as an adult.
- Remember that small changes in your level of acceptance and support can make a difference in reducing their risk of suicide, self harm and improve general and mental health outcomes.
- Encourage them to get further advice and support at **headspace** or **eheadspace** if they are going through a tough time.



Don't forget to look after your own needs too and reach out for extra support if you or other family members need it. Talk to someone you trust, and seek professional help.



headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

This information was produced in conjunction with **Transgender Victoria** (www.transgendervictoria.com).

References: ¹Robinson, K. H., Bansel, P., Denson, N., Ovenden, G. & Davies, C. (2014). Growing Up Queer: Issues Facing Young Australians Who Are Gender Variant and Sexuality Diverse, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne. ²Ryan, C., Russell, S.T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R & Sanchez, J. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(4): 205-213.

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