

Transsexualism

The idea of a person changing from male to female or vice versa is foreign and confusing to most of us. We don't know what to think, how to begin to understand or even what questions to ask. Some background information is helpful.

Definitions

Personal identity	Physical sex	Biological sex: a combination of genes, and primary and secondary sex characteristics such as chromosomes, genitalia, etc.
	Gender: identity	The inner conviction that "I am a man" or "I am a woman"
	Gender: role	Social sex role, the behavior that an individual engages in that identifies him or her to others as being male or female (e.g., wearing dresses/makeup)
	Sexual orientation	Sexual partner attraction (may be opposite sex, same sex, both sexes, or none)

Gender and physical sex	Transgender	Transsexualism	Gender identity does not match biological sex (generally there is an extreme sense of being in the wrong sex which has persisted for many years, commonly since childhood)
		Transvestism	Cross dressing, sometimes related to sexual fetish
	Intersex	Primary or secondary sex characteristics do not fit neatly into society's definitions of male or female. For example, structure or function of genitalia may not be easily categorized as completely male or female. "Corrective" surgery has been performed on many intersex people's bodies before adulthood, even though their bodies are healthy.	
	Cisgender	Gender identity matches biological sex. The vast majority of people are cisgender.	

Sexual orientation	Homosexual	Attracted to people of the same sex
	Heterosexual	Attracted to people of the opposite sex
	Bisexual	Attracted to both sexes

Overview

Causes of transsexualism are unknown. Theories include hormonal changes before birth, genetic anomalies and early childhood influences.

On the path to gender reassignment is the Real Life Test: a medically, ethically approved program which includes psychotherapy, hormone treatment and living in the target gender for at least a year, prior to sex-reassignment surgery.

The process of changing one's body and social identity from one sex to another is called Transition. This process is complex, time-consuming and often very expensive. Changing one's identity on paper alone can take months because it includes birth certificates, school records, passports, mortgages, etc., each handled by a different bureaucracy whose staff are often unfamiliar with transgender issues. Sex-reassignment surgery is rarely covered by health insurance, even though the cost ranges from about twenty to fifty thousand dollars.

What to Expect During Transition

In general, the hormonal effects start to become pronounced after about six months. After 18-24 months most of the changes have occurred; however, it can take five or even ten years before all the changes are done.

A point to remember: When a male transitions to a female (MTF), the individual as a female starts off at an emotional or social age of around twelve. It takes about two years for that person to go through the same maturing process a genetic woman does and become "adult" again. Of course, many of the social skills learned as a male are not sex-specific, so this maturation just applies to female-specific socialization. The opposite applies to someone going from female to male.

Male to Female (MTF)

Affected by female hormones (estrogen):

Personality	May become less aggressive, temporarily more emotional	
Physiology	Skin	Becomes softer, thinner, more translucent, male “toughness” diminishes
	Breasts	Breasts develop
	Body fat	Redistributes to female type (less at waist, more fat on hips & thighs -- becomes “pear shape” vs. male type “apple shape”)
	Blood	Increased clotting

Not affected by female hormones:

Physiology	Beard	Handled by electrolysis or laser
	Voice	Once the voice has deepened due to puberty or hormones, it will not change, but voice lessons can be helpful

Female to Male (FTM)

Affected by male hormones (testosterone):

Personality	May become more aggressive, temporarily more emotional	
Physiology	Skin	Becomes rougher
	Body fat	Redistributes to male type (more at waist, less on hips & thighs -- becomes “apple shape” vs. female type “pear shape”)
	Hair	Male pattern baldness may begin; beard growth begins
	Voice	May crack temporarily as vocal cords lengthen, then voice deepens

Not affected by male hormones:

Physiology	Breasts	Addressed surgically
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Personal Reactions and Responses to Transsexualism

- Reactions may vary widely and could include: anger, anxiety, aversion, concern, curiosity, disbelief, disgust, fear, feelings of inadequacy, frustration, grief, interest, reexamination of your own sexuality, relief, sadness, wondering, worry.
- Our own reaction may depend upon our past experiences, our comfort with ourselves, our previous relationship with the individual, our culture.
- Have respect for reactions different than your own. Allow others their feelings.
- Have respect for the individual and the workplace. Keep behavior appropriate.
- Try for empathy. Have you ever been unhappy with your body? Unhappy with your role in life? Imagine how this might be if it were all the time and multiplied many times.
- If you find that you are having trouble normalizing your reactions, or that they are out of proportion to the situation, or that they are distressing to you, talk with a qualified counselor.

How Does a Transsexual Person Wish to be Treated?

- Ideal response: as if nothing out of the ordinary occurred.
- Worst response: to totally ignore or make negative comments to or around the person (unacceptable in the workplace)
- It's better to be as natural as possible, to try to remember to call by the new name, but to be understanding of yourself if you forget.
- If you have questions, it's okay to ask.
- If you don't know how to react, it's better to say, "I don't know how to react," outright than to avoid interacting at all.

Resources for More Information

- Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc. (HBIIGDA): <http://www.hbigda.org/>
HBIIGDA members include psychiatrists, endocrinologists, surgeons, psychologists, sexologists, counselors, sociologists, and lawyers. HBIIGDA develops and publishes the international guidelines for the treatment of transgendered people, called the HBIIGDA "Standards of Care."
- Dr. Anne Vitale's web site on transsexualism: <http://www.avitale.com>
- International Journal of Transgenderism: <http://www.symposion.com/ijt/index.htm>
- FTM International: <http://www.ftmi.org>
- Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays (PFLAG): <http://www.youth-guard.org/pflag-tnet/>
- True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism— For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals by Mildred Brown and Chloe Rounsley (ISBN 0787902713)
- Becoming a Visible Man by Jamison Green (ISBN 082651457X)
- Intersex Society of North America (ISNA): <http://www.isna.org/>

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