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# Transgender in a nutshell

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Ever questioned whether you are a male or female, or wished you were the opposite 'sex'? Probably not. Most people go through life without giving their gender a moment's thought. They see themselves as male or female, an identity formed in early childhood, and cannot conceive of being anything else. So the idea that someone might think differently and want to change gender can seem strange. And yet that is what transgender folks do and this can and does lead to a lot of misunderstanding. The following aims to give the basics on what being transgender is about and is not about, which in turn will hopefully help those who have to work with and support someone who is transgender as they undertake a hugely scary, challenging and emotionally and physically painful journey.

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## Gender

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- Nature has evolved brains so that there are fundamental differences between male and female brains to enable them to support the roles they take in nature, a variance that is reflected throughout nature.
- Gender is the manifestation of this variance - how you think, feel, see yourself as, respond to and behave in the world around you and how the world, therefore, perceives and responds to you. You can see yourself, think, behave and be perceived as what we call a 'female' or as what we call a 'male', or as someone somewhere in between.
- Gender is not the same as nor fundamentally related to your sex - what reproductive organs you have - or your sexuality - who floats your boat. Gender is about your brain and how this is structured and wired.
- Gender, as with sex, is not actually binary – that is only male or female. It actually exists across a spectrum. Some people find they fit somewhere in between or fluctuate between male and female. Our society has chosen to divide people into binary male or female gender groups at the moment, but a number of cultures recognise more than one gender. For example the Red Indians had 5. A growing number of binary based cultures are now moving to a 3 gender system.
- We assign a sex at birth by looking at the genitalia. From this a gender is assumed, but neither may be right

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## Transgenderism

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- Transgenderism is when your brain is structured and 'wired' to think, feel, respond and behave in a way that is different to the gender normally associated with your sex. Those who are transgender often have a self image that is the opposite to their assumed gender and physical sex.
- Transgenderism is normal and quite common. It estimated about 1 in 100 are fully transgender (which is roughly the same as the number of people with red hair) and that up to 1 in 25 have some degree of gender identity issue.
- Historical records of transgenderism go back over 5000 years and there was even a transgender roman emperor. It is nothing new.
- 1 in 4 transgender people are females to males (FtM) currently, though this figure is rising rapidly. It is not solely the domain of males to females (MtF).
- You are created and born transgender – it is not something that 'develops' or is learnt and you cannot make someone transgender. It is not something you can choose or pretend to be. It is not a fad and it is never 'a phase'. It is not a (mental) illness and neither is it a physical disability. It is a fundamental and completely natural biological condition and as such cannot be 'cured'.

- We actually have an excellent understanding scientifically, medically and biologically of the mechanisms that lead to people being transgender and how these manifest themselves in brain structures and the ways individuals think (from the earliest ages). A primary mechanism is known to be a lack of or excessive hormone levels, which are controlled by various genes, at critical stages of foetal development and especially at key stages of brain development.
- Transgender folks have the same range of sexual orientations as non trans people. Adding the T to LGB is actually confusing, as being trans has little to do with sexuality: That it is, is only because transgender folks face many of the same discrimination and social issues that LGB folks do and so they join together to work against these

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## Consequences and Treatment

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- Being expected to be one thing but actually being something different causes a huge range of problems, including mental conflict and anguish. Resultant mental health issues and substance abuse are commonplace while the attempted suicide rate among transgender people, at over 40%, is the highest for any single group of people and well over 10 times the national average. Being transgender is not fun!
- Just as it is not possible to make someone transgender you cannot unmake them transgender. It is not possible to change the fundamental structures and working of the brain and it makes no sense to try to do so.
- For those who are severely transgender, the easiest and best course of medical action is to provide psychological assessment and support, subsequent medication (hormones or puberty blockers) and ultimately and as desired surgery so that the physical body is as close as possible to the norm of the desired gender. This is undertaken alongside social integration where the person moves to live and present as the relevant gender within society. This is called transitioning and its aim is to enable individual to live their lives as naturally and normally as possible.
- Gender reassignment surgery (GRS), be it MtF or FtM is not, as many believe, the main focus for treatment. Many transgender folks transition and live successfully in the desired gender role without wanting or having the surgery. GRS makes little difference to how a person presents to and is perceived and treated within the world.
- Sexuality does not change with transitioning, though the door may be opened to suppressed sexuality.
- Transitioning typically takes between 3 and 5 years. Main (MtF) GRS surgery costs about the same as a hip replacement and the treatment program is rigorously controlled and one of the most successful of all programs with hardly anyone ever having issues post transition

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## Acceptance, transitioning and outcomes

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- Though trans folks are aware of their condition from around the age of 3 it can take years of confusion and uncertainty before someone comes to finally understand and accept they are transgender. It is common for individuals to make extreme efforts to conform to the gender role their family and society has projected on them, often very successfully, before admitting to being transgender. This can make their coming out all the more surprising to those who know them.
- For most coming to terms with being transgender and deciding to transition is hugely difficult and frightening. There are a raft of challenges beyond the medical/physical; masses to learn but little time in which to do it, social acceptance issues, immense changes to every relationship, including breakdown, to be faced, a sea of excessive

bureaucracy and officialdom to be waded through and the challenge of maintaining employment/education.

- Verbal and physical abuse towards transgender folks, including murder, is shockingly high, while discrimination and bullying is commonplace. Breakdown of family and personal relationships is almost the norm. Coming out and transitioning is not something anyone does for fun or on a whim!
- While transitioning treatments continue to develop and improve, success is dependent on a number of factors not least of which is the availability of funds. The treatments offered by the NHS are limited, while many do not have the funds to obtain the additional treatments that would make the outcome of their transition more successful. Added to this one's start point is also important. Considerable hormonal effects during puberty and the results of other genetics e.g. height, deep voice, etc. can be hard to overcome.
- Demand for the NHS gender services currently significantly exceeds capacity and waiting times just for a first appointment at a Gender Clinic are typically two years or more while treatment may not start for many many months after that. This is against a legal requirement of 18 weeks for first appointment and start of treatment. This can significantly add to the distress of the transgender individual!
- No trans person chooses to be trans. It is a phenomenally difficult and, for most, lonely experience. But families and friends can choose how they respond and their acceptance, love and support is crucial to a trans persons happiness and wellbeing.