



Gender identity and mental health



About gender identity

Gender identity is typically developed very early in life. It's about how you 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 and that there are a diverse range of gender identities.

For instance, you could identify with a gender that's different from the sex you were born with (e.g. you were born a girl but you identify as a male,

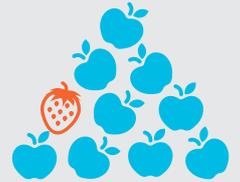
or you were born a boy but you identify as a female), or somewhere between male and female, or any other gender identity.

Young people who are gender diverse or do not identify with the gender they were born with may have a range of stressful experiences that contribute to their increased risk of depression, anxiety, self harm and suicide. However, gender diversity does not cause mental health problems.

Common experiences

Some common experiences that can affect your wellbeing and increase your vulnerability to developing mental health difficulties are:

- **Feeling "different"** from other people around you
- **Transphobic bullying** about your gender identity, whether verbal or physical
- **Feeling pressure** to deny your feelings regarding your gender identity
- **Worries** that your gender identity will not be accepted by friends and family members, along with the possibility of being rejected or isolated



- **Feeling unsupported** or misunderstood by family or friends
- **Feeling stressed** and anxious in relation to the pressure to conform with your biological sex

These pressures can be very stressful, especially when combined with other issues in your life such as managing school or university, finding a job, forming relationships and making sense of who you are and your place in the world.

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

Things to look out for include:

- **Changes in mood** – feeling sadder, more anxious or more irritable
- **Changes in behaviour** – being less talkative, becoming withdrawn or being more aggressive
- **Changes in relationships** – falling out with friends or your partner, or conflict with family
- **Changes in appetite** – eating too much or too little, or losing or gaining weight without trying to
- **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.

Transphobic discrimination

Transphobic discrimination and being made to feel 'different' because of other people's prejudices can affect your sense of wellbeing and make it difficult to enjoy life fully. It can also make it hard to ask for help, or know where to turn for help, when problems come up. If your difficulties seem to be going on for weeks or months, or they are impacting on things like your sleep, appetite, concentration, or your relationships, then it might be time to get some help.

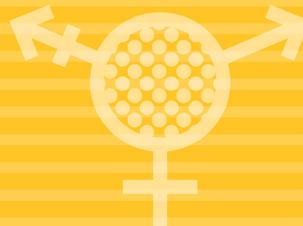


Ask

for help

While it's normal to occasionally experience some of these things if you're finding it hard to cope and your social, work or school life are being affected then it's time to ask for help.

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Getting help



Getting help when problems develop can reduce the effects of mental health problems on your life, and can prevent more serious problems in the future.

Some transgender or gender diverse young people find it especially hard to ask for help. This might be because of discrimination by health professionals in the past, worries about privacy, or difficulty talking to strangers about their gender identity.

It's important to find someone you trust to confide in to support you throughout your journey. This might be your

general practitioner (GP) and/or other health professionals experienced in working with gender diverse young people. While **headspace** may not be able to help with some gender identity concerns around gender transition, such as hormone therapy, we can refer you to specialists who can.

A trusted friend, teacher or family member might also be able to recommend someone to

talk to. It can take time to find the health professional who is right for you, so don't give up if you don't find the right person straight away. Remember that you don't have to discuss your gender identity if you don't feel comfortable or safe.

Helping yourself

Apart from seeking professional help there are a number of things you can do to help yourself feel well.

Here are some strategies to try when you're feeling stressed out or having a hard time:

- Eat well
- Get enough sleep
- Spend time with people you trust, who are accepting and who make you feel good about yourself
- Talk to people about how you feel
- Exercise
- Avoid using alcohol and other drugs
- Find time for enjoyable activities in your day
- Get help if things aren't improving



Remember that you are not alone and that there are an increasing number of young people in our community exploring and questioning their gender identity. If you want to talk through any questions or concerns about your gender identity there are people who can help and support you.



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).

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