

Working with Transgender Youth



Have you asked your patient about their gender identity?

In order to provide competent care for your patients, this is a question that needs to be asked. Transgender people may face different health issues than their peers. In many ways transgender youth have a greater struggle for understanding and acceptance. As time goes on, transgender individuals are becoming more visible and will continue to do so. People do not choose to be transgender. Many transgender individuals in general do not feel comfortable seeking medical care from a family doctor. These individuals then resort to the emergency room when they have a medical concern.

Let's TALK About it!

General sensitivity and awareness are important for any work with the transgender community. When discussing these topics it is important to use the language that corresponds to the person's identity, from names and pronouns to the preferred language of their own bodies. It is important to ask the individual their preferred name, pronoun and when relevant, words for their genitals, or chest. Some words (breasts, penis, vagina, etc.) are heavily gendered terms and may trigger stress responses, especially if these areas are under examination.

Health Concerns

Transgender patients should be made aware of their specific health needs. A female-to-male transgender individual still requires papanicolaou smears, and male-to-female transgender people require prostate exams. These can be very uncomfortable for a transgender person and can trigger **gender dysphoria**. Some indi-

What IS gender identity?

Gender identity is our deeply felt, internal sense of who we are as male or female. Many of us are born feeling a congruency between our **sex** (physical anatomy or biological sex) and our **gender** (who we feel ourselves to be). Some people do not experience this congruency, and there is a difference between their sex and their gender identity.

Many of these people use the word **transgender** to signify this experience. Many transgender individuals describe feeling like there is something wrong with their body or it does not accurately reflect how they see themselves, or their body causes them discomfort. However, what it feels like is different for every person. Another term to signify this experience could be **transsexual**, but some feel this word is outdated and highly pathologized.

Are transgender people also gay, lesbian, or bisexual?

Though included together in the acronym "LGBT", terms like lesbian, gay and bisexual are used to refer to a person's **sexual orientation**. Sexual orientation relates to who we are emotionally, physically and romantically attracted to, or how we feel about others.

It is separate from gender identity, which is an internal relationship to how we feel about ourselves as male or female. Everyone has both a sexual orientation and a gender identity. Many people who are transgender will also identify as heterosexual (straight), gay, lesbian or bisexual.

viduals may not seek out papanicolaou smears or prostate exams to avoid the distress and body dysphoria that may come along with it. They may also have apprehensions about interacting with healthcare professionals who do not understand their experiences. Having a practitioner who is accepting and understanding makes a great difference in the person's comfort level and possibly their willingness to get this test done.

It is important to have conversations regarding sexual health with the transgender youth. These conversations should involve frank, explicit, and sex-positive discussion regarding the particular practices that individual engages in. It is important to not have any assumptions about their partners or sexual activities. Not all transgender adolescents are dysphoric about their genitals. Some engage in receptive or insertive, oral, vaginal and anal intercourse. Sexually transmitted infections as well as contraceptives should be discussed.

Get Connected!

If you would like to find resources, materials or learn more, refer to these organizations below.



- The Youth Project:
www.youthproject.ns.ca
youthproject@youthproject.ns.ca
902 429 5429
- Pride Health:
<http://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/patients-clients-visitors/support-services/pridehealth>
Coordinator: Cybelle Rieber
cybelle.rieber@cdha.nshealth.ca
902 473 1433
- Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health:
www.CPATH.ca

Safe Spaces

Some youth may feel comfortable talking with you about being transgender on their first visit. Others may not feel this open and are unsure how to discuss it. There are numerous ways to create an environment conducive to the discussion of trans issues with adolescents. Having visible symbols of support (magazines, posters, pamphlets, etc) can give youth confidence that you are a supportive practitioner, help teens express themselves, and give them the language to express their feelings.

It is crucial to maintain a non-judgemental attitude, actively demonstrate transgender awareness and reassure them about confidentiality. This helps convey to the adolescent that you are safe and approachable. It is also important not to simply categorize people into male or female. Having options such as male, female, female-to-male, male-to-female, and other options when discussing gender is respectful.

It is recommended to incorporate a brief question about gender during your intake process with all clients. An example of this type of question would be "Many people struggle with gender identity. Is this an issue for you?". Asking an indirect question such as this decreases some of the embarrassment some trans youth may feel and make them feel included. Opening the possibility of positive self-disclosure can go a long way in building trust with your transgender patients.

This information was compiled by Katherine Tanner, as part of a field placement study in the Dalhousie Nursing program with The Youth Project.

References:

- Basic Tips For Health Care and Social Service Providers for Working with Transgendered People. (2001) Gender Education & Advocacy, Inc.
- de Vries, A., Cohen-Kettenis, P., Delemarre-Van de Waal, H. (2006). Clinical Management of Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents. *Caring for Transgender Adolescents in BC: Suggested Guidelines*
- Holmans, C., Goldberg, J. (2006). Ethical, Legal, and Psychosocial Issues in Care of Transgender Adolescents. *Caring for Transgender Adolescents in BC: Suggested Guidelines*
- Transgender Teens. (2003). *The survival guide for queer and questioning teens*. Free Spirit publishing