

what is gender identity?

Gender identity is how you perceive your gender, how you show this to others, and how you want others to treat you.

About gender identity

The physical features you were born with (sex assigned at birth) don't necessarily define your gender. Although gender has traditionally been divided into 'male' and 'female', it's now widely recognised that gender is not that simple and that there are a diverse range of gender identities.

For example, you could identify with a gender that's different from the sex you were assigned at birth, such as:

- being assigned female at birth, but you identify as a male
- being assigned male at birth, but identifying as a female
- you identify somewhere between male and female
- you recognise yourself as another gender identity.

Some people may not have a label for what they are experiencing and some might be questioning their gender identity.

Young people who are gender diverse or do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth can live exciting and fulfilling lives. But, a lack of understanding, acceptance, discrimination and transphobia contribute to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, self harm and suicide.

It's important to know that gender diversity does not cause mental health problems.

Why might this be difficult for me?

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

- feeling 'different' from other people around you
- experiencing bullying about your gender identity, whether verbal, physical or online
- experiencing discrimination – being treated differently or excluded – because of your gender identity (note, this is against the law in Australia)
- feeling pressure to define or deny your feelings regarding your gender identity
- feeling unsupported or worried that your gender identity will not be accepted by friends and family members, along with the possibility of being rejected or isolated
- feeling stressed and anxious in relation to the pressure to conform with your sex assigned at birth.

Feeling these pressures can be stressful, especially with any other stresses you might be experiencing in your life, such as managing school or university, job hunting, forming relationships or making sense of who you are and your place in the world.

How do I know if I'm struggling with my mental health?

It can be hard to know if you're experiencing early signs of a 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

If you have been struggling with any of these things for a long time, you might not see them as changes.

Getting the right help and support

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.

Getting help when problems develop can reduce the effects of mental health problems and can help prevent more serious issues developing 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 gender identity.

It's important to find someone you can trust 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.

headspace can also help connect you with specialists for specific needs around gender transition if you decide to go down that path.

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.

You can find 'tips for a healthy headspace' if you're feeling stressed or having a hard time.

Remember that you're not alone and there are many young people exploring and questioning their gender identity. If you want to talk through any questions or concerns about your gender identity, or if you're having a hard time, there are people who can help and support you.

If you ever feel unable to cope because of intense emotions or if you have thoughts of harming yourself, then ask for help immediately.

For immediate help contact triple zero (000) if it is an emergency

National 24/7 crisis services:

- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au
- **Suicide Call Back Service:** 1300 659 467 or suicidecallbackservice.org.au
- **beyondblue:** 1300 224 636 or beyondblue.org.au

Additional youth support services 12-25 years

- **headspace:** visit headspace.org.au to find your nearest centre or contact eheadspace, our phone and online service (12-25 years)
- **Qheadspace:** Chat anonymously with other young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ and ask questions of our headspace queer peers
- **Qlife:** Chat to a volunteer LGBTIQ+ counsellor over the phone or through web-chat every day from 3pm to midnight (all ages)
- **ReachOut:** (under 25 years). Find a gender diverse support services or social network in your state
- **Minus18:** Have lots of resources about gender diversity for young people and their families
- **Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800 (5-25 years)
- **SANE Australia:** 1800 187 263 (18+ years)



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au



If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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