

# OUR TRANS LOVED ONES:

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR  
PARENTS, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS  
OF PEOPLE WHO ARE TRANSGENDER  
AND GENDER EXPANSIVE

A large, stylized sunburst graphic in a lighter shade of orange, positioned at the bottom of the page. It features a central circle with several pointed rays extending outwards, and a curved line below it that suggests a horizon or a path.

**PFLAG**  
[www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

# SOME (VERY) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **What causes someone to be transgender?**

There is no single explanation for why some people are transgender. Transgender people have existed throughout history and across societies the world over. The diversity of transgender expression and experiences argues against any simple explanation. Dr. Johanna Olson, Medical Director of the Center for Transyouth Health and Development at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, says, “Trying to identify causes, whether they are genetic, hormonal, or something else entirely, those studies are underway. The question is, what contributes to the formation of gender identity? It’s really complex.” Whatever the cause, there is nothing wrong with your loved one, and supporting them is critical and helps result in a more positive outcome for them.<sup>3,4</sup>

## **What’s the difference between being transgender and transsexual?**

“*Transsexual*” is a less frequently used—and sometimes misunder-

stood—term (considered by some to be outdated or possibly offensive, and others to be uniquely applicable to them) which refers to people who are transgender who use (or consider using) medical interventions such as hormone therapy or surgery (or a combination of the two) or pursue medical interventions as part of the process of expressing their gender. There are also people who identify as “*transgender*” who seek medical intervention.

The words “*transgender*” and “*transsexual*” do have one thing in common: They are both adjectives (used to describe something) not nouns or verbs. Just as you wouldn’t say someone has been “gayed” or “straightened,” neither would you say someone has been or become “transgendered.” Saying “Alice is a person who is transgender” is correct—just like saying “Alice is a person who is young”—but saying “Alice is a transgender” or “Alice is transgendered” is not. In fact, saying either of the others is considered offensive, so avoid using these words in those ways.<sup>5</sup>

## Aren't there only two genders?

No. In America we tend to only recognize two genders, referred to as the “gender binary”—masculine/man/male and feminine/woman/female. But cultures throughout the world recognize many more than just two genders.

The Bugis people of Indonesia recognize a total of five genders. In India there is a third gender called “*Hijra*” that is neither male nor female. The *fa'afafine* is a third gender, as well as a sexuality, in Samoa. The *muxe* people are a third gender in Mexico.

In Australia, the High Court made a landmark decision in 2014 formally recognizing a third, neutral gender that is neither male nor female, and in Germany, a third gender option became available on birth certificates to those whose babies were born of an indeterminate biological sex. To learn more about how other cultures perceive gender, check out the interactive map—and companion publication—[pbs.org/independentlens/two-spirits/map.html](https://pbs.org/independentlens/two-spirits/map.html).

Like our sexual orientation, our gender identity can be looked at as a continuum as well. There is a whole range of identities to be found on the “gender spectrum.” Throughout our lives, we can experience and express our gender in a variety of ways. Our gender expression can change over time as we have new

experiences and become aware of new ideas.

Remember, gender is a label created by people. Labels, like gender, are used to help us figure out what to expect from one another and inspire a sense of community.

They aren't set in stone, and there is no right or wrong gender to have or express.<sup>6</sup>

*“My family, while at first confused and saddened, have always supported me and now see me exactly as I have always seen myself. And are happy with my decision. They learn more about me and the LGBT community all the time. Win!!”*

—Allison P., 45,  
Arcola, VA

## What is transitioning?

The process of moving towards and affirming one's innate gender identity is known as transitioning. Some people transition through clothing, some through a medical process, and some through both, or neither at all. There is no “right” way to transition, though there are some common social changes that many transgender people experience such as wearing clothes they feel more accurately communicates

their gender identity, changing their names, or adopting different pronouns. One type of transition—medical transition—can include things such as hormone therapy or surgical alteration of the body.

Since every transgender person's path and narrative will be different, it is important to remember that your loved one will need the space and time to determine how they wish to live and express their gender identity. Some may know and express their need to transition at a very young age while others may not share their needs until well into their teens or even late in life. Again, there is no one "right" way to transition. We will address the subject of transitioning and what it means to different age groups later in this publication.

What is important to understand is that the decision to transition, in whatever form, is a highly personal and individual one. A respectful and caring approach involves providing the love, support, and resources necessary to help your loved one make the most informed decisions to help them along their journey.

There are some who feel that if, as we all believe, gender identity has always been inside a person, then the phrase "transitioning" is inaccurate to describe the process a transgender person is going through from that person's perspective. What we see on the

outside might be a change, but to the transgender person it is not so much a "transition" as it is a "settling in to themselves" or a "coming home" process. This description may resonate more clearly with people who are transgender or gender expansive.

### **What is okay to ask and say—or not ask and say—when I learn that a person I know or care about is transgender?**

When you are ready and the timing is right, you may want to consider the questions below, which could lead to a meaningful dialogue with your loved one about their gender identity. Remember, when asking these questions don't begin with the expectation that you'll get all of your questions answered immediately. Rather you are trying to gather information for greater insight, understanding, and empathy. It is also extremely important to make sure your loved one is comfortable and that you respect their wishes if they don't want to discuss certain things with you. This initial conversation may lead to many subsequent discussions that will help you more fully understand your loved one's gender identity.

It is essential that the questions you ask are coming from a place that seeks to better understand the person's experiences and needs, not simply satisfy your curiosity.

You might begin by asking them to tell you what they'd like to say to you, and then ask whether it is okay to ask some questions. Regardless of whether you take their lead or decide to ask questions first, know that it's fine to repeat that you are asking because you care and you will be fine if they want to stop the exchange any time. Once questions are deemed okay, some find it helpful to begin the conversation by saying something like "I don't want to make any assumptions about you or your experience" and then asking the question. Here are a few suggested questions to begin this dialogue with transgender and gender-expansive adults and adolescents:

- What name/pronouns would you like me to use when addressing you?
- What can I do to better support or help you at this time?
- If someone asks me about your gender identity or gender expression, how would you like me to respond?
- Do you have support from other friends and family members?
- Is there anything that you've seen or read that you would like me to see or read?

In PFLAG's Straight for Equality® project publication *guide to being a trans ally*, we tackle this issue of appropriate—and inappropriate—questions and comments, and many other issues. To download a free

copy, visit [straightforequality.org/trans](http://straightforequality.org/trans). There is also a list of resources at the back of this publication (and on the PFLAG National website) that you can reference to educate yourself in preparation to have these conversations. Turn to page 70 for more info, or visit [pflag.org/trans](http://pflag.org/trans).

### **Will my loved one be safe?**

With love, support, and resources, your loved one will have every opportunity to lead a healthy and happy life, and the sooner parents and guardians, friends, or family members come to terms with accepting their transgender or gender-expansive loved one, the more quickly they will be positively impacted. Being affirmed in one's gender identity and expression can improve self-esteem and relieve the stress of having to hide one's authentic self. Your loved one's safety—in school, in the workplace, in your faith community—can be a legitimate concern; we will address potential life-stage safety issues later in this publication.

Know this: The future you envisioned for your loved one may now look different, but it can still be filled with wonderful possibilities. And while coming out or transitioning will not solve all of their problems—and may in fact introduce a new set of challenges—it may make it easier for them to address those challenges. With

love, support, and advocacy for their wellbeing, your loved one can lead a happy, safe, and productive life.

## **How can I make my home respectful, safe, and welcoming to people who are transgender or gender expansive?**

Your loved one will be most comfortable around you if they know that you love them unconditionally and support them as they travel their gender journey. You can help ease their possible feelings of vulnerability by creating a respectful space at home where your loved one can explore and define their gender identity and expression without fear of rejection.

For your home to be a respectful and welcoming space, it is important to learn the appropriate terminology, show respect for your loved one's new name or pronoun choices, and have a basic understanding of transgender and gender-diversity; reading this publication is a great first step. Additionally, you might consider which photographs, plaques or trophies, or photo albums you have on display. You can either take

*“When someone uses a neutral pronoun for me, it not only makes me feel accepted by that person, but it also makes me feel comfortable in my own skin.”*

—Haley B., 23,  
Chicago, IL

action or have a conversation with your loved one in advance.

Also, engaging in dialogues with your peers about these issues in a positive, supportive manner and

using affirming language conveys your unconditional love and support to those that you speak with, but particularly to your loved one. Further, others will take your lead as they interact with your loved one. Positive language is critical when discussing this topic with others; without it, you may find yourself struggling to demonstrate support. Mindful and authentic intent is important, too: Communicate your feelings with sincerity and honesty, and be sure that, to the best of your ability, your nonverbal cues align with your words. After all, you can say that you love and support someone, but if your body language and tone belie your words, this can lead to miscommunication, hurt feelings, and a less-than-supportive environment.

Learning to advocate for your loved one is certainly a process and may take some time. Ultimately it helps to ensure that your loved one has an environment in which they feel respected, safe, and welcome, and

in which they can live, grow and learn. It may take you a while to feel able to support your loved one: You may fear what others will think or say about you, your parenting, or your family, or you may simply not know how to respond. After all there were no mentions of this as you prepared to become a parent. Reading this publication will help you figure it out, and reinforce

your courage to move through your feelings—both the good and perhaps the bad—empowering you to discover a renewed commitment to fully celebrate and support your loved one. Over time, you may discover that the source of most of your anxiety derives from your own fears and expectations that may well change as you seek to celebrate your loved one’s authentic sense of self.