

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

EXPLORING YOUR GENDER IDENTITY

Whilst people are becoming increasingly comfortable with talking about sexuality, even just thinking about gender identity can be difficult as it can raise fundamental existential issues – *who am I? who do I want to be? why do I feel different to other wo/men?* Being at university, away from family and friends, and the constraints of previous assumptions about one's identity, can offer the opportunity to explore gender in a way that might not previously have been possible. For some there may come the realisation that they do not feel happy in the body or role into which they were born, for others there may be a sense that they cannot identify with a traditionally defined binary male or female, but are not quite sure how to explain their gendered self.

It is important to differentiate between gender identity and sexual orientation because they are not the same. Sexual orientation refers to an individual's sexual attraction to others, whereas gender identity refers to an individual's (non-) gendered sense of self. A trans-person can also be straight, bisexual or gay, or any other sexual identity (see our leaflet on Exploring Sexuality).

THINKING ABOUT GENDER IDENTITY

The term 'gender identity' dates from the 1960s and is defined by Stoller (1992) as being

"a complex systems of beliefs about one's masculinity and femininity. It implies nothing about the origins of that sense (e.g. whether the person is male or female). It has, then, psychologic connotations only: one's subjective state" (p78)

From birth, babies are assigned a sex of 'boy' or 'girl' based on their physical appearance. The child is then often raised in a stereotypical gender role, often dressed in gendered clothing, given gender specific toys, and encouraged to think about roles and behaviours befitting that gender e.g a child assigned female from birth might be discouraged from being noisy or overly confident, whereas this might be promoted in a child assigned male at birth. For most individuals, this feels right (*cisgender*). However, this might be incongruent with how the child (or subsequent adult) feels, and this can cause an intense discomfort that is often labelled 'gender dysphoria'.

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Traditional ways of understanding gender promote a binary understanding: male or female. However, current thinking offers more progressive ways of understanding gender including considering gender as a spectrum, being *gender fluid*, being *non-binary* or *genderqueer*, or being *agender*. How someone self-defines is very important, and should always be respected by others. This means taking time to understand their personal experience, being considerate of their choice of gendered pronoun such as he/she/they/ze/zie/per¹, and using an individual's chosen name, even if it is not the name written on official documents.

COMING OUT

As with coming out about one's sexuality, telling others about your gender identity can be fraught with difficulty. You may not yet have the words to fully express how you feel, and it may come as a complete shock for someone else to hear about your private thoughts and lived experience. They might not react positively initially, and may belittle your experience, or insist that it is just a phase that you are going through. It is therefore really important to think about who you want to tell first, and chose a suitable time to do this when you will not be interrupted and have the space to talk and think.

Whilst some individuals have known from a very young age that they are transgender, for others, it can be a relatively recent experience. Parents and close friends may have suspected that you were transgender and coming out to them may be a positive experience met with an accepting and loving response. However, some people may react with hostility and be rejecting, particularly if they feel that you have never shown any 'signs' previously. Hopefully, this initial stage will pass, and whilst it may be very traumatic for you, try to keep the door open to others to enable them to understand and support you better in your journey. An initially negative response may change over time as people overcome their initial shock and are able to move towards acceptance.

There is no right way to come out, and you should not feel pressurised to do so by friends or family. Take your time, and do what feels right for you. Things to think about might be whether you want to gradually come out e.g. start wearing clothes, make-up or using different gender pronouns in environments where you feel safe, who

¹ This list is not intended to be exhaustive; there are many different possibilities. See <http://nonbinary.org/wiki/Pronouns> for a detailed listing.

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you want to come out to, whether you 'need' to tell people, how you want to self-identify on Social Media etc.

HEALTH CARE

It may take time to become at ease with one's gender identity, and some individuals may elect for medical intervention or gender affirming surgery to enable them to fully express their gender identity. Some may feel able to openly identify as a trans man or trans woman, but others may prefer to keep their identity more private, especially if they do not feel safe living openly in their felt gender identity.

Gender dysphoria can also be medicalised and is a diagnosable condition under DSM V (an American Psychiatric Classification System). This is a controversial diagnosis within the LGBT+ community as it implies a diseased mind. However, a formal diagnosis may be required for hormonal treatment or gender reassignment surgery. Both interventions can only be offered in the UK via tertiary care in highly specialised NHS Gender Identity Clinics, or from a small number of Private Consultants.

If you would like to discuss the process of physically transitioning, you will need to make an appointment to see your GP. They may do some initial blood tests to check for good basic health and hormone levels and will be able to refer you to one of the national NHS Adult Gender Identity Clinics. Individuals living in Reading typically go to The Charing Cross Hospital, West London but you can also ask to be referred to any Clinic. The waiting times can be long, and progress can feel frustratingly slow if you have made the decision that you wish to transition. However, support is available from the University Counselling Service, your local GP, or Support U in Reading, to help you during this time.

Like anyone, you are entitled to non-judgmental health care, not only for your physical and sexual health, but also your mental health.

TRANSITIONING AT UNIVERSITY

Whether you have decided that you would rather be referred to by the non-binary pronoun of 'they', want to have your title changed, or wish to be known by your preferred gender identity and name, the University is committed to supporting you with this.

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To change any details on your University Campus Card or RISIS, you need to go to one of the Student Support Centres with a copy of your Deed Poll showing your change of name. You can ask for your name, title and photo to be changed. There is also an option on RISIS to have a 'preferred name' if you do not want to officially change your details by Deed Poll. Once RISIS has been updated, your university email should automatically update as well.

At present, gender neutral toilets are located in three locations on Campus (Carrington Building, Students Union Building and Reading Enterprise Centre on Earley Gate), and these are shown on the main Whiteknights Campus map

(<http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/whiteknights-campus-map-and-keys-2016.pdf>).

For further information on the University of Reading's policy on supporting trans students, please see link below.

USEFUL RESOURCES:

- Supporting Trans Staff and Students
[https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/humanresources/humres-Supporting Trans Staff and Students.Aug10.pdf](https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/humanresources/humres-Supporting%20Trans%20Staff%20and%20Students.Aug10.pdf)
- University of Reading's LGBT Society meets twice a week for an informal coffee hour – details available on their FaceBook page (lgbt+reading(university) or their RUSU web page <http://www.rusu.co.uk/organisation/11536/>
- RUSU Part-time LGBT Officer – lgbt@rusu.co.uk
- Support U – Reading based support group providing telephone, email and face-to-face support for LGBT individuals in the Thames Valley. They also have a monthly trans support group <http://www.supportu.org.uk/>

See also our leaflet on 'Exploring Sexuality'.