

Understanding Transition – What it Is and What it Means

“Transition” is a big and broad word, typically used to describe the social, legal and/or medical processes trans and gender diverse people undertake as they come into themselves as trans and gender diverse people. Transition means something different to every trans person, and there is no single way to transition as a trans and gender diverse person.

Important: The term trans is defined as “identifying with a gender identity different from the gender you were assigned at birth”. Being trans or gender diverse is not inherently connected to any specific transition journey. While many trans and gender diverse people access medical support, such as surgical or hormonal interventions, an individual’s trans identity is no more or less legitimate based on whether or not they access medical transition services.

This resource is intended to help service providers, educators and loved ones of trans people better understand the complexity of transition, what transition might mean to different people, and how to support trans people in their lives who are in the midst of a transition. Transition isn’t linear, nor is it ever necessarily over. Many trans people, as they explore and seek to better understand themselves, will transition in different ways over the course of their lifetime.

Understanding Different Types of Transition

Transitioning is often described within three interconnected categories – legal transition, social transition and medical transition.

Social transition largely refers to trans people changing their chosen name or pronouns, and/ or shifting their gender expression (i.e., changing how they dress to better align with their gender identity). Social transition also includes changing mannerisms, voices and other behaviours.

Medical transition largely refers to either surgical or hormonal interventions that trans people may undertake to better align their bodies with their gender identity. Medical transition is different for every trans person, but may include breast removal or augmentation, permanent hair removal, removal of the adam’s apple or trachea, taking estrogen or testosterone, and/or undertaking surgery to reconfigure genitals to better match a person’s gender identity.

These are but a few examples of processes that may be included in an individual's medical transition. Legal transition generally describes the process of changing your legal name and/or designated sex/gender markers to better align with your gender identity.

Common Misconceptions of Transition

Many misconceptions persist about transition that negatively impact trans and gender diverse people. These misconceptions are important to avoid and unpack, in order to better understand and support trans people in your life.

- **Misconception #1:** “Trans people aren’t trans unless they have had the surgery.” Many, but not all, trans people access medical interventions to align their bodies with their gender identity. However, not all trans people want or need to undertake medical procedures. Many trans people are content with their bodies or may only seek certain interventions over others. A trans person’s specific transition journey has no bearing on if they are or are not trans.
- **Misconception #2:** “I have the right to know about a trans person’s transition journey.” Many people presume that trans people’s experiences and stories should be readily available for discussion and debate. Trans people, like all people, have the right to privacy, agency, and autonomy. It is disrespectful to pry into an individual’s transition journey or medical histories. You should not ask a trans person about their transition unless they have explicitly provided consent.
- **Misconception #3:** “All trans people are seeking to match binary norms.” While many trans people identify as either male or female and should be treated like any other man or woman, some trans people are non-binary. It is important to note that not all trans people are seeking to fit into gender binary norms and should not be forced to subscribe to or identify by binary terms. The way a trans person wishes to identify has no bearing on the fact that they should be treated with respect and given the space to identify as they chose.

Transition means something different to each and every trans or gender diverse person. Access to gender-affirming care is integral for many trans people, but all deserve space to explore and unpack what they want their transition to look like, without having to navigate our assumptions or suppositions about trans identity or transition.

If you are a service provider, you can support your trans and gender diverse clients by exploring locally available gender-affirming care services, exploring training to learn about transition-related healthcare, and strengthen your understanding of the different elements that may be a part of an individual’s transition or journey as a trans person.