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Understanding sex, sexuality and gender

LGBTIQA+

LGBTIQA+ stands for **lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and asexual**. The **plus** is used to show that the term includes all gender, sex and sexuality diverse people, and those who are questioning their gender and/or sexuality.

While one term can't capture the full diversity of identities, sexualities, relationships, bodies and experiences, it can be helpful to bring these groups together under one label when highlighting their shared experiences of stigma, discrimination and marginalisation, and promoting safe, inclusive services.

Whenever possible, be as specific as possible and use a person's preferred terminology.

Sex

Sex generally refers to the chromosomal, gonadal and anatomical characteristics associated with biological sex. This is not always as clear-cut as 'male' or 'female'.

Intersex

Intersex is an umbrella term that describes the ways people can have innate variations of sex characteristics that are not commonly regarded as unambiguously 'male' or 'female'. InterAction for Health and Human Rights states that:

People with innate variations of sex characteristics form a diverse population with many different kinds of bodies, sex characteristics, observed/assigned sex, genders, identities, life experiences, and terminology and word preferences. What we share in common is an experience of having innate sex characteristics (such as chromosomes, gonads, reproductive development or hormones) that differ from medical norms for female or male bodies.

People with innate variations of sex characteristics can have a wide variety of physical or biological types, which do not always align with social and/or legal understandings of sex or gender. They experience discrimination, stigmatisation and harmful practices because of the ways their bodies are seen as different.

Gender

Gender is a sociocultural concept that refers to the way a person lives in and interacts with the world. It is a division of people traditionally based on assumed differences between the sexes and their identities, expressions and experiences.

Gender conveys social meaning that is typically encoded as femininity and masculinity, but there is a great deal of variance among societies and cultures in how different genders are understood and defined.

Gender presentation

Gender presentation is how a person expresses their gender using outward signs and signals, such as clothing, physical appearance, behaviour and mannerisms. Many of the ways we present ourselves to the world carry a gendered meaning.

Gender diverse

Gender diverse is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender is different to the legal sex assigned to them at birth. This may or may not influence their gender presentation.

Trans/transgender

Transgender (or trans for short) is an umbrella term for those whose gender differs from the expectations placed on the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a person assigned female at birth may feel a gender identity that more closely aligns to the expectations of masculinity and be a trans man.

This term includes binary trans people (trans men and trans women) and non-binary trans people.

Because gender is about sociocultural differences and self-understanding, it is important to recognise that the way someone understands their gender is just as valid as being assigned a gender at birth.

Non-binary

Non-binary is an umbrella term describing people who feel that the rigid division between masculinity and femininity does not fit their gender identity. It encompasses a range of other terms people may use for their gender, such as genderqueer, bi-gender, agender or genderfluid.

This is not the same as being androgynous, which is an outward appearance of indeterminate gender. Some non-binary people may choose to express themselves androgynously; some may not.

Gender affirmation

Many trans or gender-diverse people experience internal distress about their gender and want to find ways to present a more authentic sense of self to the world. This process is called gender affirmation.

They may take steps to socially, legally and/or medically affirm their gender. This could include changing their name and/or pronouns, altering their gender presentation or physically changing their body to align with their gender, such as through taking hormone replacement therapy.

Gender affirmation is a personal journey and will look different for everyone. Importantly, a person's gender is valid regardless of whether they choose to affirm their gender socially, legally and/or medically.

Sexuality

Sexuality is comprised of three separate but interconnected dimensions: **attraction, behaviour and identity**.

For example, a woman who has sex with men (**behaviour**) to whom she is sexually attracted (**attraction**) and who identifies as straight (**identity**) would be a heterosexual woman.

Common identifiers for sexuality are:

- > **heterosexual/straight:** someone who is attracted to people of a different gender to their own
- > **homosexual/gay/lesbian:** someone who is attracted to people of the same gender their own
- > **bisexual/pansexual:** someone who is attracted to people of both the same and different genders
- > **asexual:** someone who experiences low or no sexual attraction.

There is a common but incorrect view that attraction, behaviour and identity have a clear alignment, as sexuality is often linked to the heteronormative model based on a gender binary. This does not allow for complexity of identities that people experience.

A man may occasionally have sex with men (**homosexual behaviour**) because he is visually attracted to the male physique (**aesthetic attraction**), but he may identify as straight (**heterosexual identity**) because his primary romantic and sexual relationships are with women.

The complexity of human sexuality is vast when considering sexual behaviour, attraction, relationship building, identity and societal norms.

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