1. Who are transsexual people?

Most people never have to ask themselves the question, “Am I male or female?” They know the answer to this question with certainty, as both body and mind are congruent. For the transsexual person, their gender identity—that is their internal, innate sense of being male or female—is out of sync with their body: the biological sex of their body feels totally incorrect. And it is. Transsexual people are often confused about this incongruence and as a result suffer intense internal conflict and frequently live in isolation, secrecy, shame, and silence. It often takes transsexual people many years to figure out this sense of wrongness they feel about their body and to place a name to it—transsexual.

2. What causes transsexualism?

Transsexualism—as with all transgender identities—is a naturally occurring phenomena—just a normal part of the immense diversity of human nature. Nobody knows for sure what exactly causes transsexualism to occur. Recent research is beginning, however, to show that gender identity is fixed at birth. How gender identity comes to be is probably through a combination of genetic variation and variations in hormonal levels and their timing prenatally. One’s gender identity is immutable—not able to be converted or changed. In other words, the only “cure” or, rather resolution, for a transsexual person is to utilize the current methodologies of changing the body to match the mind.

3. Why does a person change genders in mid life? Is this a lifestyle choice?

Being a transsexual person is never a lifestyle choice. Transsexual people are born transsexual. Since transsexual people are often isolated from correct information about themselves, it routinely takes people many years to begin to understand that they are transsexual. Then it often takes people many years to work through their denial and fear before they can take steps to correct or resolve their situation. Also, most health care providers are not knowledgeable trained with regard to gender identity issues so they are usually not a resource for the transsexual person.

4. Are transsexual people just homosexuals who can’t come to terms with their own sexuality?

The short answer is no. Sexual orientation like gender identity is just one more characteristic that occurs on a natural continuum of diversity. Increasing it is thought that, like gender identity, sexual orientation is fixed at birth. Sexual orientation is defined as our emotional, erotic, affectional and psychological attraction to someone. We can be heterosexual, bisexual or gay/lesbian (homosexual). Transsexual people, just like everyone else, can have any sexual orientation. Gender identity is how we know ourselves to be male or female and sexual orientation is who we are attracted to.
5. What’s the difference among people who identify as transsexual, transvestite or crossdresser?

People who are crossdressers now consider the term transvestite (which is actually French for cross dresser) to be stigmatizing and demeaning and so it is not any longer commonly used. Crossdressers are transgender people, who enjoy for purposes of psychological and emotional fulfillment, dressing in the clothing of the non-birth gender. Both men and women cross dress. Transsexual people know they are a person of the opposite gender and they feel a compelling need to change everything about themselves: their bodies, their dress, their mannerisms, etc. A very small number of crossdressers do make some body modifications.

6. How can anyone adjust to someone’s disclosure that they are a transsexual person as this may be a huge surprise for people?

Life is constantly bringing us change and we are similarly constantly adjusting to change. The process here is really not any different. Of course, people have many responses to a transsexual person’s disclosure, and people will adjust according to how they adjust to other changes. Because transsexual people are often very isolated, and filled with shame about their transsexualism they go to great lengths to hide it—hence, the surprise upon disclosure. People need time to adjust to the news. They need time to grieve, to ask questions—and to be given correct information. The transsexual person may be to the rest of the world changing their gender, but really they are for the first time correctly revealing their true gender to the world. This takes tremendous courage and fortitude which we could admire. The keys to good adjustment—are mutual love, support, acceptance; listening to one another; learning more about the transsexual person’s suffering and struggles; good communication; respect; understanding that the transsexual person will, perhaps, face potential discrimination and difficulties the rest of their life; trust that the transsexual person knows what is best for them as they transition; empathize—put yourself in the transsexual person’s situation and remember that ultimately the relationship you have with the transsexual person will be much more satisfying for both parties now that they have transitioned. The key to remember, while some of the outside features of a person are changing—they may look different, have some different mannerisms, they will still “be themselves”. Transsexuals do not undergo a complete personality change when they transition. Yes, it’s OK to ask the transitioning person questions; just be prepared to respect that some things are private, and may be answered more generally for you.

7. If I need assistance regarding an employee’s gender transition, who can I turn to?

Your supervisor(s), union representative, human resource officer, and other designated staff members are there to assist you with your questions and adjustment issues. They will provide leadership and encourage the value of good teamwork and unity. They will be an example to follow. They can provide correct information to your questions—or obtain that information should they not know the answer immediately. They can assist you with correct use of pronouns and the correct use of the person’s new name. They can provide you with resources so you can learn more about issues of gender identity and how it affects people’s lives, and if necessary they can provide you with a referral to an employee assistance professional or a qualified professional counselor.

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