

Gender Dysphoria

The link between gender dysphoria and autism is something which has been researched globally. The thinking currently seems to be that there is more of a prevalence of gender dysphoria relating to autistic people compared to non-autistic people, however, more research about this is much needed but because of this link we will briefly cover this topic.

The NHS Gender Identity Development service (GID) states: 'There seems to be a higher prevalence of autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) in clinically referred, gender dysphoric (GD) adolescents than in the general adolescent population. Holt, Skagerberg & Dunsford (2014) found that 13.3% of referrals to the service in 2012 mentioned comorbid ASC (although this is likely to be an underestimate). This compares with 9.4% in the Dutch service, whereas in the Finnish service, 26% of adolescents were diagnosed to be on the autism spectrum (Kaltiala-Heino et al. 2015). Why there is a higher prevalence of ASD in GD young people is still unknown.'

What exactly is gender dysphoria and gender identity?

Gender dysphoria is described as a person having a sense of unease because they don't feel a match between their biological sex and their gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person's sense of who they are and how they see and describe themselves. It is different to a person's biological sex which is to do with the genitalia a person is born with. Some people identify as male, female, or non-binary. Non-binary means the concept of a person's gender and is not relevant to their identity.

Signs of gender dysphoria

- Alterations to appearance.
- Low self-esteem.
- Social isolation
- Not wanting their gender to be referred to, for example 'good girl', 'that's my boy' etc.
- Changes in behaviour or interests.

The journey to transitioning

For someone who doesn't understand their gender, life can be very stressful and they may feel they don't fit in anywhere. Initially you may want to get to the bottom of the person's feelings and give them a concrete way of expressing how they are feeling. For others it may be a state of confusion and their desire to transition may turn out to be more of a distress at going through puberty and body parts growing and changing. For others it may be because they feel a lack of connection to their physical selves. We would recommend that counselling is sought in trying to understand the way they are feeling. As a result of this they may decide to remain as the gender they are. Questioning gender won't necessarily mean they want to transition; they may just be on a journey of discovery and self-expression. Try and go at their pace and support them as much as you can.

How can you support an autistic person experiencing gender dysphoria?

- Professional support: Talking to their GP or a psychologist or psychiatrist about how they feel is a good first step.
- Help them to express themselves and their feelings: Encourage dressing how they feel comfortable and support them to voice their opinions and feelings. Give them tools to do this.
- Discuss differences: If they want to fully transition you need to prepare them for what to expect. This may look like adaptations to their existing body or hormonal changes. You may use visuals of male and female bodies to do this.
- Suggest trying things out first: Some people may need to experience what it feels like being a male or female first before fully transitioning. They may do this by dressing as they identify.
- Give practical support: Some autistic people may need practical support such as help buying clothes and shoes or applying makeup.
- Your acceptance and support: This is vital because it is likely they will still be trying to process and figure out their feelings. Fear of judgements and rejection from you as a parent can be a huge barrier in the person being completely comfortable with their true self. Be open-minded and remember, whatever they decide, they are still your child.

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- Research: Find out as much as you can about gender dysphoria including what support is available. Be mindful that not all autistic people will want to access groups due to social anxiety so may need individual support.
 - Your feelings are normal: It is completely natural and understandable to feel upset, anxious, scared and to experience a sense of loss. You may need to seek some support for yourself to come to terms with these changes.
 - Respect the person: Ask them how they want to be addressed- he, she, they. It is likely that the person will recognise that you are making an effort and trying your best so will be understanding if you make mistakes.
 - Respect boundaries: they may feel uncomfortable with certain questions or situations.