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INFORMATION
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WORKING WITH TRANSGENDER AND NONBINARY CLIENTS: Where to Begin?



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As clinicians, we expect that our clients' gender identity and gender expression are aligned with their sex assigned at birth. Unless you specialize in working with transgender and nonbinary clients, likely all, or nearly all, of your clients are cisgender. The field of psychology's understanding of binary gender identities, dividing all people into masculine and feminine categories, may be nearly as outdated as the Masculinity/Femininity scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2)! Historically, masculinity and femininity have been conceptualized and measured by an individual's adherence to stereotypical traits and interests of men and women (Wood & Eagley, 2015). Gender identity has also been measured by individuals self-categorizing themselves as men or women (Wood & Eagley, 2015). Our field has only recently begun to incorporate the voices of nonbinary and transgender individuals into qualitative research to better understand their experiences in therapy. Many psychologists are used to thinking about gender as a binary of woman and man. These categories become hazier when we consider intersex people. They become hazier still when we acknowledge the existence of gender identities that do not align with sex assigned at birth. These gender identity categories may include transgender, nonbinary, agender, and

genderqueer, among many others. (For an overview of these gender identity terms, see the National Center for Transgender Equality's website: transequality.org.) While the diversity of gender identity labels may be overwhelming, it is not necessary to be an expert on queer gender identity definitions to appreciate the complexity of gender. I would ask you to try and define your own gender, out loud, to another person. If you identify within the gender binary, what does that mean to you? Can you describe what makes you a man or a woman, outside of your biology? How do your lived experiences, personality traits, interests, and values contribute to your sense of yourself as a gendered person? Has your understanding of your gender identity changed over time? Hopefully this exercise will help to demonstrate how difficult it can be to convey a deeply held sense of self to another person. The list below contains a brief overview of the interventions and practice guidelines drawn from the clinical research on therapy with transgender and nonbinary clients. I have also included my own thoughts on providing therapy as a queer, nonbinary psychologist working with this population.

- Introduce yourself to your clients with your name and pronouns. This lets clients know from the very start of your work together that you have a basic understanding of gender-inclusive

language (Matsuno, 2019). Practice using a client's pronouns between sessions to make sure you get them right most of the time (Matsuno, 2019).

- Include legal name, preferred name, pronouns, and gender identity on your intake forms. Make sure to review this section of the form before you greet your clients (Matsuno, 2019).
- Ask the client if gender identity or gender transition is a presenting concern for therapy, rather than assuming that the client's goal is to address gender dysphoria (Matsuno, 2019). Either avoiding gender altogether or focusing on gender more than the client would like can damage the therapeutic alliance (Budge & Moradi, 2018).
- Exploring gender identity should have the goal of greater self-understanding and acceptance. Gender identity work is unethical if it is focused on "curing" gender identity (Rowland & Cornell, 2021).
- Be curious about a client's gender identity and work collaboratively on goals surrounding exploring gender (Budge & Moradi, 2018).
- If you are not sure what language to use in reference to gender, ask your client. You can also mirror the language your client uses to describe themselves (Matsuno, 2019; Singh & Moss, 2016).

- Use a social justice lens to acknowledge gender-based oppression and the power imbalance between cisgender people and transgender and nonbinary people. This power imbalance extends to processing the power differential between yourself (assuming you are cisgender) and the client due to heterosexism in society (Singh & Moss, 2016). This social justice lens may include advocacy work from your position of power as a psychologist (Budge & Moradi, 2018; Matsuno, 2019; Singh & Moss, 2016).
- Invite your client to experiment with their gender expression during your therapy work together (World Professional Organization for Transgender Health, 2012). Gender expression refers to all the ways someone communicates their gender identity through their clothing, hairstyle, jewelry, makeup, voice, and mannerisms.
- For clients who identify with a religious tradition, do not assume that their faith conflicts with their gender identity. Examining their faith and using their faith practices as healthy coping strategies may be beneficial in the therapy work (Sadusky & Yarhouse, 2020).

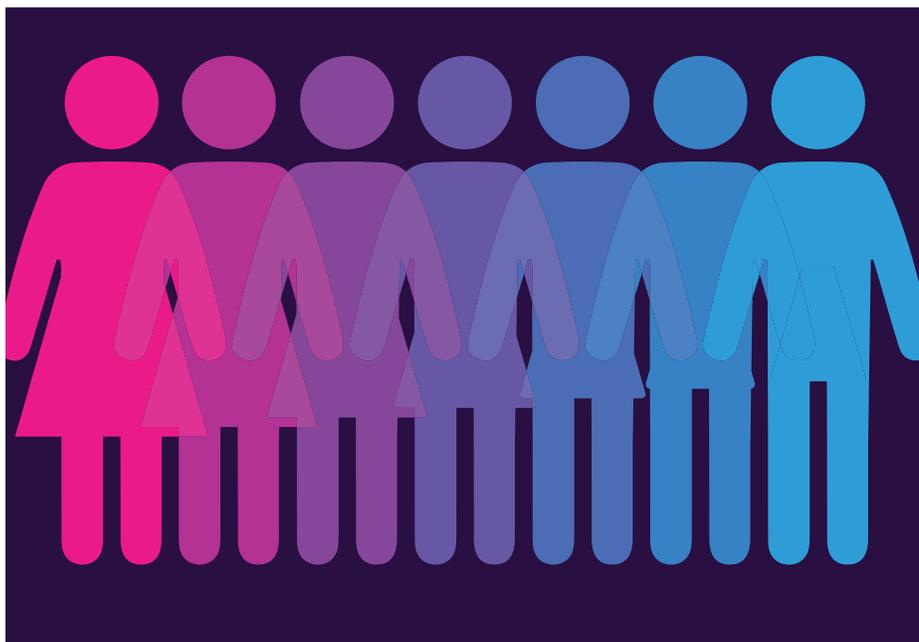
If you plan to seek out transgender and nonbinary clients, look for additional training and resources. Do not advertise your practice

as trans-affirming until you have done the work to have awareness, knowledge, and skills working with this population (Snow et al., 2021).

My hope is that the above suggestions will help you feel more prepared to work with transgender and nonbinary clients who seek out your services. Trans-affirming work is not often covered in graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology, so it is an area in which we must all seek out our own continued learning. Appreciating the intangibility of one's own gender identity is an excellent way to wrestle with the societal messages that transgender and nonbinary people navigate daily. If you are looking to further your knowledge on this topic, I recommend the American Psychological Association's (2015) publication "Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People" as an invaluable resource. 📖

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