

## Identity

### Identity or “Self 101”

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*Do you know who you are? How do you define yourself? Is it based upon your job, your family roles, your religion or your ethnicity? Identity is our most basic concept of self. It describes who we are and how we fit into the world around us. It defines our expectations of ourselves and the expectations of others.*

Society has role expectations for each of us based upon our gender, age, social and economic status. We can strive to meet those expectations, or we can challenge them. How we act, and the response of society to our actions, helps to further determine our sense of self.

When we are born, the first thing asked is whether we are a boy or a girl. Our parents often choose clothing colors based upon gender. How often have you been confused by an infant who is dressed in a color that is not stereotypically male or female? “Your baby is so cute, is it a boy or a girl?” If we can’t tell using the cues of appearance such as hair or clothing, we have to ask or risk making an assumption that may or may not be correct.

What toys did you play with as a young child? Did you gravitate towards dolls and pretend kitchens, or did you prefer cars, trucks and blocks? Did you like to play quietly with crayons and books, or did you jump on the furniture and run through the house in pursuit of imaginary foes? Have you already assumed that these differences in toy selection are based upon gender division? Whether it’s politically correct or not, most children in our culture tend to play within these socially-determined gender guidelines, and you have to make a conscious effort to think otherwise. When a parent makes the decision to give a child toys that do not fit with their gender stereotype, others may question that parent’s judgment. Sometimes there may be conflict between two parents of the same child over this type of decision.

Gender-specific behavior becomes even more ingrained during adolescence. Our surging hormones cause major physical changes, and our interest in establishing relationships begins to solidify. The activities we choose and the people with whom we identify all contribute to our sense of identity.

By the time we reach adulthood, our sense of self is more firmly established. We choose a career, establish friends, maybe get married and have children of our own. Much of what we do socially and professionally may be influenced and guided by our gender identity. It all seems so routine.

### What if it’s not that obvious?

What if you have gone through much of your life with the sense that your inner sense of self is not accurately reflected by your outer self?

Imagine this: while your parents are dressing you in gender-specific clothing, buying you gender-specific toys, enrolling you in gender-specific activities, and while you and your peers are engaging in dating relationships, career decisions and long-term life choices, something just doesn’t feel right. You know that you are supposed to think and feel a certain way, but you don’t. Maybe you are physically female, but wish you were male, so that you could play with the boys, have a masculine career and grow up to be a husband and father. Maybe you are physically male, but wish you were female, so that you could play dress-up with the girls, immerse yourself in the world of women, and grow up to be a wife and mother. What if you KNOW that you are not the gender you appear to be? You may be transgender. Other terms may include transsexual, gender-variant, gender dysphoric, gender identity disorder.

Imagine having these feelings, but keeping them to yourself. Maybe you don’t think you are supposed to feel like this. Maybe you are afraid of how others will react if they know. Our culture does not have a history of acceptance of gender differences. Fear and shame are powerful influences on behavior. Many transgender people live dual lives in order to protect themselves from rejection and even physical harm. Here is a great description of the effort that goes into maintaining this facade:

Transsexuals often express their feelings as akin to being cast in a role they are not suited for, for example, trying to play the hero when they are better suited to portraying the heroine. Nevertheless, they have to fit in to survive. They learn their lines and act the part. Actions and words that are foreign to their true nature are forced upon them because of their physical appearance. Eventually, as any actor would when performing in any long-running play, they get the role down pat. They can recite the lines, follow all the stage directions, and be a very convincing man or woman without even thinking about it. The trouble is that when they leave the stage, when they’re alone with themselves, they know that the part isn’t right for

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them. They know who they really are. They want nothing more than to be themselves, but they can't just take off the costumes and lead normal lives because the costumes are actually their bodies.

*(Renaissance Transgender Association)*

### What Happens Next?

Historically, psychiatrists tried to “cure” transsexualism without success. In the 1950's, Dr. Harry Benjamin, a psychiatrist and endocrinologist, began to treat transsexuals with the idea that the body should be changed to correspond to the mind, rather than the reverse. Gender reassignment, through the use of hormones and surgery, brings the body and mind into accordance with each other. This process is known as “transitioning” and includes specific guidelines for doctors and mental health professionals. Formerly known as the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIIGDA), the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) is the organization which developed and maintains these Standards of Care.

The role of the therapist in the transition process is very important. Transgender people seek out therapy for a variety of reasons. Some are seeking therapy for issues related to gender questioning and exploration. These clients recognize their feelings of gender dysphoria, but may not know what to do about their feelings. Other clients seek therapy with the primary goal of obtaining a referral for medical treatment. These clients have a clear vision of gender transition and their therapy is structured to assist them with this goal. Still other clients seek out therapy to help with relational issues, perhaps involving a partner or family members to improve understanding of the transgender identity within the relationships. (Coolhart & Bernal, 2007)

Maintaining a therapeutic relationship through all stages of transition is valuable in helping clients to work through all of the above issues. It also allows the transgender person to meet criteria required for different stages of the transition process. The nature of the requirements has the potential to create some tension by placing the therapist in a “gate keeping” role. It is crucial that client and therapist work together to establish goals and expectations. By providing an opportunity to explore the events of transition - anticipated and unanticipated - therapy is a vital piece of the puzzle.

Transition for the transgender person is a means to bring personal and public identity into accord with each other. It is the task of every human being to answer the essential question “Who am I?” All of us approach this question as we sort out how our inner selves and our outer lives mesh. A strong therapeutic relationship can provide a safe and nurturing place for all persons, transgender or otherwise, to more fully understand who we are.

### Resources and References

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- International Foundation for Gender Education, <http://www.ifge.org>

### A New Website

The staff of Riegler, Shienvold & Associates is pleased to inform you that we have a new website and newly designed web page. The new web address is [www.rieglershienvold.com](http://www.rieglershienvold.com) and has been active since February 1st. We designed our homepage to be more user friendly, with information you need usually accessible by just one or two mouse clicks.

Our services are divided into three headings: Adult Services, Child Services, and Forensic Services. Click on the green header of the service and a description of the types of services for that category are available for your viewing. Choosing the **ABOUT US** tab navigates to a page that lists office hours and bio information for all our therapeutic staff.

Previous newsletters are available to view or download by accessing the hot link on the homepage. Links to other resources can be accessed by clicking on the **RESOURCES** hot link at the top of the home page. The **CONTACTS** hot link navigates to a page with directions to our practice from various locations. Also see the link to Map Quest ,which provides “door-to-door” directions.

Lastly, there is an **ANNOUNCEMENTS** block on the home page. We plan to use this block to post announcements of upcoming and current events, such as changes in staffing or hours, and special announcements such as office closings due to weather or other causes. Take a minute or two to explore at the new site and let us know your thoughts. Your feedback will help us keep the site current and respond to your needs.