

Fall 2019
engage
LIVE WITH PURPOSE

Issues: Increasingly Up for Discussion

by Betsy Storm



Gender Identity

No surprise: Many older adults find their heads spinning at the ever-evolving world of sexuality and gender.

Older people grew up with a very clear understanding that a person identified as one of two genders—male or female, said Tim Hayes, assistant superintendent for student services at Winnetka's New Trier High School.

But old ways of classifying sexuality are no longer valid (if they ever were), as those who study gender issues discover more and more about the reality that gender identity must be classified on a far broader, even nebulous spectrum. (See sidebar, "Resources for a Better Understanding of Gender Identity.") All manner of organizations are better recognizing the leading role of gender in one's overall identity. For example, the Illinois Department on Aging recently added gender identity to its intake process.

A record 4.5%—more than 11 million U.S. adults—identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, according to a recent estimate by Gallup, Inc., a U.S. analytics and advisory company. That number is up from 4.1% in 2016 and 3.5% in 2012, the year Gallup began tracking Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) identification. A 2016 study of almost 81,000 Minnesota high school students estimated that nearly 3% identified as transgender

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or gender nonconforming, meaning they don't always self-identify as the sex they were assigned at birth.

But no matter the numbers, the wish of every person of every gender is the same—to be accepted, included, listened to, understood and cared for. It's as natural as a spring shower, and it's practically embedded in human DNA.

North Shore Senior Center strives to be an inclusive, diverse community, one where people are free to be who they really are and to express themselves openly.

Audry Farber, IT consultant at North Shore Senior Center, is thankful for finding herself on the receiving end of the Center's progressive, welcoming approach. Farber, who sometimes goes by her legal name of Jim Habel, began working at the Center in 2008. She came out as transgender at an office Halloween party four years ago when

Located in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, the Center on Halsted is the Midwest's most comprehensive community center dedicated to advancing community and securing the health and well-being of Chicago's LGBTQ community.

Coming out is never easy, no matter how empathetic and understanding one's family is. Young people in the midst of gender questioning need reliable peer outlets and support, resources they find easily available at local high schools. At Glenbrook High School, SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance) offers a safe place for students to talk to like-minded peers and allies—friends who support their journeys.

Matthew Bertke, a French teacher who doubles as a staff support person for SAGA, offered this counsel: "Listen without judgment. It's also important to ask genuine questions and show empathy and

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she dressed up as "Grace O'Malley, the Irish Pirate Queen," a historical figure born in 1530. "When people asked about my costume, I just said, 'I am transgender.' It was very freeing."

She found her co-workers to be enthusiastic, positive and understanding—without exception. The then executive director (a male) also expressed support. In September 2018, she started presenting as Audry at work full time. "When I first appeared as Audry, it created a bit of a stir with my copper jacket and colorful top. Nonetheless, I received hugs and smiles." There were some challenges, not surprisingly, in interactions with a few members and volunteers. "At first they didn't recognize me, but they became supportive once they realized who I was and what I was doing." Farber enjoys interacting with volunteers at the gift shop where she buys scarves and jewelry. She said many of the men she encounters are often "befuddled, but there is never a hint of unkindness."

Farber's emphasis on acceptance resonates with what the guidance experts dispense about how older adults can best communicate with their adult children, grandchildren, or other loved ones who may want to talk about their gender-identity journey.

Britta Larson, senior services director at the Center on Halsted, emphasized that the most important thing older adults can do is express unconditional love, acceptance and a willingness to learn.





Gender Identity Issues

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caring.” Teens are looking for allies, he emphasized, and your early behavior and reactions to their news will show whether you can be one. With that goal in mind, don’t bring up sexual or anatomy-related issues. Last, “Teens are especially aware of and sensitive to tone of voice so speak with compassion and understanding.”

Echoing everything Bertke said, New Trier’s Tim Hayes, assistant superintendent for student services at New Trier High School, also pointed out the negative consequences that often arise when kids are not supported in their gender-identity journeys by parents,

grandparents and others who’ve always provided what every human being desires—a safe place to fall. Not surprisingly, Hayes said, a range of negative consequences ensue when there’s no safe spot readily available. “When kids are confronting a lot of confusing questions, but they can’t talk to their older family members about them, then they have to keep secrets. They have to hide. Not surprisingly, their academic performance suffers.”

Added Hayes, “In families that really struggle with these issues and are not supportive of their kids, it makes everything much more challenging.” Conversely, “When parents (and others) are really open minded and tell their kids, ‘Okay, let’s explore this together’ (even if the parents or grandparents aren’t really convinced yet), it brings the family much closer together. Give teens the space they need to explore.”

Resources for a Better Understanding of Gender Identity

Websites

PFLAG: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

is a national organization providing confidential peer support, education and advocacy in communities in nearly all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Founded in 1972, PFLAG strives to save lives, strengthening families and changing hearts, minds, and the law. www.pflag.org

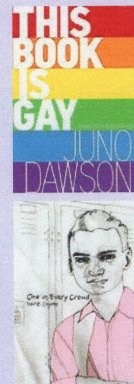
GLSEN (pronounced “glisten”) is an organization whose mission is to create safe and affirming schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. GLSEN has championed LGBTQ issues in K-12 education since 1990.

www.glsen.org

Books

“**This Book Is Gay**” by Juno Dawson, answers many questions about what being LGBTQ+ is, the difficulty and importance of coming out, and general information that could help grandparents to understand without needing to ask questions they maybe aren’t ready or comfortable asking.

“**One in Every Crowd**” by Ivan E. Coyote, includes stories about being LGBTQ+ and how it feels when things aren’t going so great.



Gender Identity: Terminology

Many Americans refrain from talking about sexual orientation and gender identity or expression because it feels taboo, or because they're afraid of saying the wrong thing. This glossary was written to help give people the words and meanings to help make conversations easier and more comfortable.



Ally: A person who is not LGBTQ but shows support for LGBTQ people and promotes equality in a variety of ways.

Androgynous: Identifying and/or presenting as neither distinguishably masculine nor feminine.

Asexual: The lack of a sexual attraction or desire for other people.

Bisexual: A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Cisgender: A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Closeted: Describes an LGBTQ person who has not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Coming out: The process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others.

Gay: A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender.

Gender dysphoria: Clinically significant distress caused when a person's assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify. According to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the term—which replaces Gender Identity Disorder—"is intended to better characterize the experiences of affected children, adolescents and adults."

Gender expression: External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.

Gender-fluid: According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a person who does not identify with a single fixed gender; of or relating to a person having or expressing a fluid or unfixd gender identity.

Gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

Gender non-conforming: A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category.

Genderqueer: Genderqueer people typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity and often, though not always, sexual orientation. People who identify as "genderqueer" may see themselves as being both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.

Gender transition: The process by which some people strive to more closely align their internal knowledge of gender with its outward appearance. Some people socially transition, whereby they might begin dressing, using names and pronouns and/or be socially recognized as another gender. Others undergo physical transitions in which they modify their bodies through medical interventions.

Homophobia: The fear and hatred of or discomfort with people who are attracted to members of the same sex.

Intersex: An umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations. In some cases, these traits are visible at birth, and in others, they are not apparent until puberty. Some chromosomal variations of this type may not be physically apparent at all.

Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women.

LGBTQ: An acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer."

Non-binary: An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a male or female. Non-binary people may identify as being both a male and a female, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do.

Outing: Exposing someone's lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity to others without their permission. Outing someone can have serious repercussions on employment, economic stability, personal safety or religious or family situations.

Pansexual: Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

Queer: A term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations. Often used interchangeably with "LGBTQ."

Questioning: A term used to describe people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

Transphobia: The fear and hatred of, or discomfort with, transgender people.