

CONVERSATION TOOLKIT

OPEN ABOUT GENDER

INFO FOR
MENTAL HEALTH
PRACTITIONERS AND
PEER WORKERS

AT A GLANCE

This toolkit provides written and visual prompts to support conversations about gender and related aspects of identity, including:

- gender expression
- body characteristics
- physical and romantic/emotional attraction (or lack thereof)

Young people may choose to explore some or all of the aspects of identity covered in this toolkit. By providing a young person with space to explore and share their gender identity without judgement, these conversations are intended to build a young person's ability to describe their experience, needs and goals related to gender affirmation when accessing care.

WHO IS THIS TOOLKIT FOR?

This toolkit is designed to support affirming conversations about gender with young people who are exploring their gender identity, or who identify as trans or gender diverse.

- **It is important that any practitioner using this toolkit takes a person-centred approach that respects a young person's sense of themselves.** This includes commitment to learning and reflection about one's own assumptions about gender and how to support safety when talking about gender and related aspects of identity.

- This toolkit is designed for clinicians and peer workers supporting a young person who has not yet had the opportunity to explore their gender within a safe and respectful environment. Young people who already have a strong sense of their gender may still find some sections helpful for exploring gender affirmation goals.
- This toolkit was developed for practitioners working in primary youth mental health services, including peer workers, practitioners and student

practitioners. Information presented here may also be useful for other health professionals with competency in gender affirming care.



Questions frequently asked by practitioners about this toolkit can be found on pages 7 and 8.

WHAT IS GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE?

Practitioners using this toolkit should take a person-centred approach that respects a young person's sense of themselves. *Gender affirmation* describes the processes that can support people to live and flourish as their authentic gendered selves. The term *gender-affirming* is used to describe something that supports someone's gender identity. *Gender-affirming care* is health care that holistically

attends to trans and gender diverse people's physical, mental, and social health needs and wellbeing while affirming their gender.

Competency in gender-affirming care is underpinned by an understanding of gender diversity and minority stress, and it includes a range of practices – for example, using and normalising correct names and pronouns; delivering evidence-based, trauma-informed, non-pathologising and strength-based interventions tailored to the young person's unique goals and preferences.

This resource should be used in line with professional standards of care, organisational policies, and relevant state or federal legislation, such as the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021* (Vic). Care should be affirming and must not seek to change or suppress a young person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

To learn more about gender-affirming care, explore Orygen's suite of resources: [Trans and gender diverse young people](#).

TIPS FOR USING THIS TOOLKIT

- * Ensure you're familiar with the toolkit and the reasons for asking certain questions. Review the [Information for practitioners](#) section of this resource for more information.
- * Go through all questions with the young person first, so they know what you're going to ask. Let them know that you can go through none, some or all of the questions today depending on what they want.



- * Check-in frequently to see if the young person would like to continue, take a break or stop. Also look for non-verbal signs that you might need to change the pacing or take a break.
- * Ask the young person's permission to upload the tool onto their file and check if they would like a copy of any sections.

HOW WE TALK ABOUT GENDER

The way we understand gender and the language we use is constantly evolving. This toolkit expands on the [Gender Unicorn](#) and draws on its framework for exploring gender, attraction and identity. The toolkit adapts and expands those ideas for practitioners in primary youth mental health services. The language used in this resource has been informed by young people, clinicians, peer workers and researchers with lived expertise of gender diversity.

Young people may use different language. **Respect can be shown by using the language young people use for their genders and bodies.**

OPEN ABOUT GENDER

Gender identity

Our internal sense of gender and how we describe and understand our experience of it.

Many different cultures across history have incorporated and celebrated gender identities outside of the gender binary of men and women. These include but are not limited to *fa'afafine* and *fa'afatama* from Polynesian culture, *hira* from South Asian cultures and *two-spirit people* from native North American cultures. The words provided are drawn from English language and White and Western understandings of gender. If you have other words you use describe your gender, add these in the box with the '+' symbol.

Words I use to describe my gender:

woman/girl/femme

none strong

non-binary

none strong

man/boy/masc

none strong

agender

none strong

What does
(woman, man, agender etc)
mean to you?

- ☐ Sometimes this changes for me
☐ I feel unsure currently

Gender expression

Our external way of indicating gender in our daily life and social settings.

Gender expression doesn't always equate to gender identity.

This part has two steps: First, we try to understand what your ideal gender expression looks like. Second, we explore how connected you feel to your current gender expression. Where there is a gap between your ideal and current gender expression, this can help us to create goals for affirming your gender.

Step 1. Indicate your ideal expression on each of the spectrums from none to strong.

Step 2. Mark on each spectrum how connected to your current gender expression you feel

feminine/femme

none strong

androgynous

none strong

masculine/masc

none strong

What does
(feminine/femme, masculine/masc) mean to you?

If you were to feel connected to your gender identity, what would be different?

Gender fluidity

Shift or changes in gender identity or expression – or gender fluidity – may be experienced over time or in different social contexts (such as home, school, etc.). Fluidity can relate to someone's internal sense of gender (identity) or how they express themselves (for example, through their clothes or behaviour). Some people experience fluidity that means their identity or expression varies day-to-day, while for some it might be weeks, months or years.

Sometimes gender expression can vary in different situations depending on how safe a person feels, for example, how safe they feel to wear certain clothes or makeup with certain friends or family. The sense of choice or agency a person has over their gender expression can interact with feelings of comfort, pride and joy about their gender.

How often does your gender identity or expression change?

☐ Contextual
 ☐ Daily
 ☐ Weekly
 ☐ Longer-term

What communities, relationships, hobbies, or aspects of your identity feel important to your gender identity and expression? For example, culture, neurodivergence, disability.



Pronouns

Pronouns are the words used when referring to someone when not using their name. In the English language, pronouns can be gendered – for example he/him/his, she/her/hers. Some people use gender neutral pronouns, for example they/them/theirs, including neopronouns such as ze/ hir/hirs.

Some people may use one set of pronouns and others may use multiple sets of pronouns interchangeably – for example, they/them/theirs and she/her/hers, and some people use their name rather than pronouns. Some people might use different pronouns in different contexts or situations.

Circle your nouns from the list below (select all that apply)

he/him/his

she/her/hers

they/them/theirs

xe/xem/xyr

ze/hir/hirs

ey/em/eir

I use other pronouns:

- ☐ I feel unsure about my pronouns
☐ I'd like to talk about trying out different pronouns

Romantic and emotional attraction

To whom we feel emotionally and/or romantically interested or attracted. This can also be described as being attracted to a person's character, mind and spirit. Sometimes this matches our physical attraction, but this is not always the case.

☐ I **do not** experience romantic and/or emotional attraction

☐ Gender is **not** relevant to my romantic and/or emotional attractions

I **am** romantically and/or emotionally attracted to:

women/femme

none strong

non-binary

none strong

men/masc

none strong

☐ I am **not sure** about how I feel when it comes to my romantic/emotional attractions (and that's ok)

Physical attraction

To whom we feel physically and/or sexually interested or attracted. Sometimes this matches our emotional attraction, but this is not always the case.

☐ I **do not** experience physical attraction

☐ Gender is **not** relevant to my physical attractions

I **am** physically attracted to:

women/femme

none strong

non-binary

none strong

men/masc

none strong

☐ I am **not sure** about how I feel when it comes to my sexual attractions (and that's ok)

More information about the type of folks I'm physically and/or sexually attracted to:

We ask about these types of attraction separately to recognise this diversity and support a more accurate understanding of someone's experience.



Body characteristics

While gender is a social and cultural experience, many aspects of how we experience gender are also embodied, meaning they are experienced within and through our physical bodies.

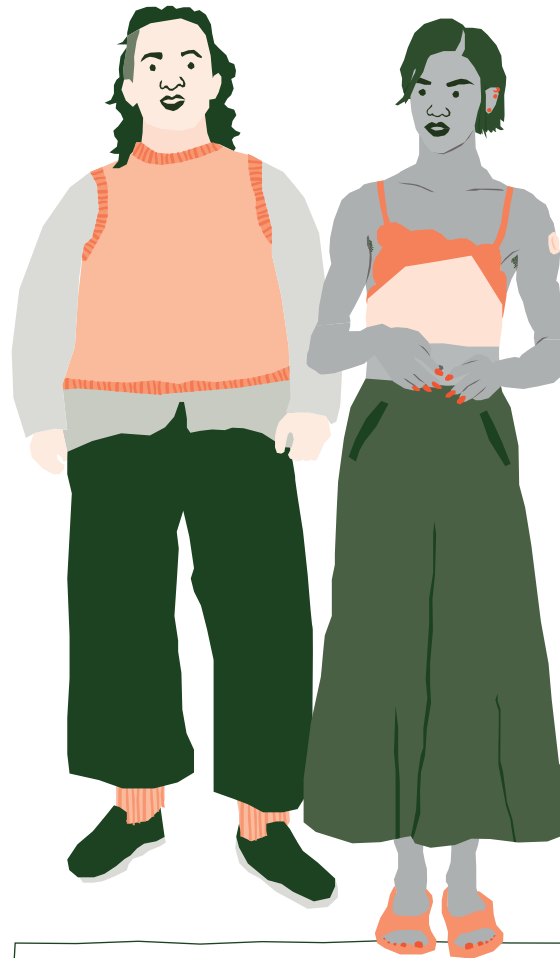
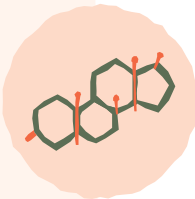
Diversity in body characteristics means that each person has a unique embodied experience of gender.

Hormones are chemicals in our bodies such as testosterone, oestrogen and progesterone. They fluctuate (change over time). They can be influenced by our diet, environment, medications, or health conditions. Chromosomes are pieces of genetic information found in our cells. They don't fluctuate but are not binary. They can have many different combinations.

Some people are born with natural variations in their hormones and chromosomes or other sex characteristics. This is often called being intersex (for more information see <https://interaction.org.au/>). Intersex people are a diverse community with many kinds of bodies and gender identities.

For some young people, body characteristics that don't align with their gender can cause distress or dysphoria, although not all trans and gender diverse young people experience this. Talking about bodies gives the opportunity to ask questions and explore what services and supports are available that can help with affirming your gender.

☐ I don't want/need to speak about this today



Body stuff for which I'd like a referral or extra support (e.g. GP, speech pathology)

Chromosomes

☐ I am aware I experience variation

Hormones

☐ I am aware I experience variation

Monthly bleeding

- ☐ I experience monthly bleeding
- ☐ Monthly bleeding is a source of gender dysphoria for me
- ☐ I experience physical pain associated with monthly bleeding

Chest

- ☐ I experience discomfort about my chest
- ☐ I want to discuss binding
- ☐ I want to discuss chest padding

Lower body

- ☐ I experience discomfort about my body characteristics during intimacy, alone or with others
- ☐ I want to discuss body padding
- ☐ I want to discuss safe tucking practices
- ☐ I want to discuss packing and stand-to-pee devices

Hair

☐ I want to discuss hair removal

Voice

☐ I want to talk about voice training

Identity Documents

☐ I want to discuss updating my identity documents (e.g., name, sex, pronouns)

INFORMATION FOR PRACTITIONERS

To guide safe, respectful and affirming conversations about gender when using this toolkit:

- Normalise feelings of uncertainty and changes in gender identity and expression.
- Support the young person to determine their own healthcare and gender affirmation needs.
- Normalise understandings of bodily and biological variation.

Helpful phrases for introducing this toolkit:

"It's completely fine if you're not sure about the answers to anything."

"You can share as little or as much as feels comfortable."

"I'll check in as we go to see how things are feeling."

SECTION 1: GENDER IDENTITY, EXPRESSION, FLUIDITY AND PRONOUNS

What does gender fluidity mean?

Gender fluidity refers to shifts or changes in a person's gender identity or expression over time or across different social contexts (such as home, school, or with friends). This fluidity might relate to someone's internal sense of gender, how they express themselves (for example, through clothing, appearance, or behaviour), or both. For some young people, these changes may occur day-to-day, while for others it might be weeks, months or years. Asking about how often expression changes is helpful for validating fluidity and supporting agency.

It's also important to recognise that gender expression can vary depending on how safe a young person feels in any environment, rather than a fluidity in their internal sense of gender. For example, a young person might express their gender differently with supportive peers than they would at home. Having the ability to make choices about how they express their gender can be closely linked to feelings of comfort, confidence, and pride.

In psychiatric settings, shifts in gender identity or expression can sometimes be misunderstood as instability or 'identity disturbance'. However, gender fluidity is a valid and recognised experience for many people. Supporting young people to develop language for their experiences and responding with curiosity helps create a more affirming and accurate understanding of their identity.

SECTION 2: ATTRACTION

Some ways you might introduce this section:

- "This section is about attraction, which can mean different things at different times."
- "We've included questions about romantic and physical attraction, because sometimes these are different."

Why might it be important to talk about romantic/ emotional and physical attraction separately?

Talking about romantic and physical attraction separately helps capture fully capture a young person's experience. While these often overlap, they don't always align. For example, someone might feel strong emotional connection without sexual interest, sexual attraction without wanting a relationship, or neither. Separating these questions also normalises diversity, including experiences such as asexuality or aromanticism, and avoids making assumptions. It creates space for more accurate, respectful conversations and helps ensure that support is guided by the young person's actual experiences rather than assumptions.

What does it mean if a young person says they don't experience any attraction?

Not experiencing romantic or physical attraction is a valid part of human diversity and is not necessarily indicative of someone's maturity level. Some young people may identify as asexual or aromantic, while others may not yet have experienced attraction and all these experiences are normal. Decisions about access to care, including hormones, should not be based on whether a young person reports attraction, but on a broader, individualised assessment.

Why ask about gender and body characteristics separately?

Asking about both gender and body characteristics helps to explore diverse experiences of attraction. Some people are drawn to others based on gender, while others may find that body characteristics are more important. For some people these features overlap, for some people neither quite captures what attracts them to someone. Asking about both helps to understand a broad range of experiences when it comes to attraction.

SECTION 3: BODIES

Some ways you might introduce this section:



“Some questions might not feel relevant, but it’s an opportunity for you to ask questions.”



“This section might help to identify things you’d like to chat about with a general practitioner or someone else.”

Why does this resource ask about body characteristics?

Providing transgender, gender diverse and intersex young people the opportunity to raise questions or express experiences of discomfort associated with aspects of their body can create a space to feel seen and heard. It also provides an opportunity for supporting access to health and other services that can support affirmation. Body characteristics can be a source of dysphoria for some young people. It is important that clients be provided the opportunity to opt out of speaking about body characteristics.

Chromosomes and hormones are specifically asked about to determine whether a young person has any indication of being intersex, even if they were not assigned such at birth. Binding and monthly bleeding are part of the questions because providing education about safe binding practices and the availability of menstrual suppression medication may significantly reduce distress for some transgender and gender diverse young people.

If you’re unfamiliar with these topics, please consult with reputable sources so you can provide accurate, safe and affirming information to young people. [TransHub](#) can be a helpful place to start. can be a helpful place to start.

Why doesn’t this resource use sex or gender assigned at birth?

Assumptions about sex and gender can be harmful because they can reinforce the idea of a biological binary. This is particularly the case for people with intersex characteristics, however, experiences of bodily difference are a common experience for many people. Providing the opportunity to discuss body characteristics without assumptions is intended to respond directly to the healthcare needs of the client.

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RELATED RESOURCES

Orygen suite of resources:

[Trans and gender diverse young people](#)

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Orygen acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their ancestral lands, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today.

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