

# The Unofficial Internet Guide to Gender Questioning

*(Welcome, Questioner! Over the years I've encountered so many people on Reddit questioning their gender that I have developed this guide to the best resources I know of for helping people sort out their gender identity, along with a liberal dose of my own views on the subject. The contents of any links present here are the views and research of others, while the text in this document reflects the beliefs and opinions of this individual internet rando. Take it as you will.*

*This guide tries hard to stay neutral on whether you actually are trans or not. This is not a "how do I prove that I'm trans?" guide. While it's true that many people who read this guide will turn out to be trans (because few cis people ever feel a need to question their gender at all), the goal of this guide is not to assume either answer, but to give you the tools you need to conduct a fair, balanced assessment of your own situation.*

*Up front, I will say that this guide is intended for people with binary gender identities: ones that are clearly male or clearly female. People with non-binary, genderfluid, agender, or other identities may well need different resources and guides than what I can provide. I am a pretty vanilla trans-femme person myself; I do not claim to have any insight into non-binary identities, and have made no attempt in this document even to try. I am staying very firmly in my binary lane here.*

*Please be encouraged to share the link to this document with anyone else it may help.)*

## **Framing the Question**

Questioning your gender identity—i.e. figuring out what your true gender identity is—comes down to learning enough about [how gender actually works](#) (rather than just how everyone assumes it works) and about how it affects trans people so that you can make a coherent assessment about how gender identity is playing out in your own life.

The first thing to learn is that gender identity is not the same as gender expression. That is, how your "soul" feels about itself is not necessarily the same as how your body looks, when it comes to the gender categories we're familiar with. For purposes of this document, "soul" means only the innermost part of your mind that *is* your identity as a person, with no implications or connections to any religious use of the word. Though if that usage matches up with your personal religious definition of "soul", by all means roll with it.

The resource for this is <http://genderbread.org>, which is an ELI5-level introduction to the concept that your identity is made of several individually identifiable parts, all of which are real and deserving of respect. Genderbread, however, attempts to cover physical and romantic attraction as well which (though important in life) are less important for questioning your gender.

And I don't feel that Genderbread goes deeply enough into the distinction between gender identity (soul) and gender expression (body).

In short: we grow up with a default cis-centric assumption that gender is *one* thing, that it is a monolithic phenomenon, [dictated or governed by what kind of body you have](#). In actuality, gender is a *dualistic* phenomenon, composed of gender identity and gender expression. In this framework, the inner gender identity is the part that determines whether your soul is male or female, while gender identity independently corresponds to the configuration your body happens to have (and usually to whatever layer of clothes/hair/makeup/etc. styling you layer on top).

Usually, for most people, the body matches the soul. Your soul feels male or female, and your body looks male or female to match. All is well. This scenario is called being “cisgender”. But for reasons that are not well understood scientifically (though there's a pretty compelling theory about [hormone exposure during fetal development](#); use the Download PDF link on that page to see the full article), sometimes your soul goes one way while your body goes the other way, and that's called being “transgender”.

Being trans is fundamentally a mismatch between body and soul. And your soul is the part that matters. If you're transgender, it is your *body* that is out of alignment, not your soul. Your soul is fine. Your soul is *you*. If your body isn't living up to your soul's needs, then the body needs to change. This is both true on a philosophical level (the soul *should* in some sense take priority over the body), a moral level (it's not *right* to demand that a person change or hide their innermost self for any reason), and a practical level (all the evidence we have says that a person's true, inner gender identity is immutable and *cannot* be changed, while the body is readily changed through hormones and surgeries).

So that's the first thing to understand: when you're questioning your gender, you are really asking the question “does my body match my inner gender identity?” Affirm for yourself that *you*, as a soul, as a conscious entity, are fine, and ask whether the meat-sack that carries you around happens to be the right shape for your needs.

### **What Being Trans Is Like**

The second thing to understand is that when the body doesn't match the soul, it causes<sup>1</sup> people to experience a host of psychological discomforts called “gender dysphoria.” Gender dysphoria is vast and complex, and reaches into practically every facet of a trans person's life.

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<sup>1</sup> The word “causes” kind of implies that *everyone* who is trans will experience gender dysphoria. I used to believe this myself. But that's not actually the case. A great many trans people definitely do. Anecdotally, it seems to be that the vast majority of trans people experience gender dysphoria. But not *everyone* does. Dysphoria is the collective psychological distress caused by this soul/body mismatch, and yet some people who assert that they have this mismatch nevertheless don't seem to suffer any distress on account of it. Still, since most people *do*, this guide will use language like “causes” for the sake of simplicity, rather than cluttering the whole thing with “unless you don't!” language. Suffice it to say that part of your job in questioning your gender will be determining whether you have gender dysphoria at all.

This matters because one of the most accessible ways to figure out if you're trans is to assess whether you have any gender dysphoria, and if so, what kinds and how strongly. If you went to a therapist and asked them to help you sort it out, this is what they would likely do. However, this is something you can do perfectly well on your own. All it requires is learning about what gender dysphoria is, how it works, and how it typically manifests in trans people's lives.

Every trans person is unique (you know, just like every *person*), and therefore each trans person experiences dysphoria differently. Nevertheless there are trends and patterns. Learning about them is your key to figuring out whether any of those patterns apply in your own life, and the resource for doing that is the Gender Dysphoria Bible at <https://genderdysphoria.fyi>. In my opinion, while you read the GDB, the best thing to do is to pay attention to how you *feel* about the descriptions and examples of different forms of dysphoria.

If those descriptions and examples seem largely foreign to you—if they feel like interesting or potentially even fascinating concepts but nothing more—then you probably don't have gender dysphoria. But if those descriptions and examples evoke memory after memory of similar experiences from your own life then you may well have gender dysphoria. Pay less attention to the specifics of the GDB's accounts, and more attention to the overall “flavor” of what you're reading and whether you recognize that flavor from first-hand experience.

### **Yeah, but am I Trans?**

Again, if you went to a psychologist for help with that question, they'd assess your dysphoria levels but would ultimately rely on the clinical diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria. These are available many places online with minimal Googling, but the specific summary I refer to most often is here: <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Diagnosis-of-Gender-Dysphoria.aspx>

There are different criteria for children versus adults, though the two sets are similar. The individual criteria are written in very abstract, clinical language, and in my view are rather hard to understand in any useful way that lets you determine which criteria you may meet. However, since gender dysphoria is closely linked to most trans people's lived experiences, the diagnostic criteria all relate back to dysphoria in one way or another. This is why it is so useful to go through the Gender Dysphoria Bible first: get your head around what dysphoria even is and how it might apply in your own life. Having done so, you'll have a *much* easier time determining which of the diagnostic criteria you do or don't have.

### **A Word about Self-Determinism**

Diagnostic criteria are all well and good (even reassuring), but ultimately only you can determine whether you are actually trans. This point is important enough to be worth both an italic and an underline. Recall, being trans means that your body's gender expression is out of alignment with your soul's gender identity. And it's the soul that matters. But making a definitive determination that these things are either in or out of alignment means comparing a *visible* thing (your body) with an invisible thing (your soul). Nobody else lives inside your head. Nobody else knows what it feels like to be you. Nobody can see your soul to tell whether your body matches it.

Except you. You, and *only* you, have the privileged viewpoint of being inside your own head. You and only you know what it feels like to be you. You and only you are capable of assessing your true gender identity. The GDB and the diagnostic criteria are invaluable tools for helping you assess whether it is *likely* that you are trans. But ultimately, you're the only one who can say for sure.

This is critically important. Because if it turns out you are trans, you will encounter people who will reject your assertion of your own true identity. They will say you are confused, that you are influenced by the internet, that the devil is poisoning your mind, that they've known you since you were born, that you "can't argue with biology", and any number of other bullshit arguments.

All of those arguments boil down to one thing: These people are observing the way your *body* looks, making an assumption about your *soul* on that basis, and then claiming that they know you better than you know yourself. This is as patently arrogant and offensive as it is ridiculous.

They cannot know you better than you know yourself, because they can only see half of the picture. They can see your body, but only you can see your soul. And it's the soul that matters. If, after examining yourself, you determine that your soul is best labeled as "female" or "male", irrespective of how your body looks, [then that's what you are](#). Period.

If you are trans, standing up to claim your true identity will likely trigger resistance from some of those around you. It is therefore important that you understand exactly why *you* are quite literally the only person in the world who is, or even *can* be, an authority on your own identity.

### **But How Can I Be Sure?**

Let's suppose you have digested the GDB and assessed the diagnostic criteria and found that you are indeed likely to be trans, but you still have doubts. First, welcome to the club! Basically every trans person goes through a period of being unsure. This is unsurprising, especially if you are facing this question in your teens or later: the more life experience you have under your birth-assigned gender, the harder it becomes to change the lifelong belief that you are that gender. Even in the face of strong evidence, it's not easy to accept that you're actually female if you've gone through your whole life believing you're male, or vice-versa.

The most insightful strategy for being sure that I have yet seen is Natalie Reed's excellent essay The Null Hypothesis: <https://freethoughtblogs.com/nataliereed/2012/04/17/the-null-hypothesis/>

In this, Ms. Reed points out that when we question our gender, we are evaluating two different hypotheses: the "I'm cisgender" hypothesis vs. the "I'm transgender" hypothesis. Two competing viewpoints on who you might be. However, we grow up in a society with an extremely strong cisgender bias, and so we unconsciously privilege the "I'm cisgender" hypothesis. We take it for granted, not demanding that it prove itself against the evidence of our lives, while subjecting the "I'm transgender" hypothesis to the most stringent and skeptical evaluation.

And yet, as Reed points out, there is no reason for this asymmetry. Both hypotheses should be evaluated with equal stringency. How can you be sure you're trans? Well, how can you be sure you're *cis*? If you're *not* sure—and since you're questioning your gender to begin with you already know you're not—then the only right thing to do is to take the evidence your life gives you (in the form of your memories that relate to different types of gender dysphoria or to gender-coded experiences), and ask yourself which hypothesis does a better job of explaining all that evidence.

### **Look for the pattern.**

Deciding between those two hypotheses all about *patterns*. You read through the GDB. You then checked your own memories of your life for experiences that match the general ways in which dysphoria manifests in people's lives. The questions to then ask yourself are “what pattern did I find?” and “which hypothesis explains this pattern the best?”

If you're cis, you likely found very few experiences in your past that match up with dysphoria. If you're trans, you probably found a lot.

Speaking personally, this method of framing the uncertainty was exceptionally effective at helping me come to a clear and confident conclusion about my own gender identity. Because once evaluated in this light, it became abundantly clear to me that the “I'm cisgender” hypothesis really can't explain my life at all. In far too many situations, my thoughts, feelings, reactions, and responses to the situations of my life were markedly different from those of the boys around me, while simultaneously matching much better with those of the girls around me.

But the “I'm transgender” hypothesis does a shockingly, almost frighteningly, good job of explaining my life. Indeed, the parts of my life that were always the most painful, the most confusing, and the most detrimental to my own view of myself make no sense at all if I was cis—there's no reason why a boy would think or feel or react or respond that way—but are exactly what you'd predict if I'm trans. If I'm actually a woman on the inside.

Going through the Null Hypothesis exercise, outlined in Reed's essay so much better than I can do here, finally made my life *make sense* in a way that nothing else ever had. It gave me both the confidence and the comfort to say to myself “well, yes, then I truly am a woman,” despite the lie my body tells, despite what everyone assumed about me when I was born based on seeing that lie, despite the lie getting back around to me before I was old enough to know better, and especially, despite *believing* that lie for as long as I did. No lie or assumption, even one as deeply entrenched as that one was, could withstand the cold scrutiny of my life's actual evidence.

### **Ok, so I'm trans. What now?**

The general assumption is that a trans person will transition so they can live a life in accordance with their gender identity. And indeed, many trans people do! But not all. Whether to do so is an intensely personal decision, since it will affect virtually every aspect of one's life. How, then, do

you decide whether transitioning is right for you? In my view, there are some pretty clear steps you can take to arrive at a decision.

1. Figure out what your gender identity actually is. What kind of soul do you have? This whole question is why you're reading this document in the first place.
2. Figure out how your gender identity has affected you over the course of your life. If your gender questioning reveals that your gender identity isn't the same as what you were assigned at birth, then when you re-evaluate your life through the lens of your actual gender identity, chances are that a lot of things will suddenly make a lot more sense. This can be a very transformative process for how you see yourself and understand yourself. In my experience it was also very beneficial to my self-esteem.
3. Figure out how your gender identity is affecting you *now*. Dig into the ways the mismatch between body and soul is affecting you now. This is mostly about getting to know your different sources of gender dysphoria, how much they impact you, and how painful they are. By the time you finish steps 1 and 2, you will probably have a good idea about this already. If not, revisit the gender dysphoria bible to remind yourself of the patterns of dysphoria. Then look at your own life and feelings to see whether those patterns are present and to what extent.
4. Figure out what you want to do about it. This is the "should I transition, and if so, how?" part. Remember that transitioning is about *realigning* your exterior life to match your interior soul. Since this misalignment is the root cause of gender dysphoria, this realignment process can be viewed as a specific set of activities targeted at curing your specific set of dysphorias. This general strategy turns out to be shockingly effective for the vast majority of trans people. So after you finish step 3, you basically have a list of misalignments that are bugging you, which you can then set out to fix one by one. Facial hair bothering you? Laser hair removal and electrolysis! Breasts bothering you? Get a binder and schedule a surgical consultation for top surgery. There are things you can do to address each particular misalignment, and those activities plus your list of bothersome misalignments amounts to a personalized transition plan.

In broad strokes, this is what I encourage people to do beyond the basic "am I trans?" questioning: Take the answer you find and use it to figure out how to live the best life—the most authentic life, the most fulfilling and happy life—you can.

I will also say, though, that step 4 as I've outlined it here is a very *dysphoria*-lensed view of transitioning. There is definitely a place for that—dysphoria sucks, and should be treated as swiftly as possible—but it's worth considering a *euphoria*-lensed view of transitioning as well. Generally, these are two sides of the same coin: in transitioning, you're generally trading gendered aspects of your body and life that trigger dysphoria for ones that trigger euphoria. But euphoria goes broader than that. Euphoria extends into whole other worlds of gender-coded self expression that make you happy but don't necessarily correspond to "opposite" male-vs-female versions of those same things.

This is much more nebulous and I can't give you specific resources to make lists from or anything like that. But I can say that in my transfemme experience, I've done many transitioning activities specifically to target masculine things that were giving me dysphoria, but in exploring the overall world of femininity I've discovered other things I can bring into my life because they also give me euphoria. Things I wasn't necessarily *missing* before, but which nevertheless bring me joy in my gendered self and help me to sharpen the authentic feminine presentation I can now show to myself and to the world. So stay on the lookout for affirming sources of gender euphoria, too. They're worth discovering!

As well, step 4 is phrased in a very one-and-done kind of way. That's largely for clarity of explanation. In reality, there is nothing one-and-done about transitioning: it is an ongoing, continuous process. I am constantly re-evaluating my dysphorias to figure out what I should be focusing on now. What's bugging me the most? Which mismatch is troubling me most? These things can and do shift over time, and you should not be surprised, a year or two or three into transitioning, to find that you are now bothered by things you weren't bothered by in the past. Dysphoria is like noise in that way: you can only hear your worst dysphorias because they scream the loudest. Their sheer volume drowns out the sound of the lesser dysphorias.

Put another way: you probably *can't* make a comprehensive step-4 list right away. You will likely be discovering previously-unrecognized sources of dysphoria for a while. And in my opinion, that's not a bad thing. Knowing about the whole list up front could be pretty overwhelming. The very fact that new stuff will turn up later gives you a natural way to focus on only the most important things right now. This keeps it manageable while also giving you the most dysphoria-stomping bang for your buck at any given time.

### **Transitioning**

Supposing you come out of step 3, above, with a list of misalignments that are really bothering you. It's great to know what needs fixing, but that isn't the same as knowing *how* to fix it. After all, there's a whole gamut of social and medical activities you can do to re-align your body and other aspects of your life with what your soul needs.

Social transitioning is everything *non*-physical. Or at least, not about your body: your name, your pronouns, your clothes, your hairstyle, etc. I won't say much about that, since it's fairly straightforward how to change any of that stuff. For the most part, you can change it just for the asking. Want a new name? Ok. Tell people to call you something different. Making it your new legal name is a bit more involved, but for the vast majority of daily life, it's sufficient to simply declare what your new name is. Likewise for the rest of social transitioning.

That said, you may well not be *ready* to change that stuff immediately. And that's ok! I genuinely believe that listening to your loudest dysphorias first is the way to go. When you're ready to wear gender affirming clothes in public, you'll know. And if you're not sure about it yet, that just means gender affirming clothes are *not* what your soul is screaming for right now. There is no rush, and no set order for any of this. The only order that matters is *what do I need right now?*

Medical transitioning is a vast and complex subject. However, this document is explicitly *not* a guide to how to re-align your body with your soul. It is a guide for *questioning* your gender. You should look to more authoritative sources for medical transition information—hence, I do not intend any of the following as medical advice; do not take medical advice from internet randos—and where I can I have linked them here.

That said, I assert that understanding the *possibilities* medical transitioning offers is genuinely helpful in the step 3/step 4 stuff above, because it enables you to examine your feelings about those treatments. It allows you to ask yourself how you'd feel about having or not having breasts, a penis, a vagina, facial hair, etc., from the perspective of knowing that you actually could have that sort of a body and what it would take. To treat those questions not as purely philosophical musings, but as *real possibilities for you in your life*.

Second, I offer these resources out of a sense of ethical obligation; if someone reads this document and concludes that they are transgender, it would be cruel to leave them in the bleak place of feeling *stuck* in their mismatch between soul and body. I will never tell anyone what they should do with their body, but I want to tell every trans person that they can and should have genuine *hope* for bringing their body into better alignment with their souls, if they choose to do so.

Being hit with the conclusion “Well, shit, I guess I’m trans” can feel like being diagnosed with a dire disease, which if not coupled with the hope of a treatment path, risks harming people’s mental health. I am not willing to risk that harm.

So with the lengthy caveat out of the way, and for its aid to your questioning and to your future hope, the best summary I know of as to what is medically possible in transitioning is the transgender healthcare presentation deck put together by Dr. Will Powers, of the Powers Family Medicine clinic in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The latest full version of this is here:

<https://powersfamilymedicine.com/s/Healthcare-of-the-Transgender-Patient-V60.pptx>

Be warned, this presentation is written by a doctor to help other doctors treat trans patients, and is therefore heavy with medical lingo. Nevertheless, while the details of hormone metabolism or whatever may escape me or any other non-medically-trained reader, the presentation’s broad strokes are easy enough to grasp.

Note that Dr. Powers has a subreddit, [/r/DrWillPowers](https://www.reddit.com/r/DrWillPowers), which is a great place to go for a peek into the day-to-day medical realities that people face while transitioning. The sidebar of this subreddit will have a link to any updated versions of the presentation (as of this writing, there is a “leak” of an updated 7.0 version, though a final version has not yet been released). The sidebar also has links to many other healthcare resources, including a wiki where you can find providers in your area that serve transgender healthcare needs.

While I will fully admit to being impressed by Dr. Powers’ work, I would be remiss not to state that Dr. Powers is a somewhat polarizing figure in transgender medicine. Dr. Powers’ patients



seem to love him for his willingness to listen to what they want out of their transitions and to do his level best to find a hormone regimen that will achieve it for them. He has pioneered new dosing strategies and drug delivery methods for hormones that are well-grounded in science and seem both clinically safe and effective, and he is not shy about promoting what seems to work. On the flip side, given the rather sad state of academic research on medical transitioning and the politically-charged nature of such work today, none of Dr. Powers' methods have received the kind of peer-reviewed scientific study that most medical treatments receive. Dr. Powers fully admits this and encourages that type of research, but regardless, such research has *not* yet validated his methods in properly controlled trials. So, full-disclosure: some people think he's a saint, others a madman. I am of the view that [his story](#) speaks for itself, but you make up your own mind.

### Some Other Useful Bits

The above are the big resources, but they are hardly the only ones. Other resources that have helped me or others along their journeys of questioning include:

Anne Vitale's research paper on transgender identities:

*Note: the link on Dr. Vitale's site recently went stale when she revamped her website. While it looks like she intends this article to still be available, currently it is not, so here is a cached version from the Internet Archive)*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150317071633/http://www.avitale.com/developmentalreview.htm>

This paper is rather old now, and its terminology is much less "woke" than what we use here in 2022 (notably, she refers to people by their birth-identified genders rather than by their gender identities), but I still find its core observations to be extremely relevant. In it, Dr. Vitale surveys many trans people and attempts to create a set of broad classifications of trans people based on similar life experiences. I have shared this link with many others who have had the same reaction to it as I did: to have felt extremely *seen* and *validated* by recognizing themselves in one of Vitale's groupings. To grow up trans is often to grow up feeling like you are a uniquely abnormal weirdo, a misfit among misfits. But instead, I find that I am a fairly ordinary and straightforward type of trans person. I am not weird or strange. There's a whole bunch of other people out there just like me; enough that this researcher *noticed* us and gave us a label, and that is extraordinarily comforting.

Dara Hoffman Fox's blog post on dysphoria types:

<https://darahoffmanfox.com/do-i-have-gender-dysphoria/>

While parts of this will feel repetitive with the Gender Dysphoria Bible, Fox does present a useful grouping of the different broad types of dysphoria, and a methodology for quantifying how you experience each one. In some ways, I think Fox does a better job of systematizing dysphoria than the GDB does, while the GDB goes into far better depth. Read both, and let their respective strengths play off one another.

Although I said earlier that sexuality and romantic orientation were less important considerations when questioning one's gender, only a fool would claim that there is no interaction between our

gendered souls and the way we interact sexually or romantically with other human beings. One source of uncertainty many trans people feel about being trans (that is, another way they subconsciously privilege the “I’m cisgender” hypothesis), is by assuming that their feelings of dysphoria are instead some type of sexual fetish. This, too, is one of those “only you can decide for sure” things, but Amanda Roman has put together a fabulous piece exploring the dynamics of fetishism vs. trans identities that can help you sort out what’s what:

<https://medium.com/@kemenatan/its-just-a-fetish-right-91cb0a4e261> In addition to that one, for my money the best thing on the internet about kinks vs. trans identity is this piece on the incredible Stained Glass Woman substack:

<https://stainedglasswoman.substack.com/p/beneath-the-surface>

A cruel reality of gender dysphoria is that not all dysphorias are obvious. In many, many cases, specific types and instances of gender dysphoria do not feel, in the moment, like they are related to gender at all. But they are. Zinnia Jones covers these “indirect” forms of dysphoria in this next link. Again, much of this is touched on in the GDB, but Jones’s analysis is still very useful for expanding the scope of life experiences that you examine while questioning your gender, or for identifying dysphorias that would have escaped your notice otherwise.

<https://the-orbit.net/zinniajones/2013/09/that-was-dysphoria-8-signs-and-symptoms-of-indirect-gender-dysphoria/>

### **Terminology**

I have largely stayed away from defining terms in this document except implicitly through their use in context. That said, I have also done my best to be consistent with the common usage in the trans community as to what terminology to use and how to use it.

Thankfully, I need not write all that down here, as some kind soul has done that for us:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QgCzYPI5HKedhXsf5tJow8l\\_qWy4-HDPemjcel0cdUo/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QgCzYPI5HKedhXsf5tJow8l_qWy4-HDPemjcel0cdUo/edit?usp=sharing)

### **Feedback**

Suggestions, corrections, comments, or other constructive feedback may be directed to [/u/TooLateForMeTF](https://www.reddit.com/u/TooLateForMeTF) on Reddit. Any and all troll responses will be met with swift deletion and a fleeting sense of pity for the sender, nothing more.

If you made it this far, congratulations! You are a trooper. I wish you clarity!