



YOUTH MOVE NATIONAL™

PEER CENTER ISSUE BRIEF

Nonbinary Youth in Binary Systems: *Considerations for Mental Health Services*

Part One of Two: Nonbinary Youth

INTRODUCTION

According to the Trevor Project's [2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health](#), nearly one in five transgender and nonbinary youth attempted suicide in the past year. More troubling, it noted that 60% of LGBTQ2S+ youth who wanted mental health care in the past year were not able to receive it. Both of these findings convey two important messages - 1) LGBTQ2S+ youth, particularly trans and nonbinary youth, are struggling and in need of mental health supports; and 2) More often than not, these youth are facing barriers to receiving that support.

In this issue, we focus on one community that continues to lack specific research and consideration: nonbinary youth. We explore what it means to be nonbinary, its focus in mental health research, and offer some considerations and reflection questions for those looking to better serve these youth within mental health services.

UNDERSTANDING NONBINARY IDENTITIES

Biological Sex, or “Sex Assigned at Birth”

First and foremost, it's important to understand the difference between biological sex and gender. In the United States, biological sex, or “sex assigned at birth,” is what a baby is given when they're born (usually, boy or girl.) Sex assigned at birth is determined by external physical characteristics. There are many combinations of primary and secondary characteristics (like body parts, chromosomes, and hormones) people are born with which result in human biology falling on a spectrum between “male” and “female.” If you're interested in the lived experiences and stories of people who are on this spectrum, check out this resource from the [Intersex Society of North America](#). The takeaway for now, however, is that human biology and gender are not as black and white as we may think!

Gender Identity

Gender, on the other hand, is a set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate, based on a lot of things, including the sex you're assigned at birth (or the sex others perceive you were assigned at birth). More specifically, a person's gender identity is their deeply held core sense of self in relation to gender—That invisible, societally and experientially-informed facet of ourselves that helps us to define our understanding of who we are, and our relationship with the world. The more you try to describe it and define it, the more abstract it gets. But that's the beauty of it!

It is also important to note that gender identity is different than attraction or sexual orientation, which is the understanding of emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings towards people (or no people!). To be clear, one is about feelings you have towards others, and the other is more about feelings you have towards yourself and your participation in the world.

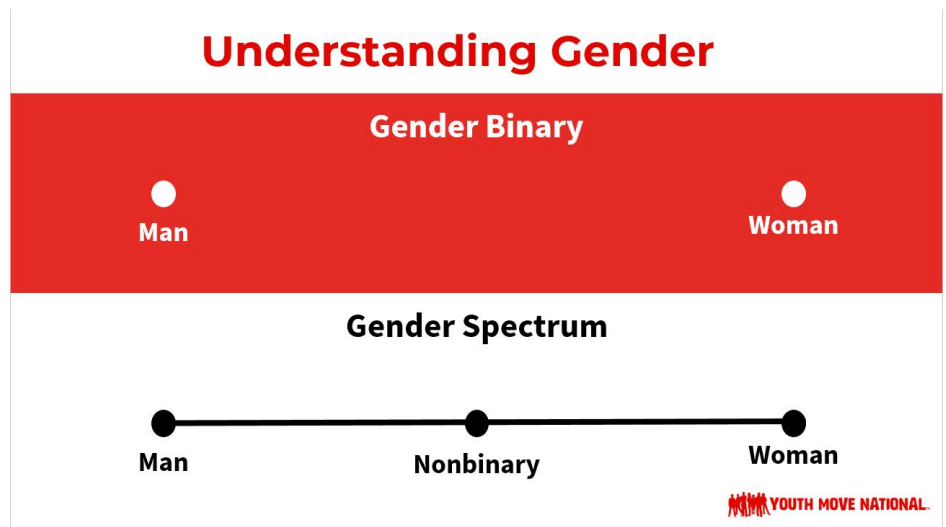
This worksheet from [Transgender Student Education Resources](#) is a helpful tool to understand this distinction!

Understanding Gender Identity and Expression

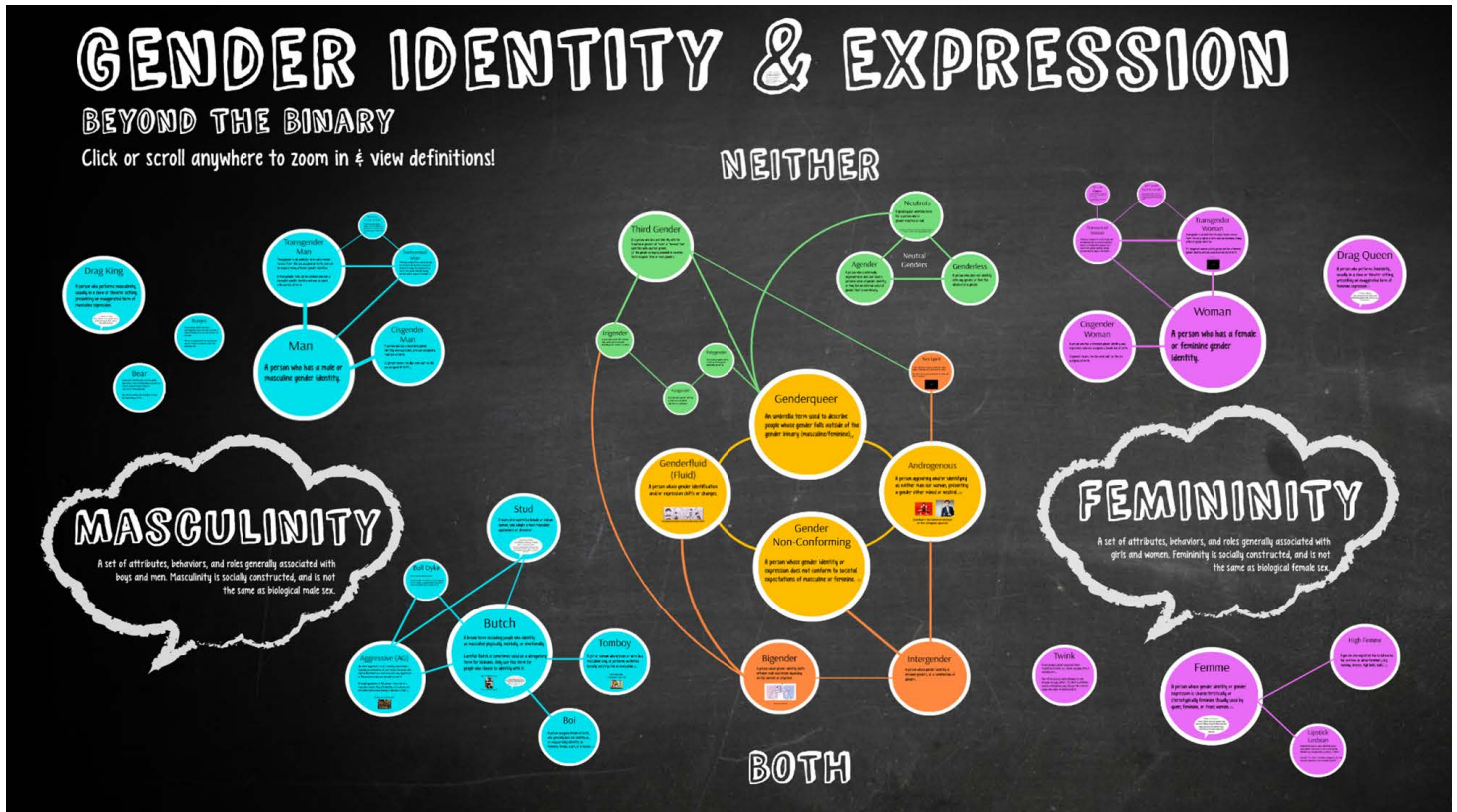
Now it is important to acknowledge how we look at the expansiveness of gender. Many are familiar with the outdated "gender binary," which is that black-and-white concept that there are only two genders, men and women, and that everyone must be one or the other.

It is a concept that's also used to assert that gender and biological sex are inherently linked. All of this we know (or should know) is not our reality.

More commonly now, we notice the reference to the "gender spectrum," which often looks something like a number line or scale. Think of a line where one side is "man", one side is "woman", and "nonbinary" is in the middle. The idea is that you could fall anywhere across this spectrum. While this concept is used very widely, it is not comprehensive of all gender identities. Many people identify as agender, or as not identifying with the concept of gender or having a gender identity at all, and they would technically fall outside of this spectrum.



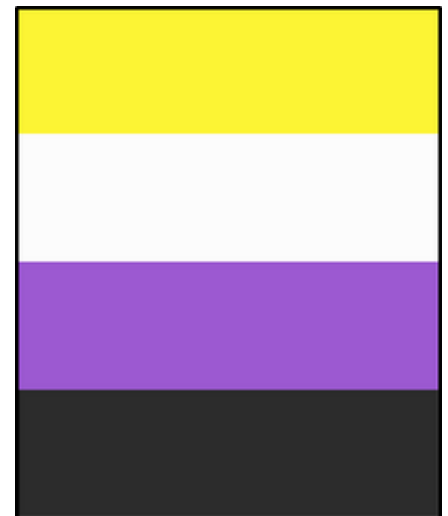
So again, the more you try to define it, the more abstract things get, and the more you realize that you really can't! The graph below can be a helpful way of rethinking our understandings of gender identity and expression. The idea is that, like stars in the sky, the expansiveness of gender can't be measured or captured in any kind of shape. There are genders that share similar characteristics, and could potentially be grouped like constellations, but at the end of the day, there will always be more.



Nonbinary Identities

So now to specify what we mean by “nonbinary.” The term nonbinary refers to people who do not identify with the gender binary at all. They might exist between or beyond the man/woman binary. As mentioned previously, a lot of folks still understand their gender as existing within that binary or “bridge” between man and woman, and that’s okay!—As long as that’s not a lens projected on or prescribed to anyone else.

Nonbinary people often understand their identity as falling under the larger transgender umbrella. However, it is important – as always! – to respect each individual’s identify and how they relate.



If you would like to request technical assistance and consultation from Youth MOVE National, you can submit your request [HERE](#)!

REFERENCES

- "2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health." The Trevor Project, 2022, www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/.
- "What Is Intersex?" Intersex Society of North America, isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex/.
- Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015. "The Gender Unicorn."
<http://www.transstudent.org/gender>.