

What's the first question that is asked when a person delivers a new baby? Is it a boy or a girl? The answer to that question, of course, is based on the genitalia of the infant. If the baby has a penis, it's a boy; no penis, it's a girl. Right? What do we say to a toddler or preschooler who refer to themselves to be the opposite gender of what their genitals define them to be? Usually we tell them they're wrong. The child is told that they are a boy or girl based on their genitals, the length of their hair, the color of their clothes, etc. Imagine what it must be like to be told in every area of your life that you are a certain gender, but on the inside that gender assignment doesn't fit. You are told to use a certain bathroom, though you swear you are the opposite gender, despite the genitalia to prove otherwise.

You are expected to play with children of similar interests, often based on gender; but that doesn't feel right either. You feel more comfortable in clothing of the opposite sex. You desire to wear makeup or a ball cap but know that you will get teased. Such is the life for an individual with Gender Identity Disorder. We often mistake those with Gender Identity Issue for being perverse transvestites. They may be labeled as "queer," "gay" or "sick"; identified as perpetrators and assumed to be dangerous. Sadly, this image prevents many individuals with gender identity disorder from leading a healthy, satisfying existence. This population is at high risk for mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. They are at higher risk for suicide attempts and completions.

Gender Identity Disorder is characterized by the strong and persistent cross-gender identification. Children will repeatedly state the desire to be the other sex, dress in attire that simulates the opposite sex, prefer cross-sex roles in make-believe play or fantasies, show a strong preference for playmates of the other sex and desire to participate in the stereotypical games and pastimes of the other sex. The individual will demonstrate persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. The child may be disgusted by their genitalia, assert the desire to grow a penis or refute breast development. As an adult, this disorder is characterized by a preoccupation with getting rid of primary and secondary sex characteristics through the use of hormones, surgery requests or other means, while also believing that he or she was born the wrong sex.

Given this population is highly discriminated against, it is important for all society members to re-evaluate what they really know about this population. Anyone can judge; only wise individuals can use novel information to challenge their current opinions. The formation of genitalia occurs intrauterine during the first two months of pregnancy. Sexual differential of the brain or gender identify (the feeling of being a man or a woman) takes place in the second half of pregnancy. Thus, these two distinct processes may be influenced independently of each other. What does all this mean? That the masculinization of the genitals may not reflect the same degree of masculinization of the brain. In summary, a penis is just a penis. It certainly doesn't define the man...or woman.