

EMBRACING GENDER DIVERSITY: EXPLORING GENDER IDENTITY

TOPIC OVERVIEW

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AWARENESS

What is gender diversity and gender identity?

Gender diversity is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of gender identities beyond the traditional binary understanding of male and female. The American Psychological Association defines gender diversity as the extent to which a person's gender identity, role, or expression differs from the cultural norms prescribed for a particular sex.

Gender identity is one's belief and understanding of their gender. Only the individual can truly know and define their gender identity. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

- 1 **Gender identity is a personal and internal sense of one's gender. Gender identity can be female, male, both, neither or anywhere on a spectrum. It can be the same or different from a person's sex assigned at birth.**
- 2 **Gender expression is how people present themselves externally through behavior, clothing, hair, makeup, voice, body language or other aspects of appearance. Gender expression does not have to align with gender identity.**
- 3 **You don't have to understand everything about a person's identity to support them. If someone confides in you that they are transgender, nonconforming, or nonbinary, the most important thing you can ask is, "How can I support you?"**

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients, and community.

- 1 Review your existing dress code policy to ensure it's inclusive of gender diversity. Implement gender-neutral dress codes so that all employees may select from a range of options.
- 2 Add a spot on intake forms to record client pronouns and include employee pronouns on name badges.
- 3 Post a diversity sign in your window that says, "Everyone is welcome here" or "Our business welcomes everyone."
- 4 Commit to being an ally of the gender-diverse community through self-education. Get information from credible sources such as the Trevor Project, PrideVMC, GLAAD and those listed in the resource section of the Topic Overview.

TOPIC ESSAY

Embracing gender diversity: Exploring gender identity

Gender Diversity

The American Psychological Association defines gender diversity as “the extent to which a person’s gender identity, role, or expression differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex.” Gender diversity has evolved over time as people think about and describe themselves and talk to one another. The widespread availability of social media has allowed people to listen to and talk about gender diversity in ways that weren’t feasible decades ago. Classically, gender diversity includes gender nonconforming (e.g., genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, etc.), nonbinary, and transgender. A level of complexity in gender diversity is that one person may have multiple categories with which they identify. Understanding gender diversity acknowledges and celebrates the existence of multiple categories and intersections within gender identities.

Gender Identity vs Gender Expression

Gender identity encompasses the process of naming and defining the diverse categories within gender. It is essential to remember that there is not an exhaustive list of gender identities, as gender identities are diverse and personal to each individual. According to PFLAG, gender identity is defined as “A person’s deeply held core sense of self in relation to gender.” In other words, gender identity is what you know to be true about your own gender. It may not be visible or understood by others unless it is personally shared. One way gender identity can be acknowledged more easily is by sharing pronouns; however, this practice doesn’t address all gender identities (e.g., gender-nonconforming people).

Gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, or body characteristics (American Psychological Association, 2023). Gender expression can be complicated because it doesn’t have to align with gender identity. Many cisgender men and women (cisgender means someone whose gender identity corresponds with their gender registered at birth) wear items of clothing, jewelry, makeup, etc., that don’t strictly go with their gender identity. Likewise, individuals who are gender-diverse are not required to have gender expression that matches their gender identity.

Promoting Respect and Understanding in Gender Diversity

In summary, gender diversity is a multifaceted concept that encompasses a wide range of expressions. It is crucial to acknowledge that gender is fluid, allowing for diverse identities and expressions. Much like a vibrant spectrum of colors can convey emotions, feelings, and experiences, embracing and appreciating the complete spectrum of gender diversity enables us to value and respect the distinctiveness of every person. To that end,

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understanding and respecting individuals who are gender-diverse involves acknowledging their inner perception of self and how individuals outwardly manifest their gender identity.

Strategies for Inclusion

There are multiple ways to make gender-diverse people welcome and have a sense of belonging in the workplace, including the following:

- Use every employee's desired name and pronouns to show mutual respect and courtesy. This gives everyone an opportunity to be referred to by their chosen name and helps normalize articulating pronouns throughout your workplace.
- Ask for people's desired pronouns in job applications to help signal your workplace is inclusive.
- Implement gender-neutral dress codes so that all employees may select from a range of options.
- Make the inclusion of staff photographs on the workplace website optional and allow employees the opportunity to choose the photographs that are posted.
- Implement a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, discrimination, and harassment.
- Read resources about the gender-diverse community provided by organizations like PrideVMC, GLADD, GLSEN, HRC, and the Trevor Project.

For individuals, listening, learning, and supporting are key steps. Listen to what people say about themselves. When gender-diverse people have concerns, don't dismiss them. Listen to how you can help and accept them for who they are. Make time to learn more about the gender-diverse community from supportive LGBTQIA+ sources. If gender-diverse people ask for support, ask them how.

For workplaces, inclusive policies, belonging, and empowerment are key steps. Policies should consider the basic human rights of gender-diverse people. They should also consider how to continue to educate staff and support gender-diverse veterinary staff and clients. Belonging should be a goal for all people in workplaces; the degree of belonging that staff members feel can be assessed by asking and listening to individuals. Empower all within the practice to hold leadership and decision-making positions; empowerment is important for long-term change.

Conclusion

Gender-diverse people have always been part of the veterinary community. Gender diversity is a complex topic; the most important step is to accept that you don't have to understand everything about another person to be respectful. We are all dedicated to animal health and well-being. ■

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RESOURCES

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