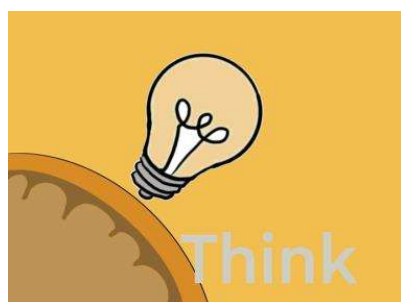


Gender

People tend to use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably but, while connected, 'sex' and 'gender' do not mean the same thing. Generally, your sex is assigned at birth based on the genitals you are born with - you are either male or female (intersex babies do not fit this binary model of sex because their genitals do not correspond to binary notions of male and female bodies). Once your sex has been assigned, your gender then tends to 'drop down' from this - male sex means you are male gender, female sex means you are female gender. However, many people's assigned gender is at odds with how they actually feel and they may use the gender identity that reflects their lived experience. As such, an individual's gender identity is personal and may or may not correspond with their assigned sex – they may identify as male, female, transgender, gender neutral, non-binary, agender, pangender, genderqueer, two-spirit, third gender or all, none or a combination of these.



Like their non-autistic peers, Autistic people may identify as any gender, as non-binary or gender fluid. Autistic people may experience gender dysphoria - a sense of unease because of a mismatch or disconnect they experience between their assigned sex and their gender identity. When their unease is heightened, it may lead to depression and anxiety and have a harmful impact on daily life.



Autistic people may be seen to lack the capacity or understanding to identify as a gender different to their assigned sex, especially if they also have a learning disability or a physical disability or they do not use speech as their main form of communication. Each of us - Autistic and non-autistic alike - has the right to identify as the gender that we feel fits us best.



For people accustomed to living in a world where your gender identity is the same as your assigned sex, it may be difficult to understand what it feels like to belong to a minority gender identity or to want to discuss and explore your gender identity. For parents, carers and partners, it is important to take the time to become informed about gender identity and the experience of gender dysphoria. A commitment to openness and acceptance in discussing gender identities reduces stigma and provides a safe space for Autistic people to explore their gender identity.