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Psychiatrists, Psychologists and Counsellors

What's the Difference?

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This fact sheet compares psychological services available to Intersex, Trans and Gender Diverse (ITGD) people.

For Physical Transition in Australia

The following information compares mental health services for treatment in regards to a physical transition in Australia. Differences will also apply depending on the state or territory that you live in. For more information on these regional differences, please visit the [Transition in Australia page on the F.T.M. Australia website](#) .

The information below compares the work of psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors in terms of three areas:

- **Training:** What training is required for these professionals to practice? Is registration with a formal body required?
- **Focus of service:** Generally speaking, what are the differences in approach between the fields of psychiatry, psychology and counselling?
- **For medical transition:** What should I know about seeing these practitioners for the purposes of medical transition?

For Purposes Not Related to Physical Transition

If you do not seek to medically transition, you may choose to see either a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist, depending on your needs.

For example: If you need advice about depression, you could see a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist, as well as your G.P. if you need support in disclosing your gender identity to your family, work colleagues or others. A good quality rapport with your G.P. is recommended, as he or she can assist you in making a decision as to what type of practitioner is most appropriate for your needs.

Psychiatrists

Training: Before being allowed to register as a psychiatrist a person must graduate from medical school as a doctor and then complete further medical training specialising in psychiatry - that is, the study and treatment of mental disorders.

Focus: The focus of modern psychiatry is almost completely biologically motivated, and problems such as depression, anxiety and general mental disorders are perceived as biochemical imbalances and treated with medication.

Seeing a psychiatrist is much like seeing a doctor. Based on your symptoms, you will most likely be prescribed medication to eliminate these symptoms.

Some psychiatrists conduct therapy, although their original/core training is based on a medical or biological model of health.

For physical transition: You may need to seek out a psychiatrist who specialises in gender identity issues, as others may have little understanding of this specialist area.

The psychiatrist's role is to diagnose Gender Dysphoria, a disorder listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM V). In the Fourth Edition this was referred to as Gender Identity Disorder. In making this diagnosis a report is written for medical doctors involved so that hormones and/or surgery can be recommended or not. Generally the psychiatrist would like to see someone for approximately six sessions before they will give a diagnosis. This can, however, vary from person to person.

Psychologists

Training: Psychologists must have at least four years of university degree level study, plus either two years supervision, a Master's degree or a Doctorate (PhD or DPsych.).

Restrictions apply to all who want to use the term 'psychologist' in any form in all States and Territories of Australia and all psychologists practising psychology must register with the Psychology Board of Australia (PBA) / Australian Health Practitioners

Regulation Agency (AHPRA).

Psychologists can work in academic settings (research and teaching) and clinical settings (working in therapeutic contexts). Only psychologists registered with the P.B.A. to work in clinical settings are, however, allowed to use the title 'psychologist'.

Focus: Rather than approaching problems from a biochemical perspective, psychologists are more likely to perceive them from a behavioural perspective and ask you about your present and past behaviour, your feelings, and core reason for your concerns. Psychologists have a much deeper awareness of the behavioural causes of problems than psychiatrists do, thus making sessions less rigid and often based on a personalised approach that suits you.

Psychologists are not permitted to prescribe medication.

For physical transition: You may need to seek out a psychologist who specialises in this area.

Like psychiatrists, psychologists can give a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria. They can then write up a report/letter to be sent to medical doctors so that treatment with hormones and/or surgery can begin. Some doctors and surgeons, however, prefer this letter to be written by a psychiatrist (in addition to a psychologist's report).

With a referral from a G.P. or psychiatrist, Medicare rebates are available for up to twelve sessions per calendar year. This means that you only pay the gap fee for these sessions (the fee difference between what Medicare covers and what the psychologist charges - usually between \$20.00 and \$80.00).

Counsellors

Training: To practise informally as a counsellor one does not usually require any qualification.

To practise formally as a registered counsellor, a person typically has to complete two to three years of study and twelve months of supervised training.

The terms 'counsellor', 'psychotherapist' and 'social worker' are currently self-regulated, with several organisations campaigning for government regulation.

Focus: Rather than imposing a medical or behavioural model on clients, counsellors typically encourage their clients to direct the session.

Through reflecting, listening, and sometimes challenging the statements that the client makes, the counsellor is able to create an environment where the client is able to rebuild his or her own sense of trust and intuition.

This process allows the client to overcome the problems he or she is experiencing without relying on someone else. The responsibility remains in the client's hands throughout the session.

For physical transition: It is advisable to see a counsellor who has experience in counselling I.T.G.D. people.

Seeing a counsellor may be more for support and advocacy than for the writing of reports and letters.

Counsellors cannot give diagnoses, but they are able to assist their clients (and close personal others) through a time that may be challenging.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.