Gender nonbinary is any gender identity that does not fall into the binary of male and female. For example, one may feel mixed genders, no gender, or may drift between genders and express more feminine or masculine qualities on any given day. Gender nonbinary identity is not a new concept. However, Western society, and sport, in particular, rely on the gender binary to categorize bathrooms, locker rooms, and athletic spaces (Katz & Luckinbill, 2017). The binary limits the visibility of nonbinary individuals, which may impact overall mental health (James, Herman, Rankin, et al., 2016).

More often than not, existing in athletic spaces means choosing between a woman’s space or a man’s space. LGBTQ inclusion policies within the NCAA and IOC are assumed to work for nonbinary individuals. However, these policies only ignore nonbinary experiences or include them as an afterthought. More importantly, these policies assume all trans and nonbinary individuals follow a similar identity development in their transition. In your role as a mental coach or therapist, allow the space for the individual to explore their transition and identity. Remain open to the possibility that individuals may find new possibilities in transitioning and that there is no one way to be gender nonbinary.

The lack of visibility and the assumption all nonbinary individuals must transition limits identity development of the individuals. Lauren Lubin (they/them), a former Division I athlete and founder of the We Exist Movement (http://weexist.co), states that “recognition is the most fundamental step and our first major obstacle. You can’t have hopes, dreams, and aspirations if you’re not recognized...And sports, systematically, is the most entrenched [institution] in gender norms.”

The assumption in sports is that everyone falls within the binary. Sport constantly reminds nonbinary individuals that there is no place for them unless they abide by the transgender policies of the governing bodies. As mental coaches and therapists, it is critical we work to build inclusive spaces and ways of doing in our consulting because that might be the one space the athletes feel like they are safe and important.
How Can I Support Gender Diverse Individuals?

Build Awareness
- Educate yourself and participate in trainings to build inclusion.
- Know if there are gender-neutral bathrooms/locker rooms and where they are located.
- Use literature, personal blogs, social media, etc. as an educational tool.

Pronouns
- Ask for preferred pronouns from all clients and provide yours in initial meetings.
- Practice using singular pronouns such as they/them and zi/zer.
- Make an effort to use correct name and pronouns.

Listen
- Respect the person’s journey to discovery.
- Allow people to define who they are.
- If you make a mistake, apologize and correct yourself. Avoid over apologizing or stating your discomfort.

Language
- Use gender neutral language when addressing groups of people (e.g., ya’ll, everyone, athletes, humans, people).
- Inviting In: Open spaces to share a part of one’s life instead of coming out.

Advocate
- Advocate for nonbinary inclusive policies and gender-neutral bathrooms.
- Create and use inclusive intake forms, which may include a write-in option for gender.
- Develop a visual statement of inclusion and your status as an ally.

Organizations to Check Out

Additional Resources
- APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Non Conforming Individuals
- We Exist: Beyond the Binary-documentary by Lauren Lubin, founder of the We Exist movement
- APA Div. 44 Gender Nonbinary Fact Sheet

This fact sheet is an initiative of the American Psychological Association Division 47’s Cornerstone Committee and has been prepared by Bernadette Compton (she/her/hers), M.S., M.A., Leadership Studies Doctoral Student, Bowling Green State University; Bassey Akpan (she/her/hers), M.S., M.S., Counseling Doctoral Candidate, Springfield College; Donna Bencivengo (she/her/hers), M.S., Behavioral Health Therapist. Faculty advisors include Dr. Laura Hayden (she/her/hers), University of Massachusetts Boston and Dr. Kimberlee Bethany Bonura (she/her/hers), College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Walden University.