

Exploring Gender Issues

For people with gender issues and their loved ones

Reviewed July 1st 2008

The personal experiences of people with gender issues and those close to them vary widely. It is outside the intention and scope of this article to provide people with advice in relation to specific personal issues. We hope to identify some of the major concerns that may impact on partners, friends and families of those experiencing gender issues, and to clarify some aspects of gender issues. We would also like to make it clear that partners, friends and families of those experiencing gender issues are welcome to access a variety of our services and resources.

There are a number of very important points to consider:

- Gender is a fundamental part of who we are: we perceive ourselves and others through the lens of gender much of the time. Because gender is assumed to be fixed and fundamental, it can be very challenging to people when a person explores different ways of expressing or experiencing gender, or changes gender altogether. Many people experience emotional distress as a result of their own gender issues.
- Partners, families and friends often experience distress as well in relation to the person's gender issues. They may feel left out of the support process or do not realise that there are support structures that they can access. They may feel that, not being "the one with the problem" themselves, it is inappropriate to access support services.

Yet, the questions associated with this process are enormously important:

- What does it mean to a person when their partner no longer identifies as the gender they originally were?
- What is it like for children (and adults) when a parent changes gender?
- How does a person feel when their brother becomes a sister? (or vice versa?)
- What is it like to be a parent and have your son or daughter change gender?

Partners, families and friends have a great need to receive support for the impact this has on their lives, and to have access to information that assists them in understanding what gender issues actually are. Many relationships (with partners, families or friends) break down under the strains placed on them by confusion, fear, ignorance, shame and embarrassment. Some of these relationships may have broken down in any case without the advent of gender issues, but others can be resolved through open discussion in a supportive environment, and with a good understanding of what the real issues are for all the people involved.

All relationships are dynamic; that is, they constantly change over time in response to a variety of influences or experiences. Relationships are also constantly negotiated in terms of these influences or experiences. How well relationships survive through change is due mostly to the willingness of people to look honestly at the changes taking place, acknowledge their own feelings, and decide whether or not the relationship can cope with these changes.

In some circumstances, it can be less distressing to both people to acknowledge that it is better to put the relationship on hold or relinquish it altogether than to attempt to salvage it at the wrong time. In some cases, time can alter things significantly and a relationship that seemed beyond

repair has resolved itself in some way after a period of time; in other cases the relationship is simply better off being dissolved.

Support

The Gender Centre offers counselling support to people experiencing gender issues and their partners, families and friends. This can be done as a joint session (with the person experiencing gender issues and their partner, friends or family members taking part) or individually, with a partner, family member or friend accessing counselling—support on their own.

However, the purpose of counselling is not to tell any person that they are "right" or "wrong". Counselling is a process of mediation and exploration, rather than being a formulaic process that ensures a particular resolution if the "right" steps are followed. Counselling is not designed to change people's minds – the purpose is to encourage people to understand each others' viewpoints, even if they do not agree. People who come along for joint counselling in the hope that it will "bring back the person I knew", or "make the situation go away" are likely to be very disappointed when this turns out to be neither the case or the strategy.

The Gender Centre aims to provide accurate and up to date information about all options available to people with gender issues. These include medical treatment, cosmetic and other surgery, alternative treatments, lifestyle, peer support, legal, political and spiritual options. The Gender Centre does not consider one client's choice to be better or worse than another's choice. We provide services to all people who present with gender issues regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, self-identity or gender. It is an essential part of the philosophy of The Gender Centre that exploring gender is not, in itself, a problem.

What tends to be problematic tends much more towards being;

- the lack of resources and information regarding gender issues;
- the unwillingness of most aspects of culture to recognise that gender is not a fixed concept; and
- the fact that gender issues have traditionally been misrepresented and sensationalized by the media.

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