

The Transsexual Person In Your Life

Responses to frequently asked questions, frequently held concerns

Reviewed July 1st 2008

About this document

This was written for people who have recently learned that someone in their life identifies as a transsexual or has decided to undergo gender transition. Since many people have not previously had the opportunity to learn about transsexualism and other gender issues, they frequently have a lot of questions, and may or may not feel comfortable directly asking the transsexual person these questions.

A few notes about terminology

The community of people dealing with gender issues is large and diverse, and terminology about these issues is continuing to evolve. We will try to follow usages commonly accepted by many people in these communities, but apologize in advance if we unwittingly offend anyone who uses different words for their experiences.

About the terms "transsexual" and "transgendered"

We are using the term "transsexual" to refer to people who are undergoing or have undergone gender transition ("sex change"). "Transgendered" is a broader term, generally used to include any person who feels their assigned gender does not completely or adequately reflect their internal gender. Transgendered people may or may not take steps to live as a different gender.

About the term "opposite sex"

Modern Western culture is very invested in a strict two–sex/two–gender system, where the two categories are constructed as opposites. Many transsexual and transgendered people (and lots of other folks, too!) feel that this model is too restrictive to accurately describe their own sense of their gender. Since the phrase "opposite sex" is based on this restrictive concept, we will avoid that term in this document, in favor of such descriptions as "another sex" or "the target gender expression." (We will occasionally use the phrase, in quotes, if we are specifically referring to the restrictive two–gender system.)

About "sex" v "gender"

Social scientists make careful distinctions between these two terms. "Sex" generally refers to biology, to the actual form of the human body, including such factors as chromosomes, genital configuration, and secondary sex characteristics, while "gender" refers to the social meanings and characteristics associated with certain types of people.

In this document, we will attempt to adhere to this usage, but not too strictly. Because transsexuals combine sex and gender in various ways, sorting out exactly what is about "sex" v what is about "gender" can get a little tricky.

Contents

Section I: General information about transsexualism and gender transition;

Section II: Responses to common reactions and feelings about transition; and

Section III: Other resources, Web links, Books

Section I: Overview

What is transsexualism?

Transsexualism is a condition in which a person experiences a discontinuity between their assigned sex and what they feel their core gender is. For example, a person who was identified as "female" at birth, raised as a girl, and has lived being perceived by others as a woman, may feel that their core sense of who they are is a closer fit with "male" or "man." If this sense is strong and persistent, this person may decide to take steps to ensure that others perceive them as a man. In other words, they may decide to transition to living as the sex that more closely matches their internal gender.

What is involved in the transition process?

The answer to this question varies depending on the needs and desires of the individual choosing the transition process. An individual may choose any combination of social, medical and legal steps that will help that person achieve the greatest level of comfort with their body and social roles.

Social steps might include asking to be referred to by a different name (perhaps one generally given to people of the "opposite sex") and different pronouns ("she" instead of "he" or vice versa), dressing in clothing traditionally worn by people of the sex they wish to be perceived as, and taking on mannerisms frequently associated with that sex/gender.

Medical steps might include hormonal treatment to achieve an appearance more consistent with the target gender expression, and/or surgery to further modify the appearance. There are a variety of surgical options to alter the transsexual person's body to help them achieve the greatest comfort with their gender expression. The transsexual person may choose some, all, or none of these surgical options.

Many transsexual people also work with the courts in their area to achieve legal recognition of their new name and gender. Steps taken vary depending on the location.

What causes transsexualism?

No one knows the answer to this question, although there is much research currently in progress investigating it. Among the theories being investigated are genetic influences, in utero hormonal influences, and other brain structure/brain chemical influences.

Human sex and gender are very complex, and it is unlikely that any simplistic analysis will definitively answer this question.

What is the treatment for transsexualism? Is there a "cure?"

Treatments for transsexualism based on attempting to change the individual's sense of their own true gender have proven ineffective. Accepted treatments are based on helping the transsexual person's body and presentation match their inner sense of their gender, usually through hormone treatment and surgery.

How common is transsexualism?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (D.S.M.– IV), fourth edition, says the following (© 1994, American Psychiatric Association):

Prevalence: There are no recent epidemiological studies to provide data on prevalence of Gender Identity Disorder. Data from smaller countries in Europe with access to total population statistics and referrals suggest that roughly 1 per 30,000 adult males and 1 per 100,000 adult females seek sex-reassignment surgery.

Because these numbers reflect only people who have sought traditional medical treatment, they do not reflect the total numbers of people who have some experience of gender discontinuity.

Is transsexualism a modern phenomenon?

While advances in medical science have only in the last few decades made it possible for individuals to transition with the aid of hormones and surgery, transgendered people have existed throughout history in many societies.

Jennifer Reitz's "Natural History of Transsexuality" provides a brief historical overview.

Is transsexualism the same as homosexuality?

No. Transsexualism is about a person's core sense of their gender. This is a separate issue from the gender of the people they are attracted to.

Just like any other individual, a transsexual person may identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual. For example, a person raised as a man who transitions to living as a woman may identify as heterosexual, in which case she would seek relationships with men, or lesbian, in which case she would seek relationships with other women.

Section II: Responses to common reactions and feelings about transition

The person I thought I knew is becoming a stranger.

A person we know who undergoes gender transition will very likely look and sound quite different after their transition. A person we've known as a woman, for instance, may change his hairstyle, grow facial hair, speak with a lower voice, and adopt an entirely new wardrobe. But he's not likely to adopt an entirely new personality or set of values, and our history with this person is unchanged. Think of any person you care about, and ask yourself what qualities you value most about her or him. You are likely to think of qualities which are not gender-specific, such as sense of humor, intelligence, and loyalty. These qualities are not likely to change as a person undergoes gender transition. In fact, a person who undergoes gender transition is in a process of becoming more comfortable with himself or herself, and so their positive qualities are likely to be enhanced.

It can be scary when someone in your life tells you they need to make such a major change, and it's understandable that you may feel you don't know this person as well as you thought. But if you continue to spend time together, you will likely be comforted to find that they are in many ways the same person you have always known.

Altering the body through surgery seems like mutilation.

This is also an understandable response. To those of us who are comfortable with our assigned gender, the idea of altering those parts of our bodies that are most associated with our gender can feel alien, frightening, and disturbing.

Another person's decision to alter parts of their body can feel threatening. It may help to remember that a person undergoing transition from, for instance, a male to female gender expression, is not making a blanket statement about the value of malehood or the validity of your gender expression. She is simply seeking to become more comfortable in her body.

Sex reassignment surgery is the aspect of gender transition that is most difficult for some people to understand, and you may never feel comfortable with it. That's okay. But that discomfort doesn't preclude honoring another person's choice, treating them with respect, and even supporting them through their gender transition.

I can't imagine the person ever seeming to me like the sex they want to be.

It's hard to let go of our perceptions of someone we've known for a long time. Changes in a person's appearance and behavior can occur gradually, and may be difficult to perceive if you are in regular contact. But if you pay attention to how strangers react to the person, it may help you to see these changes. On the other hand, the gradualness of the change may help you to adapt to the new gender identity step-by-step. You may be surprised, in time, at how completely you accept the person's new chosen gender.

It is true, however, that some people who undergo gender transition will continue to have significant characteristics of their previous gender identity. Some male-to-female transsexuals, for instance, may be unusually tall for women, while a female-to-male transsexual may have small features. It may help if you avoid focusing on these specific things, but rather honor the person's chosen gender, and try to see them as they see themselves.

How can I support this person in their transition?

There are many ways you can be helpful. Perhaps the most important is to convey your intention to be supportive to the person in transition. Let them know you want to be an ally, and ask them what they need from you. Then, to the extent you are able, offer them the support they've asked for.

We can offer a couple of specific ideas as well. First, you can adopt the use of the person's new name (if they've chosen one) and appropriate gender pronouns. This change can be uncomfortable at first, and you may slip up once in a while, but eventually this change becomes habitual and comfortable. This small but very important step will demonstrate that you take the person's decision seriously.

You can also try to maintain your previous relationship with the person, whether that's the intimate relationship of close friends or once-a-month bowling buddies. Gender transition is new territory for many people, and hence can be scary. "Hanging in" with the person in transition despite feelings of discomfort with the process can be a very supportive act.

Also, you may ask the person in transition how you can help in letting others know about their transition. They may want to tell people themselves, or they may be grateful for help "spreading the word." There may be certain contexts—the softball team, a church you both attend, or the workplace—where your assistance in telling others and expressing your support will be appreciated. Let them be your guide in this.

Section III: Other Resources

Internet Resources on Gender Issues: General Resources

The International Foundation for Gender Education (I.F.G.E.)

<http://www.ifge.org/>

"A leading advocate and educational organization for promoting the self-definition and free expression of individual gender identity. I.F.G.E. is not a support group, it is an information provider and clearinghouse. I.F.G.E. maintains the most complete bookstore on the subject of transgenderism available anywhere."

Gender Education & Advocacy (G.E.A.)

<http://www.gender.org/>

"Gender Education & Advocacy is a national organization focused on the needs, issues and concerns of gender variant people in human society. We seek to educate and advocate, not only for ourselves and others like us, but for all human beings who suffer from gender-based oppression in all of its many forms "

Jennifer Reitz' Transsexuality Page

<http://www.transsexual.org/>

A lot of good information for trans folks, as well as some interesting general info about gender issues. Sections include: "What exactly is Transsexuality?; The reasons to cherish being transsexual; Why you don't want to be a woman or a man; What can I expect long term?; What is it like to be transsexual?."

Paper Cuts on My Soul

<http://lisalees.com/>

Some great educational handouts and pointers to other resources. A wonderful archive of trans folks' letters announcing their transition.

Transsexualism And Gender Identity Disorder

<http://www.avitale.com/>

Dr. Anne Vitale's site. "The intent of this web site is to educate the reader to the psychotherapeutic issues of gender identity."

Standards Of Care For Gender Identity Disorders

<http://www.wpath.org/>

Issued by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health Inc.. This outlines suggested protocols transsexuals must conform to receive treatment from participating medical professionals.

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC)

<http://www.gpac.org/>

"GenderPAC works to end discrimination and violence caused by gender stereotypes by changing public attitudes, educating elected officials and expanding legal rights."

F.T.M. International

<http://www.ftmi.org/>

"F.T.M. International is the internet contact point for the largest, longest-running educational organization serving F.T.M. transgendered people and transsexual men."

Resources specifically for male-to-female transgendered/transsexual people

Transsexual Women's Resources

<http://www.annelawrence.com/twr/index.html>

Dr. Anne Lawrence's page contents includes a lot of good information about hormones and surgery, plus pointers to other resources, including resources specifically for young transsexuals.

Renaissance: Transgender Information & Support

<http://www.ren.org/>

A "transgender education organization and the largest open membership support group in the world." Primarily for male-to-female trans folks, including cross-dressers and others.

Information for family, friends, employers and others

T.G.S. – P.F.L.A.G. Frequently Asked Questions

<http://www.critpath.org/pflag-talk/tgsfaq.html>

Webpage associated with the T.G.S. – P.F.L.A.G. mailing list, a list "for support of parents, family, spouses and friends of transgendered people and transgenders who wish to discuss family or other personal relationships."

TransFamily

<http://www.transfamily.org/>

"TransFamily is a support group for transgendered and transsexual people, their parents, partners, children, other family members, friends, and supportive others. We provide referrals, literature, and over-the-phone information on all transgender issues "

A Parent's Dilemma, the Transgender Child

<http://www.firelily.com/gender/gianna/dilemma.html>

Well-written article by counselor and gender specialist Gianna E. Israel.

A Lover's Leap of Faith

<http://www.tsfaq.info/flgc-speech.html>

A Speech Given at the Friends (Quakers) for Lesbian and Gay Concerns Midwinter Gathering, February, 1999. The lesbian lover of an F.T.M. writes from a faith-based perspective about her partner's gender transition and its effects on her.

Human Rights Campaign's Transgenderism and Transition in the Workplace

<http://www.hrc.org/issues/4854.htm>

"A guide that examines transgender workplace issues, including a discussion of the law and strategies for dealing with transitioning on the job." For both workers and employers.

Transsexualism: Notes for Employers

<http://www.looking-glass.greenend.org.uk/work.htm>

"This document is intended to provide guidance to Managers and Employers of persons diagnosed with Transsexualism. It details the current legal position [in the U.K.] regarding such persons' employment rights, and makes recommendations for "best practice" ways of dealing with transsexualism in the workplace."

Books

Most of these books can be ordered from the I.F.G.E. bookstore.

Boenke, Mary (ed.) *Trans Forming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones*. Waterford Press, 1999.

Brown, Mildred L. *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism—For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996.

Burke, Phyllis. *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female*. Anchor Books, 1996.

Cameron, Loren. *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*. Pittsburgh, Pa U.S.A.: Cleis Press, 1996.

Cole, Dana. *The Employer's Guide to Gender Transition*. Waltham, Ma U.S.A.: I.F.G.E., 1992.

Devor, Holly. *F.T.M.: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Israel, Gianna E., et al. *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997.

Kirk, Sheila M.D. Feminizing Hormonal Therapy for the Transgendered. Blawnox, Pa U.S.A.: Together Lifeworks, 1996.

Kirk, Sheila M.D. Masculinizing Hormonal Therapy for the Transgendered. Blawnox, Pa U.S.A.: Together Lifeworks, 1996.

Kirk, Sheila Pa U.S.A. and Martine Rothblatt, J.D. Medical, Legal & Workplace Issues for the Transsexual. Blawnox, Pa U.S.A.: Together Lifeworks, 1995.

Bornstein, Kate. Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Califia, Pat. Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism. San Francisco, California: Cleis Press, 1997.

Feinberg, Leslie. Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Rupaul. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. Also see Leslie's website.

Wilchins, Riki Anne. Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender. Ithaca, N.Y. U.S.A.: Firebrand, 1997.

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Last modified: 20th July 2003

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Please Note:

The Gender Centre is listing these links for information regarding specific areas of transgender life and transition, and other resources where appropriate. Please note, while information on these websites have been found useful to some, the Gender Centre takes no responsibility for information appearing in these websites.

Many of the websites are American and British owned and operated. While general support information may be similar to here in Australia, web surfers are encouraged to contact the Gender Centre for information regarding most medical and legal issues.

The Gender Centre also possesses an extensive referral manual in the areas of legal, medical, accommodation, employment, H.I.V./AIDS, Psychiatric, Youth, Aboriginal and Corrective Services. Some of this information cannot appear on our webpage for legal reasons, and again, interested parties are encouraged to contact the Gender Centre directly.

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