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Basic Issues in Transgender Mental Health

Short Outline of Issues that Arise for Transgendered Individuals

by Ami B. Kaplan, from her blog [Transgender Mental Health](#) 

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This piece contains a short outline of mental health issues that arise for transgendered individuals, particularly those affecting one's emotional and psychological state.

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Gender Dysphoria

This is a fundamental unease and dissatisfaction with the biological sex one is born with, which results in anxiety, depression, restlessness, and other symptoms. The dysphoria often acts as a catalyst to change one's body and gender expression (how one presents to the world) to be more in keeping with what is felt to be one's gender identity (the gender that one feels oneself to be).

Problems associated with growing up with gender dysphoria

The main problem of growing up with gender dysphoria, aside from the dysphoria itself is the social predicament. Essentially everyone expects the individual to be and act like a boy/girl, whereas inside he/she feels she/he is a girl/boy.

Early Childhood

Children get cues early on from parents about appropriate behaviour, and internalise them. For example M.T.F. transsexuals have reported getting the message from parents that it wasn't okay for them to play dolls with their sisters or neighbours, and that they were expected to do 'boy' things like rough and tumble play.

Children of this age start to get the idea that there is a part of themselves that must remain hidden.

Puberty

This is a particularly hard stage, since the body begins to change and adapt gender specific features (breasts, changes in genitals, menses, etc.).

Transgendered individuals have reported "I was disgusted by (hair, breasts, etc)". Many transgendered individuals are aware of their issue by this age, but lack the means and agency to effect any change.

This has been changing in recent years where some transgendered youth are more 'out', have supportive families and are able to access services.

In some cases medication is available to delay puberty until the individual is old enough to decide whether or not to transition. This has the benefit of essentially avoiding the trauma of experiencing the physical effects of puberty in the unwanted gender.

Early Adulthood

With emotional and financial independence some people feel free to begin to address transgendered issues at this age and look into transitioning. However, some are not as free to do so, due to family and other obligations, or due to lack of information and access to services.

Later Adulthood

Some transgendered individuals put off transitioning until later in life when they feel able to do so. This can be satisfying, but can also have the disadvantage of producing a less convincing outcome. In addition there can be regret about having lived so long in an unwanted gender.

Friends and family may have a harder time understanding what is happening since they knew the person for so long in their natal gender. In all stages there can be isolation, hiding and secrets, which can lead to depression and anxiety. Transgender adults are much more likely to have suicidal thoughts, with fifty percent of adults reporting some suicidal ideation. There are two paths that people sometimes take early on: either they try to hide their inner feeling of being the wrong sex and pass for what looks like a boy or girl, or they are incapable of hiding and present as either a tomboyish girl or a feminine boy.

Either path is fraught with problems for one's emotional development. The second scenario of presenting as gender non-conforming is known to elicit harsh responses from society. This is true for non-transgendered people as well and many gay men and women experience this.

Deciding what to do.

This is a big part of the transgendered individual's experience. Making decisions about transitioning, what level to transition to, or whether to attempt any transition at all are complicated decisions and require time and support.

There are fears of how one will be accepted by family (parents, partners, children, grandparents and others), friends, colleges, fellow students, church groups, etc.

There can be anxiety about passing or how 'convincing' one will be to others as a man or woman (i.e. whether or not one will be 'read' as transgendered).

There can also be the wish to not completely transition, but assume an identity as 'gender-queer' or 'third sex'. All are perfectly acceptable options.

Usually one doesn't start at the point of deciding to partially transition, so this requires some form of transitioning as well. At the point of decision making, many things are unknown and it can be very stressful. It can also be exciting and joyful to be able to act and move towards a more authentic self.

Transitioning

For those transgendered individuals who decide to transition (to present and live in the other sex, outwardly), these emotional/psychological issues may come up:

- Fears about finding a partner;
- Impact on family relationships with parents, children, partners and other relatives;
- Impact of relationships at work and with friends;
- Fears about violence and prejudice when one is read as transgendered;
- Feelings about having to experience surgeries, hormones, (and for M.T.F. transsexuals) facial hair removal and voice changes; and
- Frustration of having to change or explain legal documents (drivers licence, passport, titles to property, diplomas, degrees, memberships etc).

Post-transition issues

Some issues that may arise include:

- Disappointment that transitioning didn't solve all problems;
- Level of satisfaction with appearance;
- Level of satisfaction with any surgeries; and
- Emotional issues that were not addressed before.

Decision not to transition

Not everyone is able to, or wants to transition. This is a perfectly valid choice for people to make. However these individuals must learn to cope with the tension that the gender dysphoria produces.

Sometimes this can be helped by having times when one can cross-dress, interact with others who are aware of one's status, talk about the issue, and take low levels of hormones that don't affect the body outwardly.

Other mental health issues not related to being transgendered

Just because someone is transgendered doesn't mean they don't have other issues in their lives. It can be hard for some people to let themselves seek treatment for other issues when the gender dysphoria is so prominent a concern.

The good news: It's important not to lose sight of the satisfaction one can have by acknowledging and (if possible) changing what can be changed and moving towards one's authentic self.

Find out about psychotherapy when dealing with gender variance in yourself or someone close to you.

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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.