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A Cross-Dressing Perspective

Former Seahorse Society President Shares Her Collected Thoughts and Experiences

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Cross-dressers in the community face many difficult situations in their lifetime. Self-help organisations such as the Seahorse Society aim to help members to deal with these situations as much as possible and encourage cross-dressers to celebrate their diversity. The types of problems usually faced by our members are varied but usually fall into two broad categories:

1. Relationship Problems - difficulties encountered when partners and family become aware of the cross-dresser's activities; and
2. Personal wellbeing - Confusion about one's own identity and place in society

While we often face difficult problems, it is important to understand that many people are quite happy to be cross-dressers and wouldn't want to be any other way.

I have collected below some of the issues, problems and experiences that the Seahorse Society has witnessed over the years. It is largely based on my experience as President of the Society for nearly five years in which time I have dealt with hundreds of people in the transgendered community including Seahorse members and prospective members, sister organisations and other community groups, and also with the partners, family and friends of transgendered people. Dealings have been in person, by correspondence or by telephone.

While we often face difficult problems, it is important to understand that many people are quite happy to be cross-dressers and wouldn't want to be any other way. Cross-dressing is not a problem in itself; the problem is generally related to the ability of a cross-dresser or someone close to them to deal with it. And their problems usually stem from their perception, real or otherwise, that their activities are unacceptable to those around them. Most people who come to terms with it can live very fulfilled lives and participate in the community like anyone else if they choose to.

What is a Cross-Dresser?

Cross-dressers are one group in the larger transgendered community. Defining a cross-dresser is difficult, because we do not fit into neat categories. There is a broad spectrum of people with characteristics that qualify them to be called cross-dressers. In general it is true to say that a cross-dresser is a man who has an overwhelming urge to dress and act like a woman on occasions. There is no proven reason to explain why a man would want to do this but many theories exist. That is not something that will be explored for now. Instead, we choose just to accept that reality and move on.

Is a Cross-Dresser the Same as a Transvestite?

The answer is yes. Transvestite is a term coined from Latin: trans = across, vestite = to dress.

Why Just Men?

All our current members were born male. It appears the service we offer is more valuable to men because if a woman wants to cross-dress, and many do, then, generally, they don't need support. It is quite acceptable among most of our community for a woman to wear male clothes and act in a masculine manner. There is very little stigma associated to that these days. For a man to put on a frock, high-heeled shoes and make-up, however, is much less usual and to do this in public often draws unwanted reactions ranging from ridicule to aggression.

How do Cross-Dressers Differ from Other Transgendered People?

This is a question that is subject to many opinions. In my opinion, the difference is not great, but more a matter of the state of mind of the individual at a point in time and how that person identifies him, or herself. It is not uncommon for members of the Seahorse Society to decide at some point in their life to take their desire to dress and act like a woman further. They may choose to live as a woman fulltime. Some go on to take female hormones and alter their physical appearance with cosmetic procedures such as permanent hair removal and surgery. Once someone has made the decision to live fulltime in the opposite gender role, one might then categorise this person as a transsexual. (Transsexual is a medical term coined from Latin roots, literally meaning 'across sex'.)

Some people see transsexuals as very different from cross-dressers, that there is some fundamental wiring in the brain that is different and this may be true. Our experience, however, is that there is a broad spectrum of existence. This ranges from men who gain sexual gratification from touching or wearing female items of clothing such as shoes or underwear to exhibitionist drag queens, to shy and closeted cross-dressers to full time gender reassigned individuals and to any and every position in between and some more that I can't

think of at the moment. And this does not imply a progression, a legitimacy or superiority of any position over another - people are different and they can change. Long live diversity.

The Experiences of a Cross-Dresser

So, assuming a diverse community exists, cross-dressers have diverse backgrounds and indeed the membership of our club includes people from all walks in life. But some themes keep reappearing. Lack of acceptance by family and friends can result in many problems. Loneliness and isolation is a common theme for young people and especially if they feel different from everyone else. A young boy wishing to dress up like a girl, sneaking away with clothes from his mother or his sister and then trying them on privately will often feel a great burden from having to keep his activity such a huge secret. He will live with a fear of discovery and probably suffer from guilt because he is doing something so wrong. Some members also report that they were forced to dress up in girls' clothes by sisters or mothers and felt some shame associated with this. He will also feel great shame if he is discovered and derided, or worse - cast out.

The isolation of a cross-dresser will probably stay with him through his teenage years when his sexual feelings awaken. This can be a confusing period but for most the love of femininity will draw them into close relationships with the opposite sex. Most of the cross-dressers I have spoken to are heterosexual. It appears that the need to cross-dress is totally unrelated to sexual preference. There are gay cross-dressers, but they are usually happy to express themselves in more open ways such as dressing-up in drag for parties. The majority of cross-dressers do, however, grow up in heterosexual roles and may marry and go on to have children.

While I have heard instances of cross-dressers who have had drug, alcohol or crime problems, the incidence does not seem any higher than the norm. In fact it may be the opposite. Among our members we have many high achievers. Many seem to be driven to achieve and prove themselves. Some over-react to their feminine desires by choosing to engage in excessively macho pursuits such as car racing or male dominated jobs such as construction. It is almost as if they are trying to deny to the world what they truly are inside. This just makes things worse as if they are surrounded by people who are even less likely to accept them, their overt manliness can make it harder to dress up and pass as a woman. Some resign themselves to never being able to express their true desires and others reach a point where they want to forget about the opinions of others and 'come-out'.

Relationships

A wife may be unaware of her husband's desires if he chooses to keep his secret from her. But many men do confess to their wives or partners and maybe also to their family and friends because they no longer want to be burdened by the secrecy. So a man may keep his cross-dressing secret, but if he is in a close relationship with a woman it may not always be as secretive as he thinks. Women are generally very observant and they will notice a hint of perfume or leftover signs of make-up and especially extra items of female clothing secreted around the house. Initially they may suspect that their husband is having an affair, but sometimes they guess closer to the truth. An interesting experience I have had on several occasions is a wife phoning the Seahorse Society having discovered her husband's secret. Rather than confronting the husband, they seek support. In one case the woman had done significant research into the subject while the husband remained oblivious to the fact that his wife suspected anything. There was a stalemate situation where both parties were too scared to raise the matter in case of an adverse reaction by either party. Although I normally hesitate to give any advice to people regarding their relationships, I believe in these cases it is better to suggest that communication commences.

However when a man asks me if he should tell his wife that he is a cross-dresser, I will not make a recommendation because it can go different ways depending on the partner's own predisposition and also the manner in which the subject is raised.

One partner I spoke to said that when her boyfriend confessed to her, she was so happy, she danced around the room. Another said "I always suspected it" and went on to have a fulfilling and understanding relationship. However for every story of acceptance, there are just as many of rejection. And there does appear to be a high rate of marriage breakdowns amongst cross-dressers.

In cases where the partner does not offer total acceptance, a compromise is often reached where rules are set to govern the cross-dresser's behaviour. For example, he may dress in front of his wife, but not in front of the children, or he may be allowed out only once per week. Rules may vary from highly restrictive to quite liberal depending on the wife's acceptance of the situation.

And What About the Children?

Many hours of sleep have been lost worrying about the effect a cross-dressing Dad may have on his children, especially to a son who would see his Dad as a role model. In some cases this has turned out to be of little consequence and the children once told, have accepted the situation well and often very positively. In one case, a daughter having been warned that her father was about to make a major announcement was expecting something horrible like that he was about to go to gaol for murder. She sensed the guilt and gravity of the situation from the air around the parents as they prepared to come out with it. She turned out to be relieved; "Is that all?" she said.

Some of our members are open with their children and some have brought their children along to social events without any problems. Quite the opposite, they often enjoy being at the occasion although daughters often feel the need to smarten up and modernize their Dad's appearance.

Unfortunately, in other cases, children have reacted very negatively and in some cases have totally divorced their fathers from their life after the disclosure. Naturally, this can be devastating to the father and it may heighten any sense of guilt he has for being who he is regardless of the fact that it was not his choice to be that way.

Coming-Out - A Turning Point

It is evident that the majority of cross-dressers spend their life closeted. For example, while the Seahorse Society has around a hundred

current members across New South Wales, only about half of these are active members. Moreover the Internet groups indicate that there are perhaps ten times as many cross-dressers who are only prepared to come-out in the relative anonymity of the web. There are doubtless many more who don't come-out at all.

The repressiveness of remaining closeted can last for many years. Some don't emerge from this ever and others leave it until later in life, often not until their forties or fifties to come-out. The 'coming-out' is an important turning point because it represents a newfound freedom.

Who Do You Come-Out To?

Most cross-dressers come-out first to their partners. Others will confide in family, friends or work colleagues. Women tend to be more understanding than men although a common reaction from women is "Why on earth would you want this life?" Not everyone will tolerate the fact, but most people do. However there is a difference between tolerance and acceptance. While someone may tolerate it and indeed defend your right to be who you are, it doesn't mean they will like the idea and they may not be willing to explore the notion any further than just knowing about it. The gay community tends to be quite tolerant of cross-dressers, perhaps because of the fact that we are minority groups who have had to deal with discrimination. However, while the level of tolerance is higher, it is by no means universal. It's ironic that straight cross-dressers may be gay-bashed because they appear to be gay in the eyes of many people.

Ultimately a cross-dresser may choose to come-out to the world and be totally open about it, in reality there is still enough reluctance by the community to accept cross-dressing that most choose to come-out only to a select audience avoiding conflicts with work, family, community or friends.

But to come-out is normally a very positive experience. It is common to hear a new member say "Why didn't I do this years ago?" It can be like a heavy burden being taken from your mind or a light suddenly turning on. "I'm not the only one in world like this." "It's not wrong and there is nothing to be ashamed about" Going out cross-dressed in public for the first time can be 'dream-like' How often do one's dreams come true, especially to an individual who has lived with such a repressive secret?

Yet for all the cross-dressers who reach this turning point in their life, there are many more who never do and the act of not coming-out can be damaging to health and relationships. It is hard to imagine how much ill-health, despair, relationship breakdown or substance abuse may be attributed to repressed dreams.

And yet relationships are also at risk by coming-out as mentioned earlier, not all partners will tolerate the disclosure that their loved one is not the man they married or, worse, that they are some kind of pervert. (What will the neighbours think?) But that's not the only problem. A partner may initially accept the disclosure and this is often a relief to the cross-dresser. There is, however, a real risk that they may push the limits too far. Like the proverbial kid in a candy store, they want it all and want it now. The act of coming-out too fast can be a danger in itself and some partners will turn from an initial positive position to a negative one if it is not handled well.

Another problem from coming-out too fast is the temptation to rush along the path to gender transition too quickly. While it may seem a natural thing to do at the time, a more considered decision may result in less collateral damage to family and friends and hopefully avoiding an irreversible mistake.

But for most cross-dressers, the turning point of coming-out is a very important event in their lives as they move towards a more contented and relaxed existence. Support groups like the Seahorse Society aim to turn dreams into reality for our sister souls out there. I love to see cross-dressers on their first outing; they are so high on the experience. But while it may be a high point in one's life, it can also be a bit of an anti-climax. The thought often going through your mind that everyone in the world will be waiting for you to walk out the door and you will create a big scene wherever you go. In reality, unless your appearance is attention grabbing, most people just ignore you.

Passing

Passing is important to most cross-dressers. This is the ability to 'get away with it'. To pass in public means to be accepted as a woman and many cross-dressers will go to a lot of trouble with their appearance to make themselves more believable - to pass. Cross-dressers' ability to pass depends on how much effort they put into their appearance and also on physical attributes which are hard to disguise such as size, shape, body hair, skin condition, voice etc. Many experienced cross-dressers will say that passing is more about self-confidence than anything else. Individually many members of the Seahorse Society do go out and pass in public with relative ease. Or if they are read, most people will be too polite to make any fuss about it. Some are luckier or more determined and they will pass easier than others. However in the end it's more about how comfortable you feel about yourself than what other people think.

Going out in a group with other cross-dressers is a different story and the likelihood of being read very much increases proportionately to the number of members in the group. The gender illusion becomes harder to pull off in numbers. Many of our public functions are held with the realisation that we are a social group of cross-dressers who are out to enjoy themselves rather than trying to pretend we are a group of larger than life women with deeper voices.

Summary

With all these problems, who would want to be a cross-dresser? Experience indicates that there is no cure but interestingly enough, most cross-dressers when asked if they would take a cure for being a cross-dresser, will say no. Most feel that they have something special, despite the problems. Treating transgendered people with aversion therapy has failed, efforts by women to correct the miscreant behaviour of their cross-dressing partners have also consistently failed, although many men will agree to curb their behaviour for the sake of the relationship. Ultimately though, the desire never dies.

The most effective treatment is understanding and communication. As a group we accept that we are what we are and we prefer to

celebrate this rather than mourn it. Hopefully the rest of the world will one day be more accepting of us and the negative feelings instilled by years of hiding and misunderstanding will gradually evaporate.

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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.