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Ten Basic Rules for Making Transmen Feel Welcome at M.T.F. Meetings

A Real Community Not Only Plays Together, But Works Together

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A real community not only plays together, but works together.

1. Do not assume all men attending meetings are M.T.F.s. Perhaps the most common error we M.T.F.s make. Often a post-transition transman attending a M.T.F. meeting will be mistaken by well-meaning M.T.F.s to be another M.T.F. who is there for the first time. The transman will explain the error, only to be answered by, "I never would have guessed you were a woman!" a comment that does not please most transmen, since they were never women, regardless of what was on their birth certificate. Many transmen will simply leave such a group without correcting the error. These are known in the F.T.M. community as invisible men. Remember we have brothers as well as sisters in our transgender family.

Making a habit of using inclusive language will raise the consciousness and sensitivity of all our M.T.F. members.

2: Listen to them when they speak. They may be shy initially, but you can make them feel welcome by being open to them and listening. When they do speak, do not cut them off, nor invalidate their very different experience by rattling on with your own. Do not talk down to them, nor make fun of them. Just because they are trying to grasp what you have disowned doesn't give you permission to discount them. Respect them and their experience. Shut up and listen to men for a change.

3: Do not ask a transman a lot of personal questions. Overall, the transmen tend to be more private about their bodies, and most feel that their medical status is nobody's business but their own. Asking them about it is invasive and rude. If they want to share, they will. Give these guys their privacy.

4: Do not hit on a transman. Unfortunately, this is a common complaint. A transman said it best: "One reason why many F.T.M.s do not come to M.T.F. meetings is because if you have thirty guys in skirts in a room, at least one of them is going to look at a transman and think, "She's a woman, and she understands me!" then glom him". Such unwanted attention can be more than just rude, when viewed in the light of some studies which have shown that the F.T.M. community suffers a much higher incidence of violence, sexual assault and incest. Our support group meetings must create safe space for all transgendered people who attend. Be sensitive and respectful. If a transman is interested in you, he will let you know.

5: Do not assume that a transman is straight. Transmen can be bisexual or gay (yes, g-a-y, as in male homosexual, as in attracted to other men, transsexual or non-transsexual). The late Lou Sullivan, founder of F.T.M. International, identified himself as a gay man and died from AIDS. Have you ever seen that button that reads, "How Dare You Presume I'm Straight"? Remember how you feel when some unknowing person thinks you're gay because you cross-dress? Avoid making this insensitive and insulting mistake.

6: Allow for bathroom parity. Don't allow both the men's room and the women's room to be totally taken over by M.T.F.s who are changing into their dresses. Transmen occasionally need to use the restroom and can't do it if three M.T.F.s are clustered around the mirror putting on makeup. An F.T.M. cross-dresser may want separate changing facilities of his own as well. For a female cross-dresser or anyone not living as a man, the trip to the men's room may not be something they are ready to handle, especially in the context of a new situation, such as attending an M.T.F. meeting for a first time. Allow them their own space to pee.

7: Avoid use of female-centric language. Whether addressing a group or speaking one-on-one, don't use "girls", "sisters", "ladies", etc. Rather: "ladies and gentlemen", "sisters and brothers", "girls and boys", or better yet, use gender-neutral language such as "friends", "folks", "people" or "colleagues". Many people on the F.T.M. spectrum opt out of the whole binary gender thing, and refusing to be identified as either a man or woman is fairly common. Consider how difficult it has been for trans activists to get gay and lesbian activists to add "bisexual and transgendered" to "gay and lesbian". Verbal inclusion is a necessary first step.

8: Use inclusive language at all times. The passability of many transmen is good enough that you will never know when a stealth transman is attending a meeting. Many of them do - as one transman puts it, "there are more of us than you think". It is fairly common

for passing transmen to surf M.T.F. support groups, showing up unannounced to check them out. But usually, he is not satisfied with any of these groups, and he doesn't come back. He has his own needs for support, and most often he is unwilling to be the token out F.T.M.. Assuming that role for a group would require him to work his butt off educating its M.T.F. membership. He also may come as an ally to the meetings of an M.T.F.-lead organisation whose mission he believes in. But in either situation, he usually will not out himself. Thus we always should try to be aware of and to use inclusive language, even when we don't seem to have any F.T.M.s in attendance. Making a habit of using inclusive language will raise the consciousness and sensitivity of all our M.T.F. members.

9: Attempt to schedule educational programming of interest to both M.T.F.s and F.T.M.s. Allow for discussion of shared issues and presentations of mutual interest. Topics may include family and relationship issues, access to and dealing with health care providers and other helping professionals, legal matters and redocumentation, violence and self-defence, political concerns, etc. Focusing on these practical matters will help those just starting to come-out overcome their fears, and help all of us to learn how to deal with these situations. These issues and concerns are the common denominators of everyone in our community.

10: Ask the guys if they are interested in working together on common issues and concerns. A real community not only plays together, but works together. Support and social activities are easily intermixed with educational and political activities, and are often synergistic. These combined activities lead to the establishment of smoother interpersonal relationships and even friendships between M.T.F.s and F.T.M.s. Much can be accomplished if we can find ways to work together toward a common transgender vision. And there are more than a few F.T.M.s who, if given the opportunity, would be wonderful leaders of transgendered groups with agendas filled with common concerns. Ask the men to join our groups and become contributing members and leaders. Remember that Inclusion is more than saying, "We're so glad you could come"!

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