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Tripping the Light Fantastic

Staying Sane and Whole while in Transition

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Article appeared in Polare magazine: June 1997 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Dallas Denny is a writer, educator, and mental health professional and is renowned for her work in advocacy, policy issues, and health practices involving transsexual and transgendered people.

Gender reassignment is one of the most radical and disruptive things that an individual can do. It strains and often severs social relationships, imposes economic hardships, involves a good deal of physical pain and a great deal of psychic pain, and requires study and hard work in order to even begin to hope to pass in the gender of choice. Transition must be pursued in the face of the general disapproval of society and the specific disapproval of loved ones, the reluctance of the medical community to provide services, a scarcity of resources, and countless legal and social obstacles. The body of one sex must be somehow whipped into the semblance of that of the opposite sex, generally after puberty has wreaked irreversible somatic changes. Old behavioural patterns must be unlearned and new ones added. A new life must replace the old.

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The transsexual person runs a gamut of obstacles, with no guarantees of success. Indeed, probably fewer than ten percent of those who set out to change their gender succeed in doing so. And yet, tens of thousands of people are happily and successfully working and living in the gender of choice. Transition is possible. It can be done. It just can't be done without disruption and sacrifice and hard work. It can't be done without stubborn determination. It can't be done without money. It can't be done in the absence of support, and it can't be done without pain.

My cross-dressing friends tell me that the transsexual people they know are no fun: "They whine all the time. They're preoccupied with their problems and their bodies. They need to lighten up." To them I say, "Please appreciate the tremendous pressures that these people are experiencing. Please understand that every aspect of their lives is affected by their decision to change gender, and that they must become somewhat self-absorbed in order to prevail against odds which are nearly insurmountable." And to those who are in transition, I say, "Lighten up!"

I don't have the space in this article to point out all the potential hazards in the mine field of transition. Our sorority simply isn't big enough. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* isn't big enough. You'll have to look elsewhere for that (you'll find a listing of such resources at the end of this article). I do have some strategies and approaches that may be of help. Here they are:

- Keep your sense of humour (and if you don't have one, cultivate one). You will only be as unhappy as you allow yourself to be. You can plod miserably along, or you can enjoy yourself. You can find humour in the ludicrous situations you will find yourself in and the things people will say which have a whole different meaning because of your gender status. Those you meet along the route will prove amusing, if you allow them to be. They will be your comrades in arms, and some of them will become your friends. If you approach transition with a sense of wonder and awe, your experiences will be more pleasurable than they will be if you inject fear and guilt. Yes, it'll be damn difficult, but you can still have a good time. Being miserable and depressed does not make for a good prognosis.
- Don't allow transsexuality to become your entire life. You shouldn't go through transition as if you were Ahab in pursuit of the White Whale. Ahab needed to get a life, and so do you. You mustn't defer your entire existence in anticipation of a hypothesized bliss once you jump genders. An empty life in the gender of original assignment will probably become an empty life in the gender of choice. Reassignment will not solve your problems; you'll still have the same troubles, but in a different gender. You would do well to have life goals other than transition. You should cultivate friends and interests outside the gender community.
- Keep your perspective. You must not allow your transsexualism to become a fantasy or a fetish. As my

friend Rachel has said, "You must weave reality back into the fabric." Don't place undue weight on reassignment surgery; it won't magically transform you into a man or a woman. You should at all times know where you are and where you are going, and this should be firmly grounded in reality. You must come to terms with your physical and behavioural assets and liabilities and incorporate them into an emerging identity. You must have realistic ideas about the social roles of men and women, and what sort of man or woman you want to be. Remember that transition is a process - a becoming, if you will. You will be gradually changing. You won't just wake up one morning and find that you are magically different.

- Don't box yourself in. You must somehow keep functioning. If you prematurely dismantle your old life, you will be unable to replace it with a satisfactory life in the gender of choice. You will be left with a twilight existence, an identification as a transsexual. And if this negatively impacts your earning potential, you can get stuck, unable to complete the procedures which will produce the bodily changes necessary to successfully pass in the gender of choice (for instance, electrolysis for the male-to-female; reduction mammoplasty for the female-to-male). You must maintain as much support as possible. You should know that in some cases that may mean clinging onto your old identity a little bit longer.
- Let go of your crutches. As your body changes, it will become less difficult to pass. You should rely less on contrivance and incorporate your natural aspects into your presentation. This may mean using your own hair instead of a wig, doing away with padding, and using less make-up. Or it may mean using your birth name, if it has a chance of working, instead of an idealized feminine name. It may mean becoming comfortable with interests or aspects of your personality that aren't a good "fit" in the gender of choice. But whatever your perceived shortcomings are, you will need to face and come to terms with them and let them go.
- Sacrifice and compromise. Being in transition will cause big changes in your life. You must be prepared to meet all challenges and to give your transsexualism a high priority. You'll be deluding yourself if you think you can maintain your previous standard of living in the face of bills from psychologists, endocrinologists, electrologists, and plastic surgeons. You must maintain your pace. If you delay procedures such as hormonal therapy because of lack of money or time, or for other reasons, your transition will eventually be delayed. And here I will insert a caveat for the male-to-female transsexual person: Don't put off electrolysis. You'll be sorry if you do. Once you are living in the gender of choice, it will be nearly impossible to bring yourself to grow the hair long enough for the operator to grasp it with her tweezers. And passing will be at best a struggle, and quite likely impossible, until the hair on your face is gone or at least appreciably diminished.
- Be a good consumer. You must at all times act with discretion and proper respect for your body. You should not act out of desperation. Although services can be difficult to obtain, they are available. You will minimize your chances of failure if you use competent service providers. Otherwise you will risk delays in obtaining diagnosis (and hence hormones), a regimen of hormones inadequate to masculinize or feminize you, and even botched surgery. You have only one shot at transition, and it is decidedly in your best interest to proceed with reasonable precautions and care, making sure that your doctors know what they are doing.
- Join a support group. It will be to your advantage to find your peers. Support groups can educate you, assist you with referrals, and help you to perfect a masculine or feminine appearance. You will probably make friends with other group members. But more importantly, you will see your peers in action, making decisions both good and bad. By observing them, and by talking with them, you can learn strategies for coping and avoid pitfalls.
- Follow the Benjamin Standards of Care. The Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc., are guidelines to safeguard transsexual people and those who provide services for them. Many transsexual people see them as obstacles to be overcome, and so they are. But by following the Standards of Care, you will minimize your chances of failing in your transition, and maximize your chances of surviving failure, if it does occur. The Standards will let you opt out anywhere short of reassignment surgery. The best of transitions will be painful. The worst do not even bear thinking about. You should not expect a perfect experience, but by exercising common sense and foresight, you will minimize disruption and conflict, and have a smoother ride.

A Brief Resource List:

Denny, Dallas. (1990). *Deciding What To Do About Your Gender Dysphoria: Some Considerations For Those Who Are Thinking About Sex Reassignment*.

Denny, Dallas. (1991). *Discovering Who You Are: A Guide to Self-assessment for Persons with Gender Dysphoria*.

Denny, Dallas. (1991). *Dealing With Your Feelings: A Guide to Coming-Out for Persons with Gender Dysphoria*.

Chrysalis Quarterly. (includes the three booklets above).

The above are available from American Educational Gender Information Service (A.E.G.I.S.), P.O. Box 33724, Decatur, Georgia, U.S.A. 30033.

Devor, Holly. *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*; Indiana University Press (1989); I.S.B.N.-13 978 0253205339.

Elizabeth, Sister Mary. *Legal Aspects of Transsexualism*; International Foundation for Gender Education (1990); I.S.B.N.-13 978 0962597602.

Laing, Alison. *Speaking as a Woman* Creative Design Services (1989) I.S.B.N.-13 978 1880715031.

Stringer, JoAnne Altman. *The Transsexual's Survival Guide*; Creative Design Services (2000); I.S.B.N.-13 978 1880715161.

Stevens, Jennifer Ann. *From Masculine to Feminine and All Points In-Between* Different Path Press (1990); I.S.B.N.-13 978 0962626203.

TV-TS Tapestry Journal.

The above are available from International Foundation for Gender Education (I.F.G.E.), P.O.) Box 367, Wayland, Massachusetts 01778.

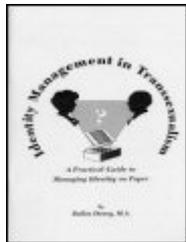
Dallas Denny

From Wikipedia:  Dallas Denny is a writer, educator, and mental health professional and is renowned for her work in advocacy, policy issues, and health practices involving transsexual and transgendered people. She has served as an advisor to the World Professional Association of Transgender Health, The University of Michigan, the Centres for Disease Control, the City of Atlanta, journalists, and filmmakers. For nearly twenty years she has taught a class on transgender issues at Emory University. She has made hundreds of presentations at universities, businesses, professional organisations, and conferences.



She has published three books and written or co-written more than twenty chapters in textbooks, hundreds of articles, editorials, and columns for magazines and journals, and assorted booklets and pamphlets. She is former Editor-in-Chief of the journals *Chrysalis* and *Transgender Tapestry* and founding executive director of the American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc., which is now known as Gender Education & Advocacy, Inc.

[Dallas Denny's Website](#) 



Identity Management in Transsexualism: A Practical Guide to Managing Identity on Paper.

Author: Dallas Denny

Publisher: Creative Design Services (1994)

I.S.B.N.-13 978 1880715079

From Amazon Books:  This is the only comprehensive guide to managing an identity change for the transsexual person. Denny shares her personal experience in tracking down the paper trail we all leave behind us. She gives solid advice and explicit directions where possible. An extra bonus is the Transgender Identity card. Just add your photo and personal data.

Polare Magazine is published quarterly in Australia by The Gender Centre Inc., which is funded by the Department of Family & Community Services under the S.A.A.P. program and supported by the N.S.W. Health Department through the AIDS and Infectious Diseases Branch. Polare provides a forum for discussion and debate on gender issues. Unsolicited contributions are welcome, the editor reserves the right to edit such contributions without notification. Any submission which appears in Polare may be published on our internet site. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor, The Gender Centre Inc., the Department of Family & Community Services or the N.S.W. Department of Health.

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.