

(The Gender Centre advise that this article may not be current and as such certain content, including but not limited to persons, contact details and dates may not apply. Where legal authority or medical related matters are cited, responsibility lies with the reader to obtain the most current relevant legal authority and/or medical publication.)

Self-Esteem

The Catch 22 of Transgender

by Julie Peters

Article appeared in Polare magazine: May 2005 Last Update: October 2013 Last Reviewed: September 2015



Julie Peters: I built my self-esteem in any way I could and that gave me the impetus to become my-self.

Transgender has its own built in Catch 22. You need very high self-esteem to successfully deal with being transgendered, but simply being transgendered is one of the great forces sapping your self-esteem.

Self-esteem - the Transgender Catch 22. But don't despair! I've discovered a loophole. Self-esteem isn't compartmentalised. Self-esteem is self-esteem. Achieving in any area of life improves your self-esteem which helps you deal with being transgendered. I discovered this loophole by accident but before I go into more detail I'd like to show you why being transgendered dragged my self-esteem so low that I was suicidal.

I was an only child for three years, the eldest grandchild on my father's side and seen as the eldest male on my mothers side. I was special and I knew it. At this age I didn't know I lived in a transphobic, homophobic, racist, classist and religiously intolerant world.

At seven I learnt I wasn't going to grow up to be a lady. And I learnt my disappointment wasn't something that I could tell anyone without fear of ostracism. But I discovered that I could have secret "soon-it-will-be-realised-I'm-a-girl" dreams and none of the adults around me knew I was having these dreams.

Initially these secret dreams gave me a feeling of being in control. But I did live in a transphobic society and as I grew older I started to measure myself by the social norms of the Catholic environment I lived in. And I could only conclude that because all I wanted to be was a girl then I was a sinner and sick in the head.

I went stealth, hiding any hints of femininity. Refusing to even play dressing up games because I knew that I would look too happy playing at being a girl and people would figure me out. Oh, how I lived for my secret "everyone-now-realises-their-mistake-and-now--realises-I'm-really-a-girl" dreams.

But as I became more Catholically indoctrinated, I found it harder to enjoy the dreams. I started to feel guilty. I knew I could hide my dreams from the world. But I started to realise I couldn't hide my dreams from God. It probably took until I was twelve or thirteen before this guilt and discomfort had become self-loathing. I imagined there had been some huge mistake and God had really created me a girl and at puberty I'd grow breasts and everyone would realise their mistake and I'd be happy.

But no. I was hit heavy by testosterone poisoning. My voice broke, my legs grew hairy, my face and crotch became hairy. I didn't want my voice broken. I wanted it fixed. But what could a girl do. Easy! The elixir of happiness! Chocolate. And so I became pimply and hairy. I was just coping. I dropped some basics, I stopped brushing my teeth. Who cared. If I couldn't be a girl I could see no point to life. Pimply, hairy, green teeth. Kids laughed at my green teeth. I started to brush again.

I think I had done my homework about twice during primary school but at eleven I found myself at the very working class, Christian Brothers College, Our Lady of Mount Carmel - which is now a Hari Krishna Temple.

It was a bit of a culture shock - these Christian Brothers. If you didn't do your homework you could easily end up with thirty cuts a day across the hand, with a thick leather strap. The formula was even-handedly applied. We were given ten spelling words to learn a night. You got a cut across the hand for each mistake. Even as I write these words my hands have become sore. And a similar formula applied for every other subject. That's how you could get so many a day.

You'll never guess. I started to do my homework. And the biggest surprise of all was that I actually found Science, Latin, Maths, Geography, Religion and English interesting. At seventeen I was at University, with a scholarship, studying engineering.

In retrospect the Faculty of Engineering wasn't the culturally best choice for a tranny in self-denial. Alcohol helped drown the pain. I dropped out of University. We had full employment in the early 1970s. I got a job in television. I discovered a gay scene. I felt comfortable with them.

Achieving in any area of life improves your self-esteem which helps your deal with being transgendered.

I passed my driving licence. I drove fast and dangerously. The worst that could happen is that I could die and I'd have no more pain. I discovered rum and coke, vodka and orange. Getting pissed was an acceptable man's way to deal with your problems. I drank. I fitted in. I couldn't shave. I couldn't even look in the mirror.

My demise was just around the corner. Soon I'd have no pain. Pissed-off-my-face I blacked out while driving home. I ran off the road. I caught myself. I stopped the car, I fell asleep.

I woke up many hours later. Scared. Petrified. I was crying. I could still just remember having high self-esteem when I was five. I wanted it back. But I didn't know how.

I could see that faintest of a glimmer of possibility simply because I could remember it. At twenty-one the terrier in me kicked in. I shaved. I sold my car. I went out and bought a dress. I determined to fight the guilt. I didn't drink a single drop of alcohol for ten years and it took me another eight years to gain enough self-esteem to be able to embrace my gender. It took until I was thirty-nine before I had enough self-esteem to live as a woman. But how did I turn myself around? I'm only now starting to see how I did it. I was looking for ways to feel good about myself without alcohol or chocolate. I found little ways to cheer myself up. But no alcohol. Okay, chocolate's allowed. I'm sure I'm alcoholic. I just don't drink. This Catholic guilt is crap. I bought more clothes. I put them on. I was overcome by an incredible rush of joy. Yes I remember this. This is self-esteem. I could remember in early high school feeling good about getting good marks at school. Achieve things. I didn't win the fight that day.

My head said I was a man and I knew I would be laughed at, ridiculed. I must keep this secret. Joy. Fear. Joy. Fear. Guilt. Fear. Guilt. Joy. A step forward. A step back. I felt a failure because I wasn't a real woman. I will fight this guilt. I didn't have any friends I felt comfortable enough with to invite home right through high school or university. I started to have friends through work. Having friends gave me a few hits of self-esteem. I discovered the Seahorse Club in 1974, a club for transvestites. It was at Seahorse that I first met transsexuals. I thought I just couldn't do what they did. But Seahorse was certainly a safe environment. New friends who understood my transgender. I could talk openly and honestly for the first time in my life. I had discovered the freedom to be myself. Or at least permission to start looking for myself.

I certainly had some disasters. But as they say "repetition is the mother of learning", "practice makes perfect". And I got better and better. At first I started to treat it like a science experiment.

I'd take careful notes as to what I did and measure it's success. If I had a bad day I'd only pass at ten metres. Or if I had a good day I could pass as close as one metre. My big problem was body and facial hair.

I soon discovered waxing and electrolysis. Looking better gave me some hits of self-esteem. I looked for and found so many ways to get a hit of self-esteem.

I did so many classes, dance, cooking and doing things around the house like carpentry, plumbing. Lots and lots of little successes. The other thing that really helped was intensive self-analysis. I read and read and wrote and wrote analysing myself. At first I wrote in code. I was so scared of it ever being read. I guess I have come a long way. Here I am writing my deepest secrets for hundreds of people I will never meet. At first I read anything that even mentioned my "condition".

Novels, biographies, psychology texts, and, surprise, surprise, a huge wealth of learning - papers on transgender in the journal racks of the Melbourne University Medical Library. I existed. I wasn't a freak. Well! I wasn't such a freak. I started to take hormones at twenty-five. I felt so good about my body until I freaked. People at work noticed I was growing breasts. I couldn't cope with the ridicule. I stopped.

In my mid to late twenties I discovered Jung and his concept of androgyny. A male can only become whole if he embraces his feminine side and a woman can only become whole if she embraces her masculine side. I did the test in the back of the book. I was perfectly androgynous. That gave me a hit of self-esteem. I had reached Jung's ideal. But I still had this nagging doubt. I knew I wanted to be an androgynous woman not an androgynous man. I was starting to get better at my work. This helped my esteem.

I was in a good relationship. This helped - more self-esteem hits. I went back and finished my degree. Four years part-time. More self-esteem hits. I started to take low dosages of hormones - to help me look androgynous as well as be it. I set myself exercises in passing as a woman. Going to a restaurant. Going to a movie. I felt really depressed when I had to change back. My house was falling apart. I fixed it up. That's three more years of self-esteem hits. I was becoming a better photographer.

I now had some great shots of me as a woman. Most not so good. Improve! I analyse every trip. Obsessed about improving my technique. I put so much energy into this that I'm sure I would have gained a PhD in "passing-as-a-woman" if only some university offered such a course of study.

I take a trip to Sydney, by myself, without any boy's clothes. Great. I've made a huge step. I've achieved one minor utopian dream. And as soon as I've climbed this new hill I can see higher more exciting hills that need to be climbed. I'm alone in my transgender. I'm only a woman if people see me as a woman. In Sydney I'm seen as a woman by strangers. I buy a bus ticket or a cup of coffee. I like strangers taking me as a woman. I need more interaction with people. I need more than a ten second conversation. I need people important to me to see me as a woman. It strikes me that my head and heart are in conflict.

I don't think I'm having emotions. Surely acting is one thing that requires both thinking and feeling. Maybe acting will help get thinking and feeling to work. I take acting and singing lessons. I develop some good friends. It takes a while but eventually I start to have emotions again. And what a shock. I realise that I desperately want to be a woman. My head tells me I'm a man and my heart tells me I'm a woman. I've allowed my head to dominate for so many years and denying my heart has got me into this mess. I realise my head and heart are running in totally different directions. My life will only work if my head and heart agree. This self-knowledge allows me to jump to the next step. I find a very lateral position that both my head and heart can tolerate.

My head gives my heart permission to culturally live as a woman and my heart gives my head permission to go around telling everyone I'm transgendered because that is logically accurate. My head and heart are friends for the first time since childhood. Now that's a step in self-esteem. I now have sufficient self-esteem to deal with my negative self-talk. I do it. It certainly hasn't been in a hurry. I've been in the wading pool of indecision for eighteen years before I jumped into the deep end of living again. I change gender. I deal with the shit. In fact dealing with the shit makes me feel even stronger. More self-esteem hits. I'm strong enough to wear down those negative people around me. The people who are positive and praise my courage give me just a few more hits of self-esteem. Shock Horror! I've done it. After all these years of indecision and self-loathing. My one aim in life is fulfilled.

Oh? What do I do now? My one aim in life is fulfilled? I have achieved my biggest goal in life. For a short time I have a little, what can I call it? It's like post-natal-depression.

Well I suppose I've just been born-again. Maybe I should call it post re-natal depression. This one doesn't stump me. I have the technique that builds self-esteem. It's simple. Do stuff that increases self-esteem. So since I've found true myself I've just kept doing things. I started to sing in public, more acting, promotions at work, I ran for Parliament five times, great relationship, public speaking, go freelance, start growing things, study multimedia, engineering. I've become a self-esteem addict. I still have days I'm down. I guess that makes me like everyone else.

But I've come a very long way in tiny, tiny steps. I survived high school by being totally logical and turning off my emotions. I kept a very tight lid on all my feelings from 1963 to 1990. That's twenty-seven years in the pressure cooker. I - oh, so slowly - built up my self-esteem to the point where it was safe to turn my emotions back on. I know most people can't wait that long. Each must find her/his way in his/her own time. But I can now cope with my weirdness. I like myself.

What was the process? Including friends, giving myself the freedom to be myself and acquiring self-knowledge.

And so I slip through the loophole in the transgender self-esteem Catch 22. Self-esteem isn't compartmentalised. I built my self-esteem in any way I could and that gave me the impetus to become my-self.

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.