

Coming Out as a Transgender Person: A Workbook

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MCC Transgender Ministries

Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches

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Purpose of this Workbook

This workbook is designed to assist in your journey of coming out to family and friends as a transgender person. This material is not intended to be an exhaustive resource, but a review of current information and suggestions, as well as a series of exercises organized to help you navigate this journey. *Please seek the assistance and counsel of a qualified therapist, pastor or other professional when engaging in this journey of coming out.*

Preliminary Terminology

The following terminology is provided for your reference and is used throughout this workbook. Terms here are defined as specifically as possible, in order to allow for your personal experience and assist you in determining your connection to the experiences of others. Unless otherwise noted, each term and its subsequent definitions are derived from one or both of two primary sources, Metropolitan Community Churches' "Trans-Glossary", and Human Rights Campaign's "Gender Identity and Faith Communities."

Coming Out - the act of revealing a truth about oneself to another person.

Gender - the set of socially constructed norms associated with bodily sex characteristics at birth. (i.e. masculinity or femininity)

Gender Identity - a sense of one's own male-ness, female-ness or other-gendered-ness.

Gender Role - the cultural expectation of how a person of a perceived gender identity will behave, i.e. perceived female people are expected to be feminine and perceived male people are expected to be masculine. These perceptions vary from one culture to another and are based on the external presentation of an individual.

Sex - the term most often used to communicate whether someone is male or female. This description is based on assessments of an infant's visible genitalia and assigns a "gender" at or soon after birth. This definition allows for only two sexes. It is a biological and legal category.

Sexuality - sexual and/or emotive expression of intimate attraction; attraction may be towards individuals of the same or differing sex, or the same or differing gender. e.g. Lesbian or Gay (homosexual), bisexual, heterosexual, queer, trans-attracted etc.

Sexual Orientation - the culturally ascribed identifier of persons based on their perceived and/or self-proclaimed sexuality.

Transgender - an umbrella term used to include all people who identify as having a gender identity different from their assigned gender (also, gender-variant). This can include transsexual, intersex, cross-dressers, etc., depending on self-understandings of gender identity. This term may also be used to describe gender-variant people who choose not to have medical intervention or limited medical intervention.

Transition - refers to the journey made by transgender individuals who choose to make some level of shift in their gender identity from that which is assigned to them by larger society. Transition may include, but does not require, any level of medical intervention, and may be limited to performative gender (i.e. changing dress to better match perceived gender expectations).

STEP 1 - YOUR TRANS-SELF

Introduction

What follows here is a collection of journaling exercises designed to help you identify what might be going on with you that could impact your coming out experience. If journaling is difficult for you, consider alternate ways in which you can record your response in each exercise below. You can also engage a friend already "in the know" or a trusted care provider (such as a pastor or counselor) to help you transcribe or write down your thoughts. At the very least, consider the exercises below very carefully before embarking on Step 2.

Exercise #1: Who am I? An Exercise in Self-Acceptance

It is important to have your own ideas of self well-established, as well as be aware of the many things impacting your life overall, before opening yourself up to what may be a difficult conversation with someone you love deeply. Coming Out is a part of transitioning. When the knowledge of who you truly are is held by others, a transition will begin in your life, as well as the lives of the people you tell. Keeping a close eye on the myriad of events, attitudes, and feelings in play in this coming out moment will provide some safety from surprises in the midst of your next big step.

Self-acceptance and coming to terms with your feelings are the first order of business in transition. If you are not emotionally grounded from the onset, you [could set yourself up for] a difficult transition....There are wondrous moments of joy and relief, but these [can] come at a high cost and can be accompanied by feelings of inadequacy and longing to be a [non-transgender person] instead of a [transgender person]. But in the end, you need to come to terms with both. You are a [person, worthy of respect and love], and you are [transgender]. Both are things you can be proud of, no matter what anyone else tries to tell you.¹

¹ <http://www.tsroadmap.com/mental/accept.html>

Take a few moments to consider the questions below. Write down, as clearly as possible (you may want to refer to this later), your thoughts as they come to you. Focus more on what comes to you and less on a cohesive picture.

1) Me, Myself & I:

What is my name?

Does my name have a story? Who gave my name to me? Does my name fit my picture of myself?

What do I want my name to be? (This CAN be the same as above!)

2) Work:

What is my vocation? Is my vocation something I enjoy doing? Am I fulfilled in my vocation as the whole person I know myself to be?

What are the specific things within my vocation that I love? What are the specific things within my vocation that I struggle with?

What about my vocation do I have the power to change or solidify?

3) Faith:

What is my faith, or my belief system regarding God? Does that faith fulfill me; if so, how? How does my faith leave me wanting?

What is my religion? Is religion an important part of my life? Does my religion directly relate to my faith? Am I fulfilled by the practice of my religion?

4) Word Exercises:

What are fifteen words (adjectives and nouns!) that best describe me today?

What are sixteen words (adjectives and nouns!) that best describe who I hope to be in one year? (Try to use different words than those above.)

What are seventeen words (adjectives and nouns!) that best describe who I hope to be in three years? (Try to use different words than those above.)

What are eighteen words (adjectives and nouns!) that best describe who I hope to be in five years? (Try to use different words than those above.)

5) Who, What, and Why:

To whom am I coming out?

What will I come out "as" to this person/these people? What terms am I most comfortable with? Do I understand these terms and can I define them? (If so, write out the definition. If not, see the terminology above and do some research to develop your own definition.)

WHY am I coming out to this person/these people? What do I need from them, or need them to do/be?

Exercise #2: Addressing FEAR

Fear is an emotional response to a perceived threat. It is a basic survival mechanism occurring in response to a specific stimulus, such as pain or the threat of danger.²

Fear can block your action due to real and/or perceived expectations of a situation. In some recovery programs, fear is given an acronym FEAR for False Expectations Appearing Real. As you prepare for a coming out experience, take a few moments to check your fear. The following questions and chart are intended to help you clarify your fear.

1) What are the top five things I am most fearful about as I contemplate coming out as a transgender person?

	Is this a real possibility?	Why or Why not?
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____

2) What are the consequences if each of the five top things I fear come true?

	Is this a real consequence?	Why or Why not?
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear>

3) Who can I rely on if any or all of the consequences above become a reality? List each person's name and contact information...and consider having a conversation with them BEFORE your coming out experience.

Name	Phone Number	Prepped? (Yes/No)
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____

STEP 2 - A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Introduction

Now that you have a pretty firm grip on where you are, what you expect, and what fears are impacting you, this section is designed to take you through a summary of what is going to be happening for your family. Though the coming out conversation is certainly about your identity, your experience, and your needs/wants, the dialogue will inevitably fall to your family's identity, experience and needs/wants. After all, their entire experience of you and your place in their lives, though perhaps unchanging in your mind, will create a whole new world for them.

Exercise #1 - Considering Your Past³

Answer the questions below from YOUR experience of those you plan to come out to. The process of coming out can be filled with uncertainty and fear, but your trust of those you intend to welcome into this journey stems from your knowledge of their love for you and the ways in which you can anticipate their reactions. Keep in mind, this is just to give you time to gain perspective on what could be...often, the worst you expect is much worse than the actual response. Prepare for the worst, Pray for the best, Breathe through reality.

How have they responded to other highly emotional events in their life? (e.g. a severe injury to child or sibling, loss and grief in the family, etc.)

Have they ever had trouble listening to you or taking you seriously?

How have they responded during past revelations of important changes in your life or person? (e.g. have your truths been considered a "phase" or "rebellion", suggesting that they believe you will not follow- through?)

³ The questions below have been modified from a list of tips from a reader published at <http://www.tsroadmap.com/mental/comeout.html>.

Exercise #2 - Your Expectations

You know very well that this journey is about you. However, for those who love you and believe they know you, the revelation of your transgender journey will very likely challenge some of their foundational perspectives of you. Such challenges can shake someone to the core of their own sense of self.

It's important to be clear about your expectations of them during and following your coming out experience. Understand that these expectations are yours alone and do not dictate how your family or friends SHOULD respond, but how you expect them to respond. Being clear about your expectations allows you to view them, weigh them, and even communicate them to those you love while also clearly recognizing that the expectations are yours, not theirs. Your family/ friend will have a set of expectations of their own which you may or may not be aware of.

1. I expect _____ to respond in the following ways and for the following reasons.

Response	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. I expect _____ to respond in the following ways and for the following reasons.

Response	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

3. I expect _____ to respond in the following ways and for the following reasons.

Response	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

STEP 3 - READY, SET, GO!

Introduction

By now you should have addressed the following:

- 1) You know who you are and why you are coming out.
- 2) You know who you are coming out to and why you have chosen them as part of your safe community.
- 3) You have spent some time resting in the shoes of those you will soon come out to and gaining some compassion for their upcoming experience of/with you.

Exercise #1 - Exploring How⁴

Coming Out Via Letter:

Some find that a letter to family/friends works best. The letter has several advantages over face to face communications.

- a) You get to take your time and think about what to say and word it perfectly.
- b) You can have a friend, therapist or supportive person read it over first and give you feedback.
- c) You can't be interrupted.
- d) The recipient can go back and read it again and take time to absorb the content.

NOTE: a letter is NOT the same as an email. Because email can be seen as impersonal, steer clear from this as your primary communication.

Coming Out in Person:

Coming out in person can be an overwhelming task. However, if you are concerned about a letter seeming too impersonal, take some time to organize your thoughts before you come out in person. You may even choose to write the letter above and take it with you to read in person.

⁴ This section modified from <http://tgmentalhealth.com/2009/12/26/thoughts-on-coming-out-as-transgender-to-family/>.

What to say:

Speak to those you are coming out to as clearly as possible. You may want to include the following:

- a) Reassurance that you love them, want to remain connected and hope that they will be supportive
- b) Reassurance that this is not their "fault"
- c) A little bit about your struggle with gender over the years, your experience, coping, isolation, etc... (Be specific! It will help them empathize with you)
- d) A few recommendations of books, articles or support groups in their area (Awareness of these may also help you in your journey.)
- e) A specific request that they **not respond** right away, but to take some time (perhaps a week) before they respond. Encourage them to sit with it. This will weed out any immediate bad response and let them cool down.

Final Considerations

Some final thoughts for preparing yourself are listed below. *These are suggestions*, taken from a variety of sources, to help you build up the system of support you will need through this part of your journey. You do not have to do any item on this list, but do consider them, for they come from others' coming out experiences.

Consider having a therapist available to you for this coming out experience. -

Though you may feel urgency at the thought of coming out, taking the time to have an impartial, but caring voice working with you can be a great relief. Many therapists are available to listen and journey with you and may be able to offer welcome respite.

Developing a relationship with a therapist can require multiple visits, so consider taking the time to build up that relationship before your scheduled coming out date.

Practice, Practice, Practice! - If you have chosen to come out in person, practice what you hope to say. Utilize some of the tools of public speaking. Write notecards to guide your conversation. Write an outline of what you want to cover. Practice with someone who is safe so you can hear yourself say the words out loud. Even ask a trusted friend to challenge you in the ways you most fear and practice not engaging in arguments.

⁵Be Aware of your Body Language.* Pay attention not to send out conflicting messages (e.g having an insecure pose while you say you feel confident or vice versa). Say what you feel and feel what you say.

Stress the pain you feel from your current condition and the problems you have in functioning like this.* Doing nothing will not improve your quality of life, quite likely things would get worse. Most people will be more open to this (who would want to see someone they love suffer) than the desire you feel to complete the transition and live in a different role. People who cannot relate to or understand your desire for change **can** appreciate your discomfort in the status quo.

Coming Out in Phases.* You may not want to stress your all of the aspects of your experience as transgender immediately. You can decide to tell things gradually during multiple conversations. You might have the feeling that you are holding back, but you are not. Instead, you are being sensitive to those you love.

Timing.* Consider your timing carefully. You might be almost bursting to tell your story, but external circumstances are making the atmosphere totally unsuitable for your message. In that case, breathe through your urgency, however difficult, in order to lovingly tell your family/friend at a time that's best for them.

Emotions : Be Prepared for their Emotional Shockwaves.* You already expect waves of emotion from those you are coming out to. However, emotions are inherently unpredictable. Make room in your mind and heart for their emotional roller coaster, knowing that their emotions may have little to do with who you are. Negative emotional responses may mean that they are concerned with what will happen to you. This is a sign of love, though the response itself may be uncomfortable for you.

Not all emotions are what they look like.* Anger and aggression can sometimes be another face of fear. This can be fear for what the future will bring for you, but most surely fear for what the future will bring for them. How will they tell this to other people ? How will people react to this situation ? How will this affect their lives? Preparing some comments for them on questions like these can help you navigate your family member or friend's emotional response. Practice these answers with someone safe.

Be Prepared for Your Emotional Shockwaves. This is an emotional time for you, too. You may find that your emotional state changes with each response you anticipate, or

⁵ The items marked with (*) have been modified from a list of recommendations from a reader published at <http://www.tsroadmap.com/mental/comeout.html>.

each consequence of coming out you can imagine. Be willing to walk into your coming out experience with the self-permission to FEEL. Feel anything, feel everything, and have someone available to receive you within those emotions.

Coming Out to Children. If you are coming out to your children, you have additional concerns to keep in mind. Please see the appendix to this resource, released by COLAGE (<http://www.colage.org>).

6No Need for Too Much Specificity.** No need to talk about specific long term plans/ timetables or surgeries in your coming-out experience. Remember, the purpose of your coming out is to let your family know that you are a transgender person. Period. Future plans are better left for future communications. Why? Because just digesting the fact that one has a transgender child/sibling/friend is enough to begin with. Remember, you've had a lot of time to think about this and are ready to move ahead. They are just learning of this for the first time and need to absorb it. It is ok to gently allude to the fact that changes might be coming in the future, but try not to go farther than that in your first communication on this topic.

What if the Response is Negative?*** Several approaches you might consider if you encounter a negative response are below. Remember, emotions may run high and a reaction is not necessarily a final response.

- a) Communicate that you are open and ready to talk when they are.
- b) Be empathic with their difficulty in accepting/understanding/assimilating this information. Understand that they need time and may have a religious/cultural basis of understanding that can't be overcome quickly.
- c) Express your wish and hope that it will change over time.
- d) Ask what you can do to help them accept this.

⁶ Items marked with (**) are modified from <http://tgmentalhealth.com/2009/12/26/thoughts-on-coming-out-as-transgender-to-family/>.

Resources

The following are a list of resources, websites, books, etc. that you may find helpful to both your journey as a transgender person and your coming out experience.

Websites on Coming Out as a Transgender Person

Transsexual Road Map: Includes letter samples and information on coming out to various communities (family, friends, coworkers, etc). (<http://www.tsroadmap.com/family/index.html>)

Human Rights Campaign - Coming Out to Family as Transgender. (<http://www.hrc.org/issues/3455.htm>)

COLAGE - Coming Out to your Kids. (http://www.colage.org/resources/coming_out.htm)

COLAGE - Resources for Children of Transgender People. (<http://www.colage.org/programs/trans/>)

“Coming Out as Sacrament”, by Rev. Dr. Mona West. Article available from Metropolitan Community Churches on the spiritual aspect of coming out. NOTE: this resource focuses primarily on coming out in the arena of sexual orientation. However, you may find the section “A Profound Spiritual Process” helpful in your journey of coming out as a transgender person. (http://www.mccchurch.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Sexuality_Spirituality&Template=/CM/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=578)

Books for Transgender People⁷

Choir Boy by Charlie Anders (2005)

Transparent: Love, Family, and Living the T with Transgender Teenagers by Chris Beam (2008)

Branded T. by Rosalyne Blumenstein (2003)

Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us by Kate Bornstein (1995).

My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You or Something Else Entirely by Kate Bornstein (1997)

She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders by Jennifer Finney Boylan (2003)

Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits by Loren Cameron (1996)

My Life as a Boy by Kim Chernin (1997)

Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities by Jason Cromwell (1999)

Mom I Need to Be a Girl by Just Evelyn (2007)

Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue by Leslie Feinberg (1999)

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman by Leslie Feinberg (1997)

Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg (1993)

Becoming a Visible Man by Jamison Green (2004)

Luna by Julia Anne Peters (2004)

S/He by Minnie Bruce Pratt (1995)

Wrapped in Blue: A Journey of Discovery by Donna Rose (2002)

Morgan in the Mirror by C. C. Saint-Clair (2004)

Freak Show by James St. James (2008)

My Brother Beth by Rebecca Sardella (2007)

The Last Time I Wore a Dress by Daphne Scholinski with Jane Meredith Adams (1998)

Transgender History by Susan Stryker (2008)

⁷ Listing from "Books and Film for LGBTQ Young People" released by The Trevor Project, July 2009.

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Transition and Beyond, Observations on Gender Identity by Reid Vanderburgh (2007)

Books (cont.)

Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender by Riki Anne Wilchins (1997)

Parrotfish by Ellen Wittlinger (2007)

True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism--For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals by Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley

The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals by Stephanie A. Brill and Rachel Pepper

Transgender Explained for Those Who Are Not by Joanne Herman

Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith by Justin Tanis

Trans Forming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones, 2nd Edition by Jessica Xavier

Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Child by Kevin Jennings

Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, And Spirituality by Leanne McCall Tigert

Books for Genderqueer, Gender Variant and Gender Non-Conforming People⁸

Butch is a Noun by S. Bear Bergman (2006)

On the Fringe edited by Donald R. Gallo (2001)

A Queer Circle of Friends by Lisa Lees (2006) [Sequel to Fool for Love]

Fool for Love by Lisa Lees (2005)

Genderqueer edited by Joan Nestle, Riki Wilchins, and Claire Howell (2002)

Prejudice: Stories about Hate, Ignorance, Revelation, and Transformation edited by Daphne Muse (1999)

Finding the Real Me: True Tales of Sex and Gender Diversity edited by Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox (2003)

If You Believe in Mermaids... Don't Tell by A. A. Philips (2007)

⁸ Listing from "Books and Film for LGBTQ Young People" released by The Trevor Project, July 2009.

Films for/about Transgender People⁹

Beautiful Daughters (2006), Rated TV-14

Boy I Am (2006) 72 minutes, Not Rated

Boys Don't Cry (1999) 118 minutes, Rated R

The Brandon Teena Story (2008) 88 minutes , Not Rated [a documentary on the story that led to the film Boys Don't Cry]

Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001) 91 minutes, Rated R

Just Call Me Kade (2002), Not Rated

Ma Vie en Rose (My Life in Pink) (1997) 88 minutes, Rated R

No Dumb Questions (2004) 24 minutes, Not Rated

Normal (2003) 110 minutes, Not Rated

Safe "T" Lessons: HIV Prevention for the Transgender Community (1996), Not Rated

Soldier's Girl (2003) 112 minutes, Rated R

Southern Comfort (2001) 90 minutes, Not Rated

Transamerica (2006) 103 minutes, Rated R

Transgeneration (2005) 272 minutes, Not Rated

Trantasia (2006) 92 minutes, Not Rated

⁹ Listing from "Books and Film for LGBTQ Young People" released by The Trevor Project, July 2009.

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AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity

What does transgender mean?

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity (sense of themselves as male or female) or gender expression differs from that usually associated with their birth sex. Many transgender people live part-time or full-time as members of the other gender. Broadly speaking, anyone whose identity, appearance, or behavior falls outside of conventional gender norms can be described as transgender. However, not everyone whose appearance or behavior is gender-atypical will identify as a transgender person.

What is the difference between sex and gender?

Sex refers to biological status as male or female. It includes physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. *Gender* is a term that is often used to refer to ways that people act, interact, or feel about themselves, which are associated with boys/men and girls/women. While aspects of biological sex are the same across different cultures, aspects of gender may not be.

What are some categories or types of transgender people?

Transsexuals are transgender people who live or wish to live full time as members of the gender opposite to their birth sex. Biological females who wish to live and be recognized as men are called female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals or transsexual men. Biological males who wish to live and be recognized as women are called male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals or transsexual women. Transsexuals usually seek medical interventions, such as hormones and surgery, to make their bodies as congruent as possible with their preferred gender. The process of transitioning from one gender to the other is called sex reassignment or gender reassignment.

Cross-dressers or transvestites comprise the most numerous transgender group. Cross-dressers wear the clothing of the other sex. They vary in how completely they dress (from one article of clothing to fully cross-dressing) as well as in their motives for doing so. Some cross-dress to express cross-gender feelings or identities; others cross-dress for fun, for emotional comfort, or for sexual arousal. The great majority of cross-dressers are biological males, most of whom are sexually attracted to women.

Drag queens and drag kings are, respectively, biological males and females who present part-time as members of the other sex primarily to perform or entertain. Their performances may include singing, lip-syncing, or dancing. Drag performers may or may not identify as transgender. Many drag queens and kings identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Other categories of transgender people include *androgynous*, *bigendered*, and *gender queer* people. Exact definitions of these terms vary from person to person, but often include a sense of blending or alternating genders. Some people who use these terms to describe themselves see traditional concepts of gender as restrictive.

Have transgender people always existed?

Transgender persons have been documented in many Western and non-Western cultures and societies from antiquity until the present day. However, the meaning of gender variance may vary from culture to culture.

Why are some people transgender?

There is no one generally accepted explanation for why some people are transgender. The diversity of transgender expression argues against any simple or unitary explanation. Many experts believe that biological factors such as genetic influences and prenatal hormone levels, early experiences in a person's family of origin, and other social influences can all contribute to the development of transgender behaviors and identities.

How prevalent are transgender people?

It is difficult to accurately estimate the prevalence of transgender people in Western countries. As many as 2-3% of biological males engage in cross-dressing, at least occasionally. Current estimates of the prevalence of transsexualism are about 1 in 10,000 for biological males and 1 in 30,000 for biological females. The number of people in other transgender categories is unknown.

What is the relationship between transgender and sexual orientation?

People generally experience gender identity and sexual orientation as two different things. Sexual orientation refers to one's sexual attraction to men, women, both,

or neither, whereas gender identity refers to one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender. Usually people who are attracted to women prior to transition continue to be attracted to women after transition, and people who are attracted to men prior to transition continue to be attracted to men after transition. That means, for example, that a biologic male who is attracted to females will be attracted to females after transitioning, and she may regard herself as a lesbian.

How do transgender people experience their transgender feelings?

Transgender people experience their transgender feelings in a variety of ways. Some can trace their transgender identities or gender-atypical attitudes and behaviors back to their earliest memories. Others become aware of their transgender identities or begin to experience gender-atypical attitudes and behaviors much later in life. Some transgender people accept or embrace their transgender feelings, while others struggle with feelings of shame or confusion. Some transgender people, transsexuals in particular, experience intense dissatisfaction with their birth sex or with the gender role associated with that sex. These individuals often seek sex reassignment.

What should parents do if their child appears to be transgender or gender-atypical?

Parents may be concerned about a child who appears to be gender-atypical for a variety of reasons. Some children express a great deal of distress about their assigned gender roles or the sex of their bodies. Some children experience difficult social interactions with peers and adults because of their gender expression. Parents may become concerned when what they believed to be a "phase" does not seem to pass. Parents of gender-atypical children may need to work with schools and other institutions to address their children's particular needs and to ensure their children's safety. It is often helpful to consult with a mental health professional familiar with gender issues in children to decide how to best address these concerns. In most cases it is not helpful to simply force the child to act in a more gender-typical way. Peer support from other parents of gender variant children may also be helpful.

How do transsexuals transition from one gender to the other?

Transitioning from one gender to another is a complex process. People who transition often start by expressing their preferred gender in situations where they feel safe. They typically work up to living full-time as members of their preferred gender, by making many changes a little at a time.

Gender transition typically involves adopting the appearance of the desired sex through changes in clothing and grooming, adoption of a name typical of the desired sex, change of sex designation on identity docu-

ments, treatment with cross-sex hormones, surgical alteration of secondary sex characteristics to approximate those of the desired sex, and in biological males, removal of facial hair with electrolysis or laser treatments. Finding a qualified mental health professional to provide guidance and referrals to other helping professionals is often an important first step in gender transition. Connecting with other transgender people through peer support groups and transgender community organizations is also very helpful.

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), a professional organization devoted to the treatment of transgender people, publishes *The Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders*, which offers recommendations for the provision of sex reassignment procedures and services.

Is being transgender a mental disorder?

A psychological condition is considered a mental disorder only if it causes distress or disability. Many transgender people do not experience their transgender feelings and traits to be distressing or disabling, which implies that being transgender does not constitute a mental disorder per se. For these people, the significant problem is finding the resources, such as hormone treatment, surgery, and the social support they need, in order to express their gender identity and minimize discrimination. However, some transgender people do find their transgender feelings to be distressing or disabling. This is particularly true of transsexuals, who experience their gender identity as incongruent with their birth sex or with the gender role associated with that sex. This distressing feeling of incongruity is called *gender dysphoria*.

According to the diagnostic standards of American psychiatry, as set forth in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, people who experience intense, persistent gender dysphoria can be given the diagnosis of *Gender Identity Disorder*. This diagnosis is highly controversial among some mental health professionals and transgender people. Some contend that the diagnosis inappropriately pathologizes gender variance and should be eliminated. Others argue that, because the health care system in the United States requires a diagnosis to justify medical or psychological treatment, it is essential to retain the diagnosis to ensure access to care.

What kinds of mental health problems do transgender people face?

Transgender people experience the same kinds of mental health problems that nontransgender people do. However, the stigma, discrimination, and internal conflict that many transgender people experience may place them at increased risk for certain mental health problems. Discrimination, lack of social support, and inadequate access to care can exacerbate mental health problems in transgender people, while support from

peers, family, and helping professionals may act as protective factors.

What kinds of discrimination do transgender people face?

Antidiscrimination laws in most U.S. cities and states do not protect transgender people from discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression.

Consequently, transgender people in most cities and states can be denied housing or employment, lose custody of their children, or have difficulty achieving legal recognition of their marriages, solely because they are transgender. Many transgender people are the targets of hate crimes. The widespread nature of discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression can cause transgender people to feel unsafe or ashamed, even when they are not directly victimized.

How can I be supportive of transgender family members, friends, or significant others?

- Educate yourself about transgender issues.
- Be aware of your attitudes concerning people with gender-atypical appearance or behavior.
- Use names and pronouns that are appropriate to the person's gender presentation and identity; if in doubt, ask their preference.
- Don't make assumptions about transgender people's sexual orientation, desire for surgical or hormonal treatment, or other aspects of their identity or transition plans. If you have a reason to need to know, ask.
- Don't confuse gender dysphoria with gender expression: Gender-dysphoric males may not always appear stereotypically feminine, and not all gender-variant men are gender-dysphoric; gender-dysphoric females

may not always appear stereotypically masculine, and not all gender-variant women are gender-dysphoric.

- Keep the lines of communication open with the transgender person in your life.
- Get support in processing your own reactions. It can take some time to adjust to seeing someone who is transitioning in a new way. Having someone close to you transition will be an adjustment and can be challenging, especially for partners, parents, and children.
- Seek support in dealing with your feelings. You are not alone. Mental health professionals and support groups for family, friends, and significant others of transgender people can be useful resources.

Where can I find more information about transgender issues?

American Psychological Association

750 First Street, NE
Washington DC, 20002
202-336-5500
lgbc@apa.org (e-mail)
www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/transgender

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc.

World Professional Association of Transgender
1300 South Second Street, Suite 180
Minneapolis, MN 55454
612-624-9397
612-624-9541 (fax)
hbigda@hbigda.org (e-mail)
www.hbigda.org

FTMInternational (FTM means Female-to-Male)

740A 14th St. #216
San Francisco, CA 94114
877-267-1440
info@ftmi.org (e-mail)
www.ftmi.org

Gender Public Advocacy Coalition

1743 Connecticut Ave., NW
Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20009
202-462-6610
gpac@gpac.org (e-mail)
www.gpac.org

National Center for Transgender Equality

1325 Massachusetts Ave., Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
202-903-0112
202-393-2241 (fax)
www.nctequality.org

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Transgender Network (TNET)

1726 M Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202-467-8180
info@pflag.org (e-mail)
www.pflag.org/TNET.tnet.0.html

Sylvia Rivera Law Project

322 8th Avenue
3rd Floor
New York, NY 10001
212-337-8550
212-337-1972 (fax)
www.srlp.org

Transgender Law Center

870 Market Street
Room 823
San Francisco, CA 94102
415-865-0176
info@transgenderlawcenter.org (e-mail)
www.transgenderlawcenter.org



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