

So what is it like to be transgender?

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Transsexual, Intersex and Two-Spirit individuals are members of our Transgender community with specific needs and options. Additional online support is available for people who claim these unique identities as their own. Please see the following documents: “What does it mean to be Transsexual?”, “What does it mean to be Two-Spirit” and “What does it mean to be Intersex?”

What does it mean to be transgender?

Gender-identity, like sexual orientation, is a state of being, not a conscious choice. Though western society generally acknowledges only two genders (male and female), certain cultures welcome those who are gendered in-between the male-female continuum, or completely outside the scope of this two-part system.

As transgender people, we experience our gender-identity in one of many non-traditional ways. The word “trans” means to cross or change. In this case, we *cross* socially accepted gender codes through our appearance (dress); behaviours (gender roles); natural biology (neither totally male nor female); or conflict between our internalized gender and biological sex.

How does it feel to be transgender?

Everyone who is transgender experiences a certain amount of discomfort with their gender-identity. When this discomfort is extreme it is called gender dysphoria.

It can be frustrating and scary knowing you’re different but not knowing why. Understanding the nature of that difference can feel both empowering and

frightening at the same time. Many of us live a “closeted” existence for many years, hiding who we are from others and convincing ourselves (or trying to) that our feelings are caused by an over-active imagination. Those of us who realize the importance of expressing our gender identity may live with an intense fear of being discovered. While not everyone may support us, it is important that we accept and respect who we are, irrespective of who we think others wish us to be.

The process of self-discovery is different for everyone. Some of us begin exploring alternate forms of gender expression as early as age three, while others may begin the process much later in life. Many trans people go through a “questioning” or “exploring” phase, trying on different gender roles before deciding which one is best suited for them.

Transgender children express themselves in ways that feel right. They often have no sense of how others may judge them; they follow their natural instincts. Some begin cross-dressing or *transitioning* as pre-schoolers and today, many parents extend a fair amount of *freedom* to these youngsters. However, once they enter school, (and for some, well before), many parents, friends, and educators encourage or nudge trans children toward more socially accepted behaviours.

Many of us remember comments that begin with, “big boys” ... or “young ladies...” We learn very early that girls wear dresses and boys play with trucks and cars; girls wear pink and boys wear blue. Eventually, we may learn how to fit-in, even if it doesn't feel quite right. Though some of us become very good at hiding our true-selves, over time we may become judgmental, (of ourselves and others), lonely (isolated) and frightened that someone will discover our secret. These emotions eventually surface in the form of anxiety, depression and self-doubt.

Puberty can be a critical time for all teenagers, but most especially for trans youth. Young bodies rapidly mature into distinctly male and female forms. Clothing styles emphasize these changes and adolescents develop an awareness of their sexuality. Any discomfort trans youth feel with their gendered appearance will become very apparent to them; it's hard to ignore a body part that is behaving in new and unexpected ways.

Despite becoming aware of this inner turmoil, many continue trying to conform to traditional female or male gender roles. The longer we ignore who we are, the more intense our negative feelings become. It is important to develop healthy coping strategies. Repressed emotions can turn into self-destructive behaviour; we have the potential to become our own worst enemy!

If you recognize your need to incorporate some level of trans-gender behaviour into your life, remember that you are normal; do not be ashamed. Though it may be scary to recognize that you are different; it can also be wonderful! Not everyone knows exactly what it will take to feel comfortable in their own skin;

most don't know until they arrive. It is normal to feel nervous, apprehensive, and concerned, but remember, how you wish to proceed is completely up to you. Take things at your own pace.

Accepting yourself is very important to the quality of life you can expect. Some of us are happy expressing ourselves in private, while others may need to do so at certain times, permanently, in everyday life. Whatever feels natural to you is the way you were meant to be. No one can tell you who you are; you are the only one who knows and your place in the world is just as important as anyone else's.

Gender-queer and other gender variant identities

Regardless of how we look on the outside, no one can really know how we feel on the inside. There are many ways to express gender and though people may appear to be expressing a common identity, each person is motivated by a unique sense of self. In the trans community, we try to respect everyone's right to self-identify. As such, trans people may ascribe to a wide range of distinct gender-identities, which include an even wider range of ways to express their individuality. Don't feel pressured to label yourself; for many it takes time to explore the full scope of their transgender identity, and still others prefer not to label themselves at all.

Transgenderist

Transgenderist is a word that has shifted meanings several times over the years. It once referred only to those who live full-time in the gender role opposite to their birth assignment, but for personal reasons does not undergo gender reassignment surgery (GRS). Today, many use the word to mean anyone who has feelings or expresses behaviours consistent with someone of the opposite sex, but others still adhere to the original definition

Androgyne

Androgyne (pronounced andro-jine) is a term used to describe people who experience themselves as both male and female or neither. Broken down, the word literally means male (andro) female (gyne). Androgynes are sometimes called gender-queers and they are thought to make up the vast majority of transgender identities. People who dress in unisex or gender-neutral styles may be considered androgynous, but they are not necessarily androgynes. Remember, forms of gender expression can appear similar, but the internal motivation behind the behaviour may be completely different. Gender-identity is a state of being; it is not a choice or a mood. While most people may accept that certain aspects of their personalities contrast their core-gender, androgynes must express the full scope of their identity in order to feel grounded in who they are.

Androgynes include people who identify as third or fourth genders (male bodied and female bodied androgynes), bi-gendered, two-spirits, gender-outlaws and

others who may also identify as intersex, transgenderists, butch, femme or cross-dressers.

Cross-dressers

Most cross-dressers are heterosexual men with only 5 to 10% identifying as gay or bisexual. Gay male cross-dressers sometimes identify as “drag-queens” or “gay drag”. “Drag”, meaning “**dressed-as-a-girl**”, was once used exclusively to refer to males, however now the term is also used by cross-dressing females, (drag-kings).

Unlike drag-queens, drag-kings represent a broad spectrum of gender-identities and sexual orientations. All are female-bodied, many of whom are lesbian performance artists or belonging to the lesbian sub-culture. Not all drag-kings are lesbian; some are bisexual or heterosexual women who sometimes feel the need to express a masculine side of who they are.

“Butch-lesbians” are female-bodied cross-dressers who are fairly consistent in their masculine appearance; they do not typically present a femme side of their identity. In time, some butch-lesbians and drag-kings proceed to identify as transmen or female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals.

Many who cross-dress, do so in private. It can be an effective way to relieve the stress of gender discomfort or dysphoria. Cross-dressers usually have no interest in changing their physical-sex, or the way in which they interact with people on a daily basis. However, while cross-dressed, they wish to be treated according to the gender they are expressing. This includes the use of gender appropriate pronouns and social etiquette when interacting with them.

Transsexual

A transsexual is a person whose (internalized) gender-identity is opposite to their anatomical sex at birth. Transsexuals sometimes alter their bodies with hormone therapy and /or gender reassignment surgery (GRS) to harmonize their physical bodies with their internal reality.

There are three categories of transsexuals:

Non-operative (“non -op”): People who either do not want, cannot afford, or for health reasons cannot risk SRS to change their primary sex characteristics. They may or may not take hormones of the opposite gender to alter their secondary sex characteristics.

Pre-operative (“pre -op”): People who are preparing for but have not had SRS. This term covers people from the time they have begun the process of reassignment to the time just before the actual surgery.

Post-operative (“post -op”): People who have undergone SRS and continue to take hormones, often for the rest of their lives. These people may identify as

male, female, female-to-male (FTM) transsexual or “transmen,” male-to-female (MTF) transsexual or “transwomen,” etc.

Intersex

“Intersex” refers to a series of medical conditions in which a child's genetic sex (chromosomes) and phenotypic sex (genital appearance) do not match, or are somehow different from the “standard” male or female.

Approximately one in 2,000 babies are born visibly intersexed, while some others are detected later. The current medical protocol calls for the surgical “reconstruction” of these different but healthy bodies to make them “normal,” but this practice has become increasingly controversial as adults who went through the treatment report being physically, emotionally, and sexually harmed by such procedures.

The term “hermaphrodite” is commonly heard in our society and widely used in the medical profession, but some intersex people find the term misleading and stigmatizing.

Sexual Orientation

Trans people can and do experience healthy romantic relationships. Gender-identity describes how we see ourselves as male or female, something in between or something outside the two-gender spectrum. It does not drive our romantic attractions towards others. We use the same labels as anyone else to describe our sexual orientation: heterosexual (straight), gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, questioning or queer.

When we talk about sexual orientation, we use a trans person's gender-identity as the anchor, just as we would with people whose gender is aligned (or congruent) with their biological sex. This may sound confusing but try to think of it this way: we are not our body; we are our mind and spirit. Our body is just a physical tool of our psychological will. If we lost a limb - an arm or a leg - it would not change who we are, just how we achieve our goals. Altering our body does not change our sexual orientation; if that were true, many forms of elective surgery would come under intense scrutiny.

A male cross-dresser who is attracted to women is considered straight, because his core (gender) identity is male, but a born female-bodied transman who is attracted to men is considered gay, because his core identity is male; with or without a penis. If you are questioning your sexual orientation, you may find it easier to sort through your feelings after gaining better control over your gender-dysphoria. Depression can easily affect how one experiences their sexuality and if you are just beginning to learn how sexual-identity is put-together, you may not fully understand sexual orientation and gender-identity as separate components.

From questioning to knowing

Arriving at a place of *understanding* our gender-identity is one of those moments many of us never forget. That initial wave of *knowing* can bring our first true sense of peace with how we see ourselves. Since you are reading this material, quite likely you've already come-out to yourself. Congratulations, you've taken a big step forward! This marks the end of an exhausting and perhaps emotionally draining period of *questioning*.

Coming-out to ourselves does not mean we're ready to come-out to others. Many of us need time to learn what it means to be transgender and to figure out how, or if we should to come-out to friends and family members. Of course, gender is not as easily hidden as sexual orientation. We may not be consciously aware of the outward and obvious ways we communicate our gender to others (behaviour, clothes, hair, etc.). Even if our core-identity matches our anatomy, loved-ones may still interpret cues we don't realize we're sending. Still, they may not be ready to hear the news and you may not be ready to tell them. Only you can decide if and when the time is right.

Common Questions & Concerns of Trans Youth:

Am I normal?

Am I sure? Am I imagining my feelings?

How did I get this way?

Is there something wrong with me?

What did I do to deserve this?

If my parents kick me out, where will I go?

How can I hide it?

Does God really disapprove?

Maybe I'm just gay!

Will I be like the trans people that others criticize? (stereotypes)

Genderism is the belief that there are (and should only be) two possible gender types; we all fit one or the other, but not both. Unfortunately, this mindset is common and it promotes attitudes and practices that discriminate against people who cannot fit this mould. Genderism is a lot like *heterosexism*; they are both vehicles that allow the majority population to assume an elevated position within society. This "higher" position has been largely maintained by false accusations of moral and ethical misconduct. Though progress is slow, society is becoming better educated and old prejudices are losing credibility.

You will most certainly face challenges however; the courts are on your side. Canada has taken a progressive approach to equal rights for sexual minorities

and mainstream attitudes are improving. Still, the challenge for us to live openly can seem daunting.

Not every one deals with their gender-identity during childhood or adolescence. Some may not be in-tune with their feelings while others may be able to manage their dysphoria until much later in life. Most people are capable of ignoring or managing certain emotions temporarily, but very few can do it forever. Those who try often suffer in many ways, (physical and emotional health, inter-personal relationships, inability to achieve goals, etc.). Regardless of how good we are at pretending, our true nature will always surface.

Common Questions and Concerns of Trans Adults:

- 1) Why me?
- 2) How will this affect my children/spouse? Will they accept me...forgive me?
- 3) Will my parents, brothers, sisters and/or other family members stop speaking with me?
- 4) What about divorce? Will my spouse want one? Do I want one? How messy can things get?
- 5) Will I lose my job? Will I have trouble advancing in my profession?
- 6) How will others speak of me?
- 7) I know very little about the trans community and what I do know doesn't feel comfortable. Perhaps I'm wrong!
- 8) Am I going to hell?

There are thirty-eight recognized transgender identities and then there are some who claim no identity label at all. The key to happiness lies in accepting *who you are* and in taking care of how you are; not in labelling what you are. Self-identification may seem important, especially when you are just beginning to explore the different possibilities within the gender spectrum. For some, finding a label means validating their *experience*. Remember, the label you choose today may not be the one that's right tomorrow. Open your heart and mind to all that you are and you will emerge with a deeper, more satisfying sense of self; this is far more important than anything mere words can provide.

We are completely normal

Being trans is a normal human reality that has been recorded in many different cultures throughout history. There are even several species of non-human organisms that literally change their sex at will depending on their environment. Nobody is 100% female, or 100% male; we are a combination of both in varying degrees.

All living things (human beings, animals, plants, fish, etc.) appear in nature with a wide range of naturally occurring variations. Human beings vary in skin colour,

height, the ability to reproduce, strength, weight, left or right-handedness, intelligence, and in all aspects of biology. Just as society would normally expect that some of us have red hair, are left-handed, or have blue eyes, it is normal to expect that some of us will be transgender.

You will encounter people, who do not understand or feel comfortable around you, but you are completely normal and living openly may be vital to living a full and healthy life. Society is becoming more accepting and greater numbers of trans people are living in the open. It is important for you to establish a network of people who accept and respect you for who you are. Many of us have been in a place where this seems nearly impossible, but have faith, believe in who you are and do not give up! The world is full of people who respect members of the transgender community. Eventually you will meet some of them and educate others just through being yourself.

Being trans is just one component in the mix of who we are as individual people. There is a wonderful diversity that can be seen in all forms of human behaviour. Whether we are talking about sexual orientation, gender-identity, culture, or personality; the spectrum of human expression ensures that no two people are alike. When we consider gender expression (gender roles or behaviour), it is easier to identify the ways we choose to express our gender-identity. Some men (trans or not) can appear to be more masculine than others; whereas others (trans or not) feel more comfortable adopting female mannerisms into their everyday lives. The gender spectrum encompasses a wide range of possibilities, from the very feminine to the very masculine, but these behaviours do not define our existence. They are simply one part of our unique state of being.

Anyone can be trans; people you pass on the street, the teacher at your high school, your boss, the cashier at the grocery store, the guitar player in your favourite band, even a top scientist at NASA (in fact there is)! Chances are you've met many trans people and didn't even know it. Alongside our gender identity, we are mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends and lovers; real people with lives just like anyone else.

How did I become transgender?

While no one knows for sure, scientists believe gender-identity may be *“much less a matter of choice and much more a matter of biology.”* (Coolidge et al., 2000). Trans identities may develop when a fetus is subjected to sex hormones that are opposite to the designated birth-sex of the child, or perhaps through some spontaneous genetic mutation. While it may be hard to say *why* we are trans, it is much easier to *know* that we *are*. You may find that in time, being transgender will become easier to discuss and sharing your story may help not only you, but others as well.

Safely, in-the-closet

Many of us keep our fears and self-doubts private while we are questioning, but *lack of understanding* is just one reason for keeping our gender-identity private. This period of secrecy is called living “in-the-closet”.

There is nothing wrong with choosing to keep your trans-identity private; just remember, if you are struggling emotionally, you don't have to go through it alone. Consider sharing the news with someone you trust. If you tell a friend, be aware that you might not (truly) know their attitudes towards transgender people. It may be best to test their reaction before telling them outright. Mention that you have a cousin or other family member who might be trans, or comment on something you read about transgender people then watch for their reaction. Another idea is to speak with someone who is expected to respect your privacy: a doctor, counsellor or supportive member of clergy.

Some people must rely on the safety of the closet. Not all school or work environments are safe. If you feel it is important to remain “closeted”, tell yourself it is temporary; a means of survival. The closet may be safe, but it is not healthy. It will deprive you of your right to live freely and it will impose undue stress, possibly eroding your self-esteem. If you must stay there for now, begin thinking of when it might be safe to “come-out”.

Ways We Remain Closeted

- 1) *Withdrawing from friends and family members*
- 2) *Lying to explain our behaviour or activities*
- 3) *Concealing items that could offer a hint*
- 4) *Dressing and acting in ways to draw less attention*

Coming-out & self-acceptance

Coming-out to ourselves is an important first step on the road to self-acceptance. It signifies that we accept there is something different about who we are - and we're prepared to ask the questions that will bring us a deeper understanding of that difference. Coming-out to ourselves makes it very difficult to return to a place of self-denial. We have made an important decision to accept the present and look to the future, come what may!

Self-acceptance is vital to our sense of well-being. To live healthy, productive lives we must let go of any internal transphobia (fear of ourselves) that could limit our ability to tap into our fullest potential as human beings. We must also love ourselves before we can love anyone else; otherwise we are likely to burden them with the negative feelings associated with our personal struggle. Achieving full self-acceptance can be a life-long journey, but some of us are able to set aside the important issues at an early age.

Trans people all have some degree of *gender dysphoria*. This unease or discomfort with our assigned gender can put us on a roller coaster of emotion, depending on the severity of the dysphoria. All trans people need to engage in some degree of *trans-gender* behaviour to achieve inner peace. This is similar to the way men who are definitively masculine will feel most comfortable adhering to rigid male gender roles. The amount of trans behaviour will depend on the intensity of our dysphoria; the greater the discomfort, the more we may need to live in the identity that is typically hidden and suppressed.

Some of us come-out to others and to ourselves at the same time. Perhaps they've commented after reading us through our mannerisms, or caught us experimenting with clothes or make-up. It is not easy to explain behaviour that we barely understand ourselves.

If you are forced-out because a loved-one has discovered you, remain calm. Be as open and honest about your feelings as possible. Explain that you are still trying to figure out this aspect of your identity, but you know that it's an important part of who you are. Some of us take risks to increase the chance of being discovered because subconsciously, we wish to come-out but don't know how. Sometimes this situation creates problems we aren't prepared to deal with. Organizations like PFLAG Canada and other support groups within the Rainbow Community can help; you do not have to go through this difficult period alone.

We come-out to others for many reasons: to openly acknowledge who we are, to cease living in secrecy and to share an important piece of our lives with those who matter most to us. We do not come-out to hurt anyone, even if we disclose the information in anger.

Five Stages of Coming-Out to Self

1) Self-awareness and acknowledgement

- Individuals are still questioning
- Obtaining information, looking for answers

2) Telling others

- We often tell a close friend first
- If we are young adults, a trusted adult is often next; possibly a parent
- Negative experiences can send us back to Stage 1
- We might begin questioning trans or gay/lesbian/bi stereotypes to decide who we are in relation to what we know (or have heard) about transgender people

3) Reaching out to other transgender people, gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women

- Begin searching for people who are similar
- Connecting with the local trans and gay, lesbian, bisexual community

- 4) Forming healthy relationships with people who accept us as trans
- 5) Complete self-acceptance
 - Open, not defensive, content with ourselves
 - Willing & able to help others

Accepting your gender-identity can provide you with enormous relief, boosting your self-confidence and providing you with a better understanding of who you are. Still, we face issues that most others will never experience. Society presents many challenges that we must rise above in order to live happy and productive lives (i.e., discrimination, prejudice, negative attitudes). These confrontations make life more difficult however, people are beginning to speak more openly about transgender issues and many of these battles are being fought and won.

Being different can be a gift

In learning to accept who we are, there may be times that we wish we could be *just like everyone else*. Being different is not a bad thing; it's just *different*. Many who are cisgender (physically matching their gender assignment) struggle with their individuality for any number of reasons; everyone faces their own personal challenges in life. Being trans means that we will inevitably come to understand gender better than most and through our unique perspective and ability to persevere, we may well become teachers and role models for many others. Value who you are, you have the gift of difference!

Historically, some cultures held trans people in high esteem because we were thought to possess both male and female spirits. Among First Nations cultures, we became the spiritual guides, healers, and people of power.

Today, we are more likely to feel vilified than valued, but the more accepting you are of yourself, the more likely others will be too. Transgender identities are not well understood by the general public and this will not change anytime soon. The trick is to help people see past our gender label; let them know the person within. All minorities face this challenge; in this we are no different because we are trans.

Coming-out to loved-ones

Things to Consider Before Telling your Parents, Spouse and Children

Sharing your feelings with others is a very private and personal choice. As much as we feel the desire to live naturally, many of us worry about what others may think. We can be patient, while our loved ones adjust to the news, but we cannot return to a place of denying who we are, no matter how difficult it may be for them to understand.

Not everyone will accept you. Trans people have been the targets of violence in schools, workplace environments, in public and even at home, but no matter how people react, **you do not deserve to be mistreated or abused.**

Not everyone chooses to tell their friends and family members; for some there is no real value in doing so (single, heterosexual cross-dressers who express themselves in private).

If you decide to transition gender roles, you will find that you need to disclose your plans with many others (i.e., school administration, place of employment). Take some time to think about how this will affect these areas of your life, and what reactions you might expect from others. Having a sense of what might happen will give you a chance to prepare. Remember, there is nothing wrong with being trans, but you may have to fight for your rights.

When you are ready to tell family members, it is better to discuss your feelings with an honest and open discussion, rather than sending subtle, cryptic clues. *How we tell loved-ones can have a lasting impact on our relationship.* Understand that their transition may be long and difficult and your ability to be open will help them down a path that you forged so long ago. Though we may be accustomed to learning from our parents (or guardians), when it comes to our gender conflict, they will look to us to teach them. It will help if you are well prepared. Surround yourself with as much information, knowledge, and support as you possibly can. Do not expect acceptance and understanding right away. Be patient; your family probably had a vision of how your life would unfold. They may need to grieve the loss of those expectations before they can develop a healthy new reality.

Many parents go through an adjustment period that can include denial, fear, guilt, anger, understanding, and quite often, genuine acceptance. This won't happen overnight, and for some, it may never happen, you must be ready to accept this possibility. Let them know that they are not alone. There are many support groups available for parents to speak with should they decide this is right for them. Sometimes you'll have to encourage them to do this, but don't pressure them. Like you, they have to go through this journey at their own pace. No one can predict exactly how their loved ones will react, so it's always best to be prepared for everything.

Take Stock, Check Your List

Before coming-out to important friends and loved-ones, it is a good idea to consider how they might react and how that could impact on your ability to cope. What are your motives for coming-out? Will coming-out improve your situation? Are you doing so to avoid being discovered?

Think carefully about your goals. If you are looking for support, it may not be the right time to come-out to those who will need you to support them. Many trans

people seek the advice of a counsellor who can also assist their family members, if necessary. It is difficult to predict exactly what will happen, but you may have some reasonable expectations to draw from. Here is a list of things to consider before coming-out to a loved one:

Coming-out Check List

- 1) Why now? What are my reasons for coming-out?
- 2) Have I spoken with a counsellor and/or have I adequately informed myself?
- 3) Am I prepared for rejection?
- 4) Who else will automatically become informed?
- 5) What are his or her attitudes towards trans people?
- 6) What am I going to say?
- 7) Do I have support?
- 8) Can I give him or her time to adjust?
- 9) Can I teach and support them?
- 10) How will this ultimately help me?

General Tips for Coming-out

You may be very nervous about telling family members that you are trans, but here are a few strategies that can help you decide what to say and when to say it:

- 1) Don't be rushed, timing is important. Try to pick a quiet time of the day that will allow everyone who is involved to focus on the discussion and any questions that follow
- 2) Tell them there is something you feel they ought to know. This says that you are making a deliberate effort to share important news
- 3) Keep your opening statements brief. If you want to start with, "For a long time, I have felt..." or any other lead-in, keep it to two sentences – or less! The anticipation may be worse than actually hearing the news
- 4) Be clear and direct. Say the words, "I am transgendered." Ask them if they know what that means and explain it as it applies to you. Tell them you have felt this way for a long time; this is your reality, not your opinion. Talk about your journey. Share some of the insights you have gained either through research or with the help of a counsellor. Tell them if you are planning to fully transition gender roles, including whether or not you are considering hormone therapy or GRS. If you are telling young children, read the section on "*Coming-out to your Dependant Children*"

- 5) Remind them of what hasn't changed, (i.e. your basic personality, talents, abilities and feelings for them)
- 6) Explain that you must acknowledge these qualities in yourself. It is simply your natural way to be. You were born trans, these feelings did not grow out of an idea or external influence
- 7) If they react poorly tell them you understand that this information is difficult to hear
- 8) Explain that it has taken you a lot of time to understand it yourself, so you realize that it will take them some time too
- 9) Try to answer their questions, but tell them you may not have all the answers

If the exchange goes poorly, don't fret. It doesn't mean they will never accept you. They may just need time to absorb the news and think about what it means to your relationship.

Coming-out to parents

The relationship we have with our mother and father can affect us at every stage of life. When we are young, it is very difficult to separate how they feel about us from how we feel about ourselves. As we age, their opinions seem to matter less and yet, there is a place in our hearts that yearns to know that they accept us for who we are. Fortunately, most parents do accept their transgender children.

Here is a list of common fears people experience before coming-out to their parents:

Young adults may wonder:

- 1) How will my parents react? (anger, tears, etc.)
- 2) Will they stop loving me?
- 3) Will they think I'm abnormal? (sick, a freak, stupid)
- 4) Will they think I'm confused? (too young to know, misguided, influenced by someone else)
- 5) Will they throw me out of the house?
- 6) Will they withdraw their financial support? (university tuition, food, clothes, shelter)
- 7) Will our home life become unbearable?

Adult children may wonder:

- 1) Will I lose my relationship with my parents? (cease talking, visiting)

- 2) How will they judge me? Will they ever accept me?
- 3) How will they speak of me with other family members? (brothers, sisters, grandparents, my partner or children)
- 4) Will they blame themselves? (We often wish we could protect our parents)

Young adults may put-off telling parents until they become independent. Older adults may try to shelter their aging parents, or avoid telling them altogether. The fear of losing important relationships and hurting the people we love can create a vast emotional separation between them and us. Coming-out is the first step toward living the life that was meant for us. It means we're no longer walking our path alone; we are inviting others to walk with us. Coming-out means we are able to form deeper and more meaningful connections with others however, it's a risk that we should take only when we're ready.

Parents must also come-out

Parents have difficulty accepting things they don't understand about their children. Initially, some parents reject the idea their child is trans rather than face the fears they associate with the truth. Parents can experience a coming-out process of their own. There is an important purpose to this experience: it forces them to take stock of everything they think is relevant to the situation and it provides them with an opportunity to find the answers they seek. At times, it may seem like your parents will never change (their attitudes) and you may wonder if they will ever come to terms with your gender-identity. Try to remember, they are not standing still; they are moving through this transition in the only way they know how. In many ways, their experience mirrors the stages of grief. They must grieve the loss of the life they expected for you, so they can make room for a new vision - one that truly reflects who you are and what will bring you happiness in life. One day this will likely make sense to them, even if it does not seem possible right now. Give them time to grow as people - and as parents!

Five Stages of Coming-out for Parents

1) Shock

- Shock may last anywhere from a few minutes to several weeks
- Parents may think that you have changed, it will take them some time to realize this is not true
- Although some parents suspect, hearing the words can still feel like a "jolt" to the senses

2) Denial

- They may cry, it's better if they express these emotions even though it is difficult to watch them in their pain

- They may tell you you're confused. Don't get angry, some parents need to consider this possibility. Remain calm, but assure them you know your own feelings
- They may think a psychologist or psychiatrist can help. If you have not seen a counsellor, it may be a good idea, but not for the reasons your parents might have in mind. Counselling can be useful for anyone who is learning to understand and accept gender diversity. This includes you, your parents, your spouse and/or any other family members.

The role of a mental health professional is outlined on page 6 of **The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association's Standard's of Care for Gender Identity Disorders (click)**. If you plan to fully transition gender roles, you will have to seek advice from such an individual

- It's okay if at first, they do not wish to discuss it. Parents sometimes need time and space to sort through complex realities concerning their children. Try not to see this behaviour as evasive or pretending the situation does not exist. They will signal you when they are ready to move forward
- Your parents may not be "together" in their attitudes toward transgenderism. Do not play one parent against the other. The key to acceptance is education and all of you may have a lot to learn. Try to respect and support each other's growth

3) Anger and Guilt

- It is normal for parents to feel angry. They might direct it towards you, your friends, your partner or even your other parent. Anger is a demonstration of fear and/or guilt they could be experiencing for any number of reasons. They may wonder...
 - What did I do wrong?
 - Why didn't I see this coming?
 - What else am I going to find out?
 - How long did my child suffer before telling me?
 - How will others react?
 - I am not equipped to handle this.
- They may rethink the pregnancy, looking for answers. Any possible answer might convince them this could have been prevented – or still could be fixed. They have done nothing wrong and there is nothing to fix. Trans people have always existed (and will always exist). It's completely natural and expected that a portion of the population will not be completely align with their gender assignment at birth

- Single parents can experience a greater sense of guilt if they believe their children are disadvantaged in any way. Single parents do not raise more trans children than coupled parents
- Remind them, no one is to blame; you can and will have the life of your choosing. It will not unfold exactly as they once thought; it will simply be different

4) Making Decisions - Three Possible Routes:

Once they've had time to fully absorb the news, they will begin redefining their sense of who you are and who you are becoming. Everything they've learned up to this point will be called into play as they add this new layer to the day-to-day interaction they have with you. The parent-child relationship usually takes one of the following paths:

- Supportive: When parents focus on their child's well-being, many other issues become relatively unimportant. This doesn't mean parents now understand what it means to be trans, or that they accept the idea. It means that whatever obstacles lay ahead, the health and welfare of their child is of the utmost importance. Such families have an excellent chance of nurturing a healthy attitude in all family members.
- In young families, supportive parents set the tone for younger siblings. In older families, they can have a positive impact on members of the extended family. Individually, these parents are open to learning and they don't mind searching for information on their own. Supportive parents tend to be supportive partners; they are likely to help each other along the way.
- Resigned or Conditionally Supportive: Parents who tolerate their trans children often see themselves as *accepting* because they remain on speaking terms and continue to support their child in other ways. These parents create uncomfortable conditions by imposing restrictions or using sarcasm to communicate their discomfort. Some parents pressure their child to keep any cross-gender behaviour private; they may use insensitive remarks to impose their will. Adult children will spend as little time as possible with their parents; trans adolescents often keep all details of their life private. Children living in these homes are often afraid their parents will ask them to leave, or cut off any financial support for post-secondary education.
- Unsupportive or Judgmental: Parents who do not support their trans children not only lose a vital connection that is important to their own well-being, they make it more difficult for their children to transition into a healthy adult life. Some of these parents lose the respect of other family members who support the transgender individual. Parents may withdraw into a "closet" of their own by avoiding social interaction with friends and family members.

5) Acceptance

A truly accepting parent would rather change society than change their child. Not all of them get this far; many remain supportive but privately wish their child would change. Coming-out for parents, means not only accepting their child, but also themselves as parents of someone who is trans. They probably won't share the news with everyone you know, but they will no longer hide it. Your transgender-identity will not feel like such a burden to them; they will recognize it as a gift, part of the unique package that makes you who you are.

More on Coming-out to Parents

Coming-out to Family (click)

Transgender Café

Coming-out Trans to your Parents and Family (click)

By Mary Boenke, 2003. PFLAG (USA) Transgender Network

Coming-out to your partner or spouse

The decision to come-out to your spouse or partner may cause you a great deal of anxiety, but it indicates your absolute need to face these fears in order to move forward with your life. Whether you feel empowered or defeated, this choice comes from a place of strength and courage and these qualities will help see you through any difficulties that lie ahead. There is nothing wrong with who you are, or in your desire to live in the way that is right for you.

Many people are able to accept their transgender partners and couples frequently report a deeper more fulfilling relationship, following a period of adjustment. Still for partners, coming-out is not only about accepting a broader definition of *who you are*, but possibly, *who they are* in relation to you. If you plan to permanently transition gender roles, partners must consider how this may affect their status within the relationship; a heterosexual couple may be perceived as lesbian or gay, a same-sex couple will appear heterosexual. Do you have children? How will this affect your family dynamic? Finally, don't assume that an unsupportive partner won't adjust, or that a supportive partner won't experience a certain amount of doubt. Couples who wish to remain together can find solutions, but it takes time so be patient. It is also important that you respect your partner's need to *accept* in their own time.

Depending on his or her reaction, telling them may mean sharing the news with everyone who is important to you, all at the same time: parents, siblings, in-laws, children, married friends and possibly work colleagues. You may be forced to face issues that are difficult enough all on their own: marriage breakdown, relocation, isolation, rejection and questions about your emotional stability or fitness as a parent. Though you are right to hope for the best, it would not hurt to prepare for the unexpected.

Here are some tips that may help:

1) **Tell someone who will support you.**

Do not attempt to handle this situation alone. Tell a friend, sibling, attend a support group like PFLAG or discuss your situation with a professional counsellor. You will need someone who is willing to listen.

2) **Try not to rely on your partner or spouse for support.**

He or she will require support for their own emotional well-being; it is not fair to place any additional expectations on him or her.

3) **Be clear and honest in answering his or her questions.**

Your spouse may accuse you of concealing your gender issues. If you wish, explain how you made your choices. Be honest and speak from your heart. People do not typically manipulate their gender issues to trap or hurt others; they do it to hide from themselves and to gain acceptance from the people they value. People make choices that seem right to them - based on everything they know in that moment. It only makes sense; who would consciously choose such a painful outcome? If you believe that marriage was the right decision for you at the time, say so – and try to be okay with that. Coming-out is a process; we know who we are, when we know who we are – and not a moment sooner. Your honesty will help set the tone for all future dealings, even if your spouse does not like your answers.

4) **Safeguard yourself and your family.**

Do not accept verbal or physical assault from your spouse: leave, call a friend or contact the police if necessary. Your spouse may become very emotional; make sure you protect your personal safety. If you must leave, call someone who can tend to your spouse. You may be emotionally upset yourself, so it may be wise to plan for your spouse's reaction. Do not leave young children in the care of anyone who is emotionally distraught. Arrange for someone to look after them so that you and your partner can focus on your discussion.

5) **Apologize if you have mistreated him or her in anyway.**

As people who struggle with our unique differences, we sometimes shut-out those we love as a means of dealing with our inner confusion and self-doubt. If you have mistreated your partner in any way, apologize and let them know it was not their fault. Explain that you were not rejecting them, but rather a “way of being” that does not represent who you truly are. You may feel consumed by guilt or shame. This is a natural reaction to a situation no one would choose to experience. It may be difficult to separate the emotional drain of dealing with your gender identity, from the combined anxiety of coming-out to your family. You may require some professional counselling to help you process these emotions.

Five Stages of Acceptance for Spouses or Partners

Everyone processes life changing news in his or her own way, yet many partners and spouses experience a common healing process. Here is a brief overview of some of the thoughts and concerns of people who learn their partner is transgender.

1) Shock & denial, and/or validation of suspicion

How your partner or spouse reacts will depend on the following:

- i) His or her basic personality (emotional well-being, ability to cope)
- ii) The type of relationship you share (healthy & supportive vs. dysfunctional & abusive)
- iii) How he or she perceives you as an individual (reliable & honest vs. self-centred & manipulative)
- iv) How he or she perceives or define themselves in relation to you and your relationship
- v) How he or she sees this news changing their life

Your partner may express anger or grief, even if they already suspected you were trans. Often, people have a fair sense of the truth, but choose to dismiss it as part of their imagination. If this is the case, he or she will have an easier time comprehending the situation, even if their initial reaction is explosive.

Not everyone reacts with anger. Some may feel very sad, wondering what will become of the marriage. Others may be relieved, having suspected for a long time. If you've ever shared the possibility that you might be trans, your partner or spouse may have lived several years with a certain amount of anticipation. While your news may not be welcome, at least he or she will feel secure in what they know.

Your partner may not understand gender as something that is separate from sexual orientation. You may have to explain this several times and in different ways before they fully comprehend. Try to be patient; they may be just trying to make sense of it all, or they may be measuring their insecurities against your broader understanding.

2) Reacting to the news

Your partner may fall into a period of emotional turmoil marked by anger and self-doubt. He or she may question whether your relationship was real, or if it was just a smoke-screen for you to hide behind. They may ask themselves, "Why didn't I see this coming?" or "Why now? Did I do something to cause this?"

Spouses and partners can dwell on past experiences that could have provided "clues". You may be called to answer for the past in many ways. If you are comfortable with responding to such inquiries, do so in a limited capacity. Don't make it a habit to measure past events, it's not productive

dialogue and it can even do more harm than good. Most of these queries are really just one question: “Is our life together real?” Explain that your life is indeed real, you have merely grown into a fuller understanding of who you are, but this does not render your feelings or the past invalid. If your partner is still confusing gender-identity with sexual orientation, you will need to re-explain yourself. Explain that you are basically the same person you’ve always been; only now you are outwardly expressing your inward reality.

When you are both ready, allow your partner to see how you express gender. While you are transitioning, talk about how you became aware of your feelings and what it means to express yourself in this way. Discuss any identity labels you may have explored and why you chose to accept or reject them. Remain sensitive to their comfort level and ask them to let you know when they’ve heard or seen enough. Not everyone is open to seeing their trans spouse in cross-gender clothing.

It is better that all important information comes forward, so there will be no surprises to undermine any trust that can be rebuilt. Trust is very important, regardless of whether you stay together or divorce.

3) Making decisions

Once your spouse understands what will change (and what will remain the same), he or she may be able to proceed with making decisions about the future. If you share any common desire to continue your relationship, you may begin deliberating the issues that will affect how you will function as a couple (i.e. honesty, openness, telling friends and family members, sharing clothing or other items, etc.). If you plan to separate, your partner may be ready to consider issues relevant to the division of property, or the care of minor children. Making decisions does not mean your partner is no longer upset or confused; it means he or she is ready to move forward with the decisions involving you. They may still face a great deal of personal conflict before moving forward individually.

4) New understanding and healing

At some point your partner will realize that you did not *just* become trans; you have been this way your whole life. He or she may begin to understand that each of you has come to this relationship from different realities. This awareness may shed new light on the current situation, perhaps allowing them to reclaim part of their identity and self-confidence.

5) Moving forward with life

When your partner is ready to take positive steps in charting a new path for themselves, or in a more clearly defined relationship with you, you will know they have made their transition. Some partners or spouses can adapt in a relatively short period of time; others may require years, but they cannot truly move forward without letting go of past assumptions.

Adapted from the Straight Spouses Network

Additional Resources for Spouses and Partners

[Straight Spouses Network \(click\)](#)

[TransFamily – Support for Spouses and Partners \(click\)](#)

TransFamily is a support group for transgendered and transsexual people, their parents, partners, children, other family members, friends, and supportive others

Coming-out to your dependant children

If your children will see you expressing yourself as transgender, coming-out is vital to their emotional well-being. It is never too soon to tell them, but make sure you are in a good place emotionally before sharing the news. Children tend to be well-tuned to the emotional message that flows with their parents' words. They can sense your fear or emotional distress. If any discord in their home environment has put them on edge, knowing the truth may set them at ease. It is best that they hear the news from you, rather than anyone else.

If you see a counsellor, it would be wise to discuss your decision before telling your dependant children that you are transgender. Knowing your situation, he or she may be able to help you come up with an effective strategy for opening a dialogue with your children. Realize, this will be the first conversation in an ongoing dialogue; talking to your children about being transgender is not a one-time event. As they mature, so will their questions and at some point they will feel the burden of transphobia; who better to talk to than you?

It is important to consider your reasons for telling your children. How will they benefit from knowing? Why now? Is there a better time to tell them? People who cross-dress in private, or just in the presence of their partner may not need to tell their children. However, many people are motivated to tell by the fear of being discovered. It is far better to explain your gender in an open discussion with your children, but if they discover you cross-dressed, remain calm. It will be difficult to create any ease of dialogue if you react with fear or anger.

If you are able to support each other, you and your spouse/partner may wish to tell your children together. It would be reassuring if they could see you handling the situation as partners. Though children are often resistant to change, it is part of their reality as they learn, grow and mature into adults. Their ability to cope with change (in all forms) is tied to knowing that their parents will love and care for them no matter what life brings.

Many children are able to grasp gender differences by age 4, yet while this may be an ideal age (because they are more likely to accept your explanations and assurances), they may not be able to keep this information private. It is believed that children ages 7 – 11 are the best equipped to handle the news. Adolescents are typically struggling with their own identity issues and trying to understand a transgender parent may complicate their own emotional growth. Teenage boys in

particular, often think that having a trans father means they themselves are likely to be trans or gay.

When your children are ready, let them watch while you transform your appearance. Talk about mannerisms that may be different while you are cross-dressed. Explain that these behaviours have always been part of you, they are just easier to express when you change your appearance.

It may be valuable to take stock of the environment in which you raised your children. As parents, have you promoted the acceptance of difference or are you judgmental of others. Are you accepting of other transgender people? What about those who are gay, lesbian or bisexual? What about people of different races or cultures? Do you live in a diverse community? Are people likely to be open-minded? You may be able to draw-in relevant examples of diversity, but if you live in a closed community, you may choose to emphasize the importance of privacy. Talk to a counsellor about discussing your situation with your children's school/teachers. Once people know you are transgender, your children may become the targets of transphobic bullying. It is important the school know, so they can better protect them.

If you plan to fully transition gender roles, or if your children are struggling to adjust, seek family counselling. Teens may require counselling separate from the family. Encourage your child to speak with people who can help.

Tips on how to come-out to your dependant children

1) Choose a quiet time.

Minimize all distractions and choose a room that is warm and comfortable for them. Their bedroom might be suitable, your bedroom might provide less distraction and allow you to sit at their level. The living room or kitchen might be okay, but make sure there are no physical barriers (such as a table or chair) in the space between you. If your spouse or partner is able, include him or her in the discussion.

2) Tell them you are transgender and talk about what that means; ask them to share what they already know.

Young children may have a short attention span so it may help to keep your explanations brief. Talk about "dressing-up" and how much they enjoy it, either as a game, or for Halloween. Explain that many grown-ups "dress-up" because they feel more comfortable in dress-up clothes than their regular clothes. Some dress-up a lot and others just when they feel like it.

Older children require a more direct approach. Tell them you are transgender. Explain that you have always been this way, even when you were a child. *"Sometimes people who are trans understand what is right for them at a very young age; others might need a very long time to figure it out."*

Talk about ways we communicate *who we are* (moods, behaviours, choices, how we wear our hair, dress, etc.). Explain that sometimes we say or do things that don't *feel right* just **to make other people happy**. Help your children provide examples of this from their own lives (getting dressed up for special occasions, eating food we don't like, not complaining when someone takes our turn, etc). Sometimes we say or do things because we're **afraid of what others think** (lying, pretending to agree when we disagree, agreeing to things we know are bad choices for us, etc.). It is very hard to be someone else when your inner voice is constantly giving advice on how to be you. People who try become sad, frustrated and angry, so it's important to value who you are, no matter what other people think.

Talk about what it's like for you to be transgendered. Talk about how you think of your gender and what term(s) you use to self-identify. Explain what it's like when you cannot express yourself and how you feel when you are cross-dressed.

Older children and teens may already have fixed ideas on what it means to be trans. Ask them what they know and help them to understand fact vs. fiction. You may find yourself re-iterating how this information applies to you. Initiating an open dialogue will set the tone for future conversations.

3) Assure them that you are basically the same.

Tell your children that even though your clothes may look different, you have not changed inside. Your personality is still the same and of course you love them as much as you always have.

4) Be prepared for clarifying questions.

People frame new information with concepts they already understand. It is our way of lending clarity and relevance to new ideas; children are no different in this practice. Their questions may seem a little strange and you might wonder if your message has been lost. Remember, they are absorbing this information through their own filter and they are using *their* realm of experience to give it meaning.

Your children may want to know if you are divorcing their other parent, or how they should address you while you are cross-dressed. They may ask if they will have same-sex parents, or in the case of a same-sex couple, one of each. They may ask about your sexual orientation, or whether transgender identities are inherited. A teenage son will often think having a trans father means he himself is probably gay; you will need to reassure him. With teenage children, you will have to discuss how they should deal with friends. These are important issues for your teenage children and it will help if you have some prepared answers.

5) Let them know there may be some changes ahead.

Explain that your family may experience some changes, but one thing that will never change is how much you and your partner love them. Let them know that as time passes, they may think of new questions and they can always come to you for help. If you plan to fully transition gender roles tell them what they can expect. Explain that people may ask questions or make comments that are insensitive. Tell them they do not have to answer for you; it's not their responsibility to explain things to other people and you will look after telling those who are most important (teachers, doctors, etc.). If people want to know and they do not wish to talk about it, tell them to reply, "That's private." It is not everyone's business or right to know, the same as when things happen in other families.

Helping your Dependant Children Adapt

With support, your children will adapt to the changes ahead, but it's important to understand, they will have a few special needs along the way.

- 1) They will need access to other children with trans parents to avoid the isolation that comes with feeling "different". Children can arrange for a pen pal from the **COLAGE (click)** website and you can check whether your town has a chapter of Family Pride which organizes social events for GLBT parents and children.
- 2) It is important to come-out several times and in several ways to your children. You may be their only reliable source on what it means to be trans. Don't hide who you are and do your best to remain open to their questions.
- 3) Talk to them about the misperceptions some people have about trans people. Transphobia will touch their lives at some point and they will have to know how to manage these situations.
- 4) They too will have to "come-out" when they decide to tell their peers. They will need an age appropriate understanding of the key concepts in order to handle these discussions with confidence.
- 5) Your children may question their gender and/or sexual-orientation more deliberately. You can encourage them to listen to their heart and have to faith in whatever feels right.

Adapted from: Bigner and Bozett (1990) & colage.org

Additional Resources for Trans Parents

COLAGE (click)

Equality and justice for people with lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgendered parents and our families

Transfamily.org (click)

TransFamily is a support group for transgendered and transsexual people, their parents, partners, children, other family members, friends, and supportive others

Transsexual and Transgender Parenting (click)

Basic Information for our Friends and Family

Coming-out to your adult children, friends & colleagues

Adult Children

Adult children have had time to develop their own ideas on gender diversity and they may be raising children with their spouse - and his or her attitudes and opinions.

If your child is in a long-term committed relationship, you may wish to tell him or her with their partner. Describe the emotional journey that led you to realize you are transgendered; be honest and frank. If there are details they will find out from someone else, be sure to tell them yourself.

Tell your children that you love them and you are thankful that you had them. Let them know you will try to answer their questions, but you may not have all the answers. Apologize for any pain they are feeling, but don't apologize for being trans. Understand it may take some time for them to sort through their feelings. Help educate them by providing useful information and remaining open to their questions. They may withdraw because they no longer know how to relate to you. They may think that you've changed on the inside; they may believe they no longer know who you are. You may have to take the initiative with rebuilding the relationship. In time, they will see you are still the person who helped raise them.

Friends & Colleagues

For the most part, people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual come-out when they're ready to talk about their sexual orientation, often to one person at-a-time.

Transgender people are not always able to choose how and when we come out to colleagues and friends. Some of us are able to manage our gender discomfort through cross-gender activity in the privacy of our own homes, but many others must transition gender roles permanently, or semi-permanently to avoid the depressions and anxiety that comes with gender-dysphoria. So coming-out to friends and colleagues can mean dealing with chance encounters at the grocery store, library, even our children's school. How do we learn to handle these awkward situations with grace and dignity?

When someone approaches, who knows us only by our birth gender, we have two choices: we can try to avoid that person, or we can continue on with our business. But, what if we meet that person face-to-face? Again, we have two choices; we can pretend we don't know them, or we can say hello. What do you think will happen? If they recognize us, two possibilities stand out: they will make a remark that will humiliate us or, they will have no idea what to say and we will have their undivided attention. Which do you think is more likely to happen? In

that moment of surprise, you have the opportunity to say exactly what you want them to hear.

It takes time to learn how to deal with friends and colleagues face-to-face. There may be many that you avoid, but don't for a minute think that you should hide just because you are transgender. So, what can you say that will make a difference? How about, *"Hello, it's nice to see you. You may not have realized that I was transgender. It's taken me some time to figure it out myself. It's been quite a learning process. So, how have you been?"* They will be surprised. Some will smile and ask questions, others will become speechless. When you part company, tell them you know it will take time for them to adjust; it's taken you a long time to figure out what is right for you. What do you do if they say something nasty? Let them pass you by. Others may stare; try not to feel embarrassed, it was they who embarrassed themselves with their poor behaviour.

Be prepared for the possibility that some people may change how they interact with you. These people are having difficulty with your situation, or they could be afraid of saying the wrong thing. You can help these friends overcome their discomfort by just being yourself. If you care about these individuals, you may have it within you to become their teacher, but do not look to them for support. They are in need of your support. If you show them you are comfortable with who you are they will see the person they have always known. If you are open to their questions, let them know; but don't hesitate to tell them you don't have an answer, particularly if they wish to discuss topics you'd rather avoid. Your ability to remain open may help them over their hurdles. In time, most of them usually come around.

Some may think that being transgender is not normal. You may not be able to reach those who are deeply entrenched in this sort of thinking. You may have to part company even if you care about them. Sharing your story may help, but realize that you will have to bring them a long way before they can accept you. If you encounter such attitudes in the workplace, report any discrimination to your employer at once. If you do not feel the situation is resolved, you can file a report with the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

What can I expect from life?

When you live in a way that is true to yourself, when you honour and value who you are, all good things in life are possible. Feel good about who you are and you will naturally look after the people and the goals that are important to you. There is no shame in being trans and you deserve the same happiness and quality of life as anyone else. If you want to, you can fall in love, have a family, enjoy close friendships, raise children and live a happy and fulfilling life. Keep in mind, everyone is different; we each have our own expectations (career, marriage) based on our personality and some goals will be harder to reach than others. Ultimately, we each decide how to realize our dreams, regardless of how great

the challenge. But when we are able to surround ourselves with people who love and accept us, we have an excellent chance of overcoming any obstacle. Nothing is impossible.

Sometime families do not accept their trans family members and some of us use the term “chosen family” to refer to friends who have taken on a support role that is normally held by a blood relative. When family members cannot rise above their prejudice, it is important to form relationships with those who will stand with us. It’s not the same as finding acceptance within our own family, but it does help to insulate us from the prejudice and discrimination we may face in life. This is one of the reasons why transgender communities and networks support their own.

If your family cannot accept you, you can find others who will. We are born into our families but we are not responsible for educating them, or opening their hearts and minds. It can take a long time to deal with the pain inflicted by parents and siblings who can’t get past their transphobia. Try to stay focused on the fact that they are limiting their own possibilities in life, not yours - unless that is your choice. You will feel the loss of their affection, but you must continue making decisions that are best for you. Try not to absorb negative comments; they are judging transgenderism, not you. Any previous goodwill they felt towards you is still within them, but their emotions are caged by their fear and misunderstanding of what it means to be trans. They will have great difficulty in seeing the situation this way; it may not be that simple for you either. Angry words and rejection can make you feel as though they have somehow erased you from their existence. This is an illusion; they will continue to love you, even if their transphobia prevents them from showing it.

Real Life Stories

Lynn Conway

Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Emerita
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

The Trans Biography Project (click)

Stories from the Lives of Eleven Trans People in BC
By Kathleen Cross, The Women/Trans Dialogue Planning Committee and Trans Alliance Society

Healthcare

Taking care of ourselves begins with becoming informed about the healthcare issues that affect us. Information that is intended for the general public does not always represent transgender people, so it is up to us to understand the risk factors that affect our health and well-being.

In dealing with and accepting our gender identity, our base levels of stress tend to be higher than average and our coping strategies are not always the

healthiest. Statistically, we smoke, drink and indulge in more high risk activities (unprotected sex, drug use), which can together affect our overall health. We also run a higher-than-average risk of developing disorders that affect body image, like anorexia and bulimia. We must become active participants in caring for our health. This means staying informed and monitoring our physical and mental condition with the assistance of a qualified health care professional.

Dealing with insensitive or uneducated caregivers can be very frustrating and it can discourage us from keeping routine check-ups with our doctor. Though health care practitioners should be informed about gender diversity and basic clinical care issues for transgender individuals, some of them aren't. Lack of knowledge (and in some cases sensitivity) may prevent practitioners from asking the necessary questions in a manner that invites honest and complete answers. This is the corner-stone of a healthy doctor-patient relationship. If you cannot achieve this level of comfort with your current caregiver, it's time to find another one.

Additional Trans-Health Resources

Access to Care and Cancer Disparity Fact Sheet (click)

American Cancer Society - A Fact Sheet for Transgendered and Transsexual Individuals

Hormones May Have Risks (click)

Transgender Cafe

Tobacco and the GLBT Community (click)

American Cancer Society Brochure

Trans-Health.com (click)

An online magazine for health and fitness for transsexual and transgendered people

Transgender Health – Healthcare Guidelines (click)

The LGBT Health Channel

Finding the Right Doctor for You

So, how exactly can you go about finding the right doctor for you? You could canvas by phone to see which doctors have experience caring for trans patients, however, this may be an unrealistic approach in small towns or communities experiencing a shortage of physicians. Contact a local support group and/or speak to other transgender people who have faced similar issues. They may be able to help you put together a list of trans-friendly doctors, therapists, and other safe places. If you would like to see a particular doctor, but he or she is not accepting new patients, write a letter asking to be put on that physician's waiting list. If you are comfortable doing so, explain your reasons for selecting him or her. Health Canada has identified the need to address access to care issues faced by sexual minorities; this physician may be willing to accommodate your request.

Additional Information on Finding a Doctor

How to Choose a Care Provider (click)

A guide for Choosing Doctors and Counsellors for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered Persons and People living with HIV/AIDS - *The Winnipeg Gay and Lesbian Resource Centre*

Medical Intervention

Those of us who decide to use hormonal and/or surgical intervention must tell our family, friends, and the many others who know us personally. The medical community generally refers to us as transsexuals, but we reserve the right to self-identify according to how we see ourselves (i.e., trans-identified, born male-bodied females, born female-bodied males, transgenderists, etc.). In order to seek hormone therapy or surgical intervention, we must undergo evaluation by a medical health professional who is qualified to recommend future medical treatment. Medical transition is a big step, however many feel that it is an absolute necessity.

The need to be recognized as you truly are may be so strong that will have to undergo a complete gender reversal. Yet it may not be enough, some long to feel completely comfortable in their own skin and seek to surgically reassign their biological gender. For medical transition to take place, you will most likely have to be evaluated and diagnosed with what the medical community refers to as Gender Identity Disorder (GID). This medical condition occurs independently of sexual orientation, and in a wide variety of animals other than human beings. GID has been detected in apes, monkeys, dogs, cats, rats, and mice. In most areas if you are under 18, you will need your parent's permission to initiate medical intervention. If you plan to pursue medical transition, it is very important that you do so under the guidance of a trained medical professional. You cannot safely manage your own treatment; it would be very dangerous and carry many health risks.

Parents and family members may have a very hard time accepting the fact that you are planning medical transition. Remember, this is something that nature has thrown at you and although you are not responsible for having these feelings, you are responsible for dealing with them. Expect and respect the confusion, fear and anxieties of your family members, but try to remain hopeful. Many families eventually accept and stand behind family members undergoing medical transition.

Many medical health practitioners do not view GID as a disorder; they consider it a medical condition. No one knows the exact cause of GID; narrowing it down to one cause is highly unlikely. Despite this, recent studies have tied the condition to a mix of biological and genetic factors, combined with uncharacteristic influences on pre-natal sex hormones (such as stress in the mother or the presence of hormone mimicking chemicals present during periods of critical development). It is undeniable that biology sets a blueprint for gender expression, but how this blueprint is impacted by other factors such as family and environment is largely unknown.

Many of us encounter a wide range of feelings and emotions that come with questioning our assigned gender. These feelings can be difficult to deal with, even if we have a strong support network. At times, we may feel so overwhelmed that we look for temporary relief in activities that are not in our best interest. Several studies have revealed specific health concerns that are often associated with being trans. These concerns are not a direct result of our gender identity rather, they stem from social pressures, especially genderism and transphobia which can lead to lower self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety, increased social withdrawal, loneliness, and feelings of guilt or shame. These feelings and emotions can affect our lives on many different levels.

Additional Resources

Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (click)

Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorders

Transgender Cafe (click)

Home of the Winnipeg Transgender Group

Practice Safer Sex

Trans people can have a difficult time finding information about sexual practices that reflect how they feel about their bodies. As many of us don't feel that our biology is congruent with our gender identity, many of us use different names for body parts. Finding information that corresponds to our internal image and our external body parts can be near impossible. Still, it is our responsibility to stay informed, and protect ourselves and our partners.

Additional Resources

It's Your Health: Male & Female Condoms (click)

Health Canada

Safer Sex – WSW (click)

For Women (or Female Bodied Men) who have Sex with Women
The LGBT Health Channel

Safer Sex – MSM (click)

For Men (or Male Bodied Women) who have Sex with Men
The LGBT Health Channel

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) (click)

Sexual Health Facts and Information – Health Canada

STD Help/info Line – Toll-free phone numbers (click)

Public Health Agency of Canada

Transphobic Harassment, Violence & Domestic Abuse

As trans people, we recognize that the issues surrounding our health are not only limited to health care settings. Some trans people face a very real threat of harm to their physical health as victims of physical assault. Although no accurate

figures exist, it is widely known that GLBT people in general are more likely to be victimized than those who are not. We must also realize that threats to our physical health do not only come from strangers, but also in the form of domestic abuse from our partners. Many of us find it helpful to have a close network of supportive friends who we can look to for guidance during these difficult times. You should never blame yourself; transphobia is the real problem, not being trans.

Additional Resource

Transgender/SOFFA Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Resource Sheet (click)

For Ourselves: Reworking Gender Expression

Managing stress

Our ability to manage stress is measured by how effectively we can release negative emotions. People who are transgender experience a higher than average dose of daily stress, so it is vital that we choose a lifestyle that promotes vitality; otherwise, we can wind-up struggling with our sense of well-being and eventually run the risk of developing a stress related illness.

Effective stress management usually requires a conscious effort. Cigarettes, alcohol and drugs are commonly available in social settings – when we most want to forget our problems and enjoy good friends; it takes a thoughtful, committed approach to maintain an exercise or meditation routine.

Try to find healthy and enjoyable ways to release stress. Physical exercise is one of the best, but creative outlets are also good and so is volunteer work. Speaking to someone who is supportive can always help you over the rough spots, but it is important to invest your time in personal coping strategies as well.

Beware of short-term solutions that compromise you in any way, even over-the-counter medication can become a problem. If you feel that you require something to help you sleep or to help manage the symptoms of depression, talk to your doctor about developing a coping strategy. This may or may not include medication, but it should not lead to new problems down the road.

Suicide alert – watch for the signs and stay alive!

Although figures vary, an estimated 30% of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-identified (GLBT) youth will attempt suicide. It might help you to know that most of us learn to manage the challenges associated with coming-out and living visibly. It's not always easy, but you have every reason to believe you can live a happy and productive life. It's normal for anyone to have fleeting thoughts of suicide when we're under tremendous stress however; there are some definite warning signs that it's time to get help.

Get immediate help if you can answer yes to any of these questions:

- 1) Do your thoughts seem to go where they want?
- 2) Do you experience mental images that you can't seem to escape?
- 3) Do you find yourself mentally transfixed, then jolted *awake* by disturbing thoughts or visions?
- 4) Have you actually formulated a plan for committing suicide, even if you don't think you'd use it?
- 5) Have you made a mental checklist of things you'd do before committing suicide?
- 6) Do suicidal thoughts give you a sense of relief?

Things You Should Know about Suicide

1. **Suicide is not a choice.** When pain or anguish become unbearable, our instincts naturally devise an escape plan that might push us down a path that we would not otherwise choose. When we cannot see any realistic options, this path may lead us dangerously close to suicide.
2. **Prolonged depression will alter your brain chemistry**, making it more difficult to overcome without help. Suicidal thoughts can persist even if we are consciously trying to put them out of our mind.

Don't be shy about calling a suicide prevention line in your area. It may be easier to speak with a stranger over the phone, than with someone you know face-to-face. People who answer these calls are ready to listen and guide you to additional resources that may help.

There is a great deal of online information available to anyone who is struggling with their gender identity (see the links at the end of this document for additional resource materials), but reading does not provide the same peace-of-mind as sharing your concerns with another person, especially one who has faced a similar situation. PFLAG Canada Chapter meetings can provide you with an opportunity to meet other transgender people who will be at various points in their coming-out and transitioning experience.

Canadian Suicide Prevention Hotlines

Kids Help Phone (click): 1-800-668-6868. No one is too old to call!

Your call is completely confidential; they don't have call display. Trained counsellors are ready (24/7) to answer your questions.

Centre for Suicide Prevention (click)

Canada-wide directory for telephone assistance

Things you may hear

Knowing and understanding the language of sexual diversity can lend clarity to the information you read and/or share. As you become more comfortable with this new vocabulary, you will undoubtedly absorb words that pertain to gender identity. This knowledge will help you to understand and embrace the vast community of people touched by sexual and gender diversity.

Common Words Associated with Gender Identity

In the trans community, we respect everyone's right to self-identify. This places the power with the individual, rather than with someone who is trying to label them. The terminology is constantly changing and a term that may be right for one person may not be right for another, even though both share very similar qualities. These are some of the common words often associated with gender diversity.

Transgender, transsexual, trans-identified, drag queen, cross-dresser, androgynous, gender queer, she-male, two-spirit, tranny, transgenderist, pangender, gender transition, bi-gender, gender identity, gender roles, transphobia, genderism, passing, intersex, gender, gender dysphoria, gender variance, assigned sex

Myths & Stereotypes

Whenever humanity has set aside discussion on important issues, mythology can take the shape of truth. Sexual orientation defines several important aspects of the human condition and people tend to fear what they cannot understand, especially when it concerns other people. Unfortunately, this means the most damaging misconceptions can become the most widely believed and the hardest to eliminate. Today, more people are engaging in healthy discussion on sexual diversity. Many of the old myths are losing credibility, but here are a few that remain:

1. Men who dress like women are likely gay.

Small-scale studies show that only 5% – 10% of cross-dressers are gay or bisexual – the equivalent rate of homosexuality in the general population. Most cross-dressers are heterosexual men and though some fantasize about being with a man when they are cross-dressed, most report fantasizing about women (cross-dressed or not). Further research is required to confirm these findings.

2. Born male-bodied females are not “real women” because they don't menstruate. This is the ultimate sign of innate femaleness.

There are many women who cannot menstruate because of their unique biological make-up; some choose to have their internal reproductive organs removed, others may have no choice because of disease or illness. These individuals are still entitled to call themselves women regardless of their internal make-up, so why shouldn't the same standard apply to women born with male bodies?

3. You must have a mental disorder if you feel the need to dress opposite to your biological sex.

Many trans people are susceptible to medical health issues such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and depression, but this is a result of society's disapproval of their behaviour and feelings. Many of these symptoms subside when trans people find themselves in a supporting and accepting environment.

4. You have no right to change your assigned sex. That is your "true" sex.

Doctors assign gender based on their observations of a newborn's genitals. Doctors are human and some of these children receive incorrect gender assignments. There are documented cases where doctors have assigned gender despite the fact that an infant's genitals were not clearly defined. In other cases, biological variations have not been readily apparent immediately after birth (i.e., hormonal status, internal reproductive organs, chromosomal sex, etc.). Our culture is trained to ignore and simplify these factors.

5. Cross-dressers really want to be the opposite sex.

The large majority of cross-dressers are happy with their bodies and do not wish to alter them with hormones or surgery. The reasons for cross-dressing often include sexual gratification and the desire to express another part of oneself. Most cross-dressers do so in private and do not wish to live full-time as the opposite gender. Cross-dressers generally have no wish to permanently transition into another gender role. Their core gender identity is the same as their biological sex, even when cross-dressed.

6. Born male-bodied females are not really women because they will never be able to experience motherhood.

For a variety of reasons, some women cannot become pregnant. The first uterus transplant was reported in Saudi Arabia in 2002, so from a medical standpoint, it is possible for women born with male bodies to give birth. It just so happens that these women are infertile by nature, similar to some traditional-bodied women.

7. Born female-bodied men are not really men because they have breasts.

If a man had enlarged breasts (for whatever reason) and felt that they interfered with his masculinity, no one would question his decision to have them reduced. Anatomy alone cannot determine a person's gender status.

8. You are not truly a woman (or truly a man) unless you were born with a vagina (or a penis).

This begs the question; if anatomy determines gender status, how should we refer to intersex people who are born with undefined genitalia? Many people live with non-specific genitalia and some have chromosomal, hormonal, gonadal, and/or genetic anomalies to consider. Clearly gender is far more complex than what we might visually observe.

9. Transsexual people choose to be that way.

No one would choose to experience the emotional, psychological, physical and financial distress of being transsexual no more than one would choose to be diabetic.

10. I can tell that person used to be a man by the way he acts.

Much like the traditional-bodied population of women and men, some women are more feminine, some men are more masculine, but most fall somewhere in the middle. Trans people are no different.

11. Women who have sex with cross-dressing men are really closet lesbians.

Although the female partners of cross-dressers may have lesbian or bisexual tendencies, most are heterosexual. One reason cited for why they have sex with cross-dressed men is that it makes their partners happy and more comfortable. Clothes do not make the relationship. Women who have sex with their cross-dressed male partners do so for any number of reasons: love, acceptance of diversity, security with who they are, desire to continue the relationship, etc.

12. Those who have medically transitioned to the opposite gender aren't really the sex they claim, because they didn't experience growing as the gender they now are.

There are examples of women raised in male gender roles, and males raised in female gender roles, and they are still entitled to call themselves women and men respectively. The fact is they did experience themselves as women or men; however, the rest of society may have experienced them in a different way. How we perceive ourselves is far more important than how others perceive us.

13. Transsexuals are just flamboyantly gay.

Gays and lesbians are generally happy with their bodies and do not feel the need to seek medical intervention to change anything. Most gay men identify as men, and most gay women identify as women. Born male-bodied females and born female-bodied males do not identify with their anatomical sex, and there is no evidence that a person undergoes the process of gender reassignment to experience sexual intercourse.

14. **Men who want to become women have no right using the women's washroom.**

Women with non-traditional female bodies (i.e., women with penises) have just as much right to use women's spaces as women with traditional female bodies. People who are uncomfortable with this should ask themselves why they feel threatened by a woman who is merely different. Unless she is creating a disturbance, she has every right to be there.

15. **There are only two sexes and therefore only two genders.**

Despite the common belief that “vagina and penis” respectively mean female and male, the scientific community uses a wide range of criteria to discuss gender. Diversity within the sexes is actually greater than between the sexes. This means that there are many different kinds of women (some are taller, stronger, without the ability to reproduce, etc.) and there are different kinds of men (some who are shorter, perhaps not as strong). The line that separates male and female is not as distinct as one might think; there ARE women with penises and there ARE men with vaginas. Though our current society may continue to focus on anatomical gender, new information will eventually trickle down from the scientific community and ideas on gender will evolve accordingly. (See work by Diamond, Hampson, and Kruijver.)

Words that hurt

Some people may use words to hurt or embarrass you. You cannot control what others say however, understanding where the words come from may help reduce their impact. Remember, these are just words and though they may hurt, it's important to consider who is saying them.

People (of all ages) who are sexually immature, or who have a limited understanding of sexuality and gender, may actually believe that being trans is not natural. Gender and sexuality are wholly integrated with who we are and some people are uncomfortable or intimidated by sexual and gender realities that they can't comprehend. Those who are polite will simply keep their ideas private, while others (the particularly rude ones) may use insults to reduce you to a status that makes sense to them. It is wrong, small minded and unfair but it happens. Early philosophers first posed the idea that earth was round in the 4th century.

Columbus set sail some 1200 years later, with most people still believing the earth was flat. Progress may see slow, fortunately we're well beyond 1492.

Since many people are unaware of the difference between gender-identity and sexual orientation, the many derogatory names geared towards trans people are rooted in the misconception that all of us are gay or we suffer from some sort of mental illness. These are some of those words: *Fruit, faggot, queer, homo, dyke, fairy, queen, pervert, freak, animal, sicko, simply pathetic, screwed up, it, that, thing, monster, pedophile*

Support

Support is important for everyone; we all need someone to listen to our concerns. Support is not the same as acquiring new information that we can find online, or in books and pamphlets. Information feeds our minds and sustains us intellectually. While it can provide us with certain tools for coping, we are still alone in our quest. "Support" connects us to other people, which is an inherent human need. Being "closeted" is an isolating experience. You may find yourself avoiding friends or social settings that could require you to talk about yourself. This isolation can emotionally disconnect us from others, making it hard to maintain healthy relationships in all areas of our life. Support helps to heal this vulnerability and re-opens important human connections that sustain our overall well-being. If friends and family members cannot provide you with this vital link, it is very important that you find others who can. There are people who are willing to listen; you just have to reach out.

We may need support but we can also give it. All members of your family will require a certain amount of support and a willingness to listen may help them through the adjustment period. However, be mindful that you are not shouldering more pain than you can handle. They will have to figure out some of the answers for themselves. Some people will ask questions using insensitive language, be patient with them. Others will ask things you cannot answer; be patient with yourself.

Hope

When you live in fear of disappointing others, you cannot focus on making choices that are right for you. Denying who you are will eventually make you feel angry, trapped or unworthy of happiness. These emotions will touch all areas of your life, affecting your work and your relationships with others.

No matter how your situation looks right now, you are making progress. You may believe that life can't get any worse, or you may be facing the uncertainty of coming-out to family and friends. Wherever you are in the process of *becoming*, this is a time to be hopeful.

Life is constantly changing; it never stops. The changes you are experiencing will propel you forward along the path that is intended for you. Being transgender will not limit your choices or potential. You are still writing your life-story and only you can decide where your path will take you. If things seem overwhelming right now remember, time is on your side. Slow down and deal with new challenges one-step-at-a-time, and only when you are ready. Look at how a situation might unfold and try to prepare for a variety of outcomes. Don't forget, most people will become more accepting with time. Also, there are resources available online or through your local Chapter of PFLAG Canada. You may wish to speak with a PFLAG Canada Contact or attend a monthly Chapter meeting. It can be helpful to hear how others have grown to accept themselves or their loved ones. You will find the courage to move forward; you have already demonstrated that much by coming to this website.

Links & Resources: (under construction)

Books Worth Reading

Links to other Support Sites

Community Support Information

Reference Information

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