

# Holding, Validating and Empathizing: Exploring Clinical Strategies to Address Gender Dysphoria with Transgender Youth

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# What is Gender Dysphoria?

- Gender dysphoria is defined by strong, persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one's own assigned sex that results in significant distress or impairment.
- Children with gender dysphoria may manifest generalized anxiety disorder, symptoms of depression and isolation.
- Adolescents and adults with gender dysphoria are at increased risk for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicides.

# Associated Features of Gender Dysphoria

- Many individuals with gender dysphoria become isolated, whether by choice or through ostracism, which can contribute to low self-esteem and may lead to school aversion or even dropping out. Peer ostracism and teasing are especially common.
- The disturbance can be so pervasive that the mental lives of some individuals revolve only around activities that lessen gender distress.
- They are often preoccupied with appearance, especially early in the transition to living in the opposite sex role. Relationships with parents and peers also may be seriously impaired.

“....being transgender is hard. It's not all sunshine and roses, filled with transition photos and achievements. It's staying up in the middle of the night replaying all of your thoughts and fears. It's deciding which bathroom to use while in public. It's having to out yourself to medical providers, lovers, new friends, coworkers and often, everyone you meet. It's answering questions about genitalia, "how and when I knew" that I'm trans. It's losing your loved ones, being viewed as a sin, a freak and circus show. I'm not your fetish, your experiment, your experience, your willingness to try it out. It's looking at your parents in their eyes and seeing their disappointment. It's the acceptance by your friends, who, meaning well, thinks your transition is cool so they tell everyone about it.

It's dealing with the pit in your stomach when you have to show ID, and your appearance and name don't match the documents. It's the painful surgeries and the financial blow of affording the medical care needed to transition, to feel comfortable in your own skin. It's about being stuck in the middle between your birth sex and your authentic gender. It's going through puberty all over again but this time in lighting speed, with no guidance but your own personal experience. It's the rushing to the mirror in the morning hoping to see your outer reflection match the person you know to be on the inside and being disappointed that the process is slow. It's building a support network through social media to replace the lack of acceptance from those you love.

It's not even so much about others acceptance as it is the struggle to love yourself when the world tells you otherwise.”

# Activity Guidelines

- This is an activity that requires you to move. If it is hard or physically uncomfortable for you to do so, then please participate in this activity in a way that works for you
- By participating in this activity, you may disclose information to the group that you would rather keep private. Please take care of yourself and decide what is best for you
- If you are unsure what a question means, don't worry there will be many more questions for you to participate in
- When answering these questions please consider if you have **ever had think about, be in a situation that would require you to think about, or have done any** of the things you are about to be asked

You never had to “come out” about your gender identity

As a youth you were never told that you were “too young” to know your gender

As a teen or young adult, you were never told that your gender was “made up” or inauthentic because you did not “come out” when you were youth

You can leave your home without the anxiety or anguish of gender dysphoria

You did not spend your childhood thinking almost exclusively about your gender

As a child, you were not told that your authentic gender identity made others uncomfortable and as a result asked to pretend to be a gender that you are not

It is less likely that your academic performance was impacted due to the anguish of gender dysphoria, bullying, and inadequate social support

If it is unlikely that anyone asks you what your “real name” [birth name] is and then assume that they have a right to call you by that name

If you’ve never heard how hard it is for other people to use your correct name and gender pronoun

You are less likely to face harassment or violence for using the bathroom or locker room that aligns with your gender identity

Your parents never wished you were “just gay” instead of having to “deal with” your authentic gender identity

Your parents never worried if anyone would love you because of your authentic gender identity

You are less likely to be asked invasive, personal questions about your gender identity and body

You have never been required to undergo psychological evaluation for your gender identity

Your gender identity is not now, nor has it ever been, considered a mental illness

You went through puberty only once and you did not have to wait until you were 18

If you've never felt like you could only wear pink because if you didn't someone might think you are a boy

Your parents didn't contemplate telling your friends parents about your genitals before you could go on a playdate or sleepover

You can't imagine spending months and thousands of dollars in therapy so that a therapist can tell you something you already knew

If you have the ability to flirt, date, or form intimate relationships without fear that your genitals may be cause for rejection or attack, nor will it cause your partner to question their sexual orientation

You are physically healthy, you don't think about having a:

- hysterectomy

- mastectomy

- massive hair removal

- taking cross sex hormones

- having vocal cord surgery

- facial feminization surgery

- or any other gender confirming procedures

It is less likely that you had to choose between having biological children and living your authentic gender

You have never bound your chest or tucked your penis in an attempt to have your body more accurately reflect your authentic gender identity

Your gender identity alone is not grounds for excommunicating you from a religious community

Entire religious movements and campaigns have not been founded in an effort to harm or exclude people of your gender identity

You are less likely to be asked to change your gender expression to participate in religious community

You are less likely to be the victim of a hate crime because of your gender identity

If you are murdered, there is no law (i.e. “trans panic”) that will legally justify your murder

You’ve never been told that you don’t know your gender because you are:

confused

too young to know

just trying to get attention

being influenced by the internet

being influenced by friends or peers

or that your brain isn’t fully myelinated

If you have a better chance of reaching old age without taking your own life

Adapted from Peggy McIntosh's White Privilege:  
Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

# Gender Dysphoria and Validation

- Transgender youth's gender identity may not be validated by parents, family, school environment, socially, politically
- In fact, the focus is often finding alternative explanations for one's gender identity
  - Being influenced by friends, trying to fit in, influenced by the internet, autism spectrum disorder, a phase, etc.

# The Seduction of Fixing



- Depression, anxiety and ocd can feel exhausting for those who are feeling it, it is also exhausting for those who are around that person
  - This can be true for clinicians as well
- It can feel unbearable for parents/caregivers to see their children in pain and suffering
  - Girls who want to have a baby
- Parents may feel like they are failing as a parent and as a result focus on “fixing” their child so that they can feel successful (again?)

# Things Parents Need to Remember ...

- Don't expect their child to start the conversation
- Don't expect their child to appreciate their efforts
- Keep in mind the impact that they have on their child(ren)
- Remind them to never use “why”, “if you”, or “just”

# Tools to Help Parents Listen

- Put themselves in their child's shoes
- Create an emotional holding space
- Parents are allowed to have needs, but remind them to always own them as their own needs
  - I need...

Empathy Does Not...

- Give advice “I think you should just ignore the bully”
- Interrogate “What did you expect was going to happen when you wore that?”
- Explain “Your grandmother is really old and I think you should just dress like a girl”
- Educate “I assume that next time you won’t tell anyone?”
- Shut down “Why would you want that person to be your friend anyway?”

- Console “It wasn’t anything you did, they just don’t understand”
- Tell tale “That reminds me when I was bullied for being short”
- Cheer up “Look on the bright side, at least Lisa is still your friend”
- Evaluate “If you hadn’t worn dress to school then he wouldn’t have bullied you”
- Sympathize “This is such a hard life, I don’t know why you have to deal with all of this”

- One up “At least we *support* you, other kids get kicked out”
- Fix it “What you should do is be less obvious”
- Correct “That’s not what happened, she was talking about someone else”
- Minimizing “You can’t expect everyone to call you by this new name, it’s only been a few months”
- Take blame “I’m sorry, it’s all my fault that you’re feeling this way”
- Provide evidence “No, you’re not ugly, you look beautiful”

- What will result from an empathic listening and communication is the child will feel validated by their parent's response for their experience
- Their child will feel that their experience is legitimate and that they are not over-reacting
- To be hurt by these experiences is appropriate and consequently their feeling is validated rather than dismissed by the solution the parent has given. Under these circumstances the result is that the child feels seen and heard rather than feeling "I need to get over this"...but I can't...I feel so alone."

- They may attempt to solve their problem on their own with self-harm, drugs/alcohol, video games, isolation - all of which, for them, is a solution to their problem because at least they can forget about it.....until the next time
- Parents then only see another problem that's even bigger ..... And yet for the child it was the only solution
- They may also develop what can look like depression, anxiety, OCD, ADD, ADHD
- We too easily focus on their solutions as the problem, and continue to invalidate the experiences of gender dysphoria