



Trans Care Youth

Let's talk trans

A resource for trans and questioning youth

This booklet is for youth who want information about being trans, gender transition, coming out as trans, or finding resources and getting support. We hope that it will be a resource that can be used by trans and questioning youth as well as loved ones (sometimes called SOFFAs – significant others, friends, family, and allies).

What does “trans” mean?

Trans is an abbreviation of *transgender*. Trans people have a way of expressing themselves, a way of describing their gender, or an identity (knowing who you are) that doesn't fit society's rules about women and men. Trans can include:

- people who identify as having more than one gender
- people who identify as gender-neutral
- people who don't identify with any gender labels
- people whose gender identity doesn't match their body (e.g., someone with a male body who identifies as a girl)
- people who have changed their bodies to better match their gender identity (e.g., someone born female who uses hormones/surgery to make their body look more masculine)
- men who like to wear women's clothes, and women who like to wear men's clothes
- anyone else who feels the word “trans” fits for them

Being trans is a normal part of human diversity, and trans people have always existed. There are trans people in myths, legends, and oral and written histories on every continent. In some cultures and times, trans people were seen as sacred and special while in others, trans people have been hated or feared. Being trans is considered normal and is no big deal in some cultures.

Like all other kinds of diversity, being trans is part of the richness of human life, and many trans people view being trans as a gift or special experience. Learning about the histories of trans people can be helpful in accepting and honouring yourself or someone you love who is trans. If you want to learn more, Leslie Feinberg's book *Transgender Warriors* has detailed information about transgenderism in various cultures.

No matter how you express, identify, or describe your gender, whether you are trans is entirely up to you. If you feel a sense of kinship with the trans community or feel that you are trans, you have the right to identify this way. If you don't feel the word "trans" fits for you, that's fine too.

How do I know if I'm trans?

Some trans people say they always knew. For other people it's more of a gradual process, having feelings that come and go over time or that get increasingly strong as they get older. Some people suddenly realize they are trans when they meet another trans person, see a trans person on TV, or read about trans issues. Lots of trans people describe it as just being themselves and not knowing there was a word for it.

Trans people describe starting to question their gender or thinking they might be trans because they:

- had an internal sense of being a gender that was different than the one they were raised as, a mix of genders, gender-neutral, or genderless
- felt a sense of sameness, closeness, or belonging when meeting a trans person, seeing a trans person on TV, or reading about a trans person
- felt affinity for a trans role from their cultural community (e.g., Fa'afine, Hijra, Mahu, Sx'intis)

- felt uncomfortable living as a girl/woman or boy/man, being referred to as male/female, or doing gender-specific things (e.g., using the women's washroom)
- liked wearing clothes of the "other" gender
- disliked body parts that are often associated with gender (e.g., breasts, vagina, facial hair, penis), or dreamed/fantasized about their body being that of the "other" sex



If I look or act more feminine/masculine than other girls/boys, am I trans?

Being trans isn't about whether other people think you look or act masculine or feminine – being trans is about how you feel about yourself. Some masculine women and feminine men identify as trans, and some don't.

How do I know if I'm trans, and not lesbian/gay/bisexual?

Being trans is about your gender (how you feel about and express yourself as a man, woman, bi-gender person, androgynous person, etc.). Being lesbian/gay/bisexual is about who you are sexually attracted to.

Some trans people identify as heterosexual, while others identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. People who feel that the categories of straight, lesbian/gay, and bisexual are too limiting may describe their sexuality in other ways.

Can I be part of the trans community even if I'm not trans?

The trans community includes trans people and their significant others, friends, family, and allies (SOFFAs). Some people don't personally identify as trans but feel part of the trans community because they experience transphobia, are the loved one of a trans person, or are otherwise affected by trans issues (so they share some things in common with trans people).

Crossdressing for sexual pleasure

Why would someone do this?

Some people get sexually turned on by wearing clothing of the “opposite” sex. For some people the sexual charge is about how the clothes feel; other people get off on the taboo of wearing “opposite” clothes; for others dressing up is part of a sexual fantasy.

Crossdressing for sex is a normal, healthy part of human sexuality, and is quite common. In a survey of 2500 randomly chosen people in Sweden, nearly 3% of men and 1% of women surveyed said they had crossdressed for sexual pleasure at least once in their lives. Some people just do it once as part of experimenting about sex; others do it some of the time or every time they have sex.

Sexual pleasure is not the only reason people crossdress. Some people don't get turned on by crossdressing, they do it because they like how the clothes fit or feel, want to express their feminine/masculine side, to have fun dressing up (lots of people crossdress at Halloween), to make a political statement, are taking part in a cultural or religious festival, or for other reasons.

Does being turned on by women's/men's clothes mean I'm gay/lesbian?

Crossdressers can be any sexual orientation. Some identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual; some feel those terms are too limited and describe their sexuality in other ways. In several large American surveys, 75% of male crossdressers said they identified as heterosexual.

Does being turned on by women's/men's clothes mean I want to be a woman/man?

Crossdressers sometimes talk about fantasizing about being a woman/man when they wear women's/men's clothes, and wanting to have sex in particular ways when they're crossdressed. Fantasizing about being a woman or man during sex doesn't necessarily mean you identify as a woman or man. It might just be part of a sexual fantasy, not something that is part of how you identify – just like people might fantasize they're

having sex with someone famous, but that doesn't mean they identify as the famous person's lover in real life!

When I'm dating, how do I get across that this is what I like to do?

It's scary to tell someone who you're interested in that you crossdress. There's a risk of being laughed at or made fun of, rejected, having your secret told to other people, or even a violent attack. There is no one right way to handle this situation. Some crossdressers decide not to tell their partners at all, and only crossdress when they are alone (e.g., when masturbating). Others ask early on because they are not interested in being with a partner who is not OK with crossdressing. Some people wait until the relationship gets serious and there is a sense of trust. Deciding who to tell, when to do it, and what to say are discussed further in the *Coming Out* section (see page 8).

I fantasize about crossdressing all the time. How can I make myself stop?

For some people, crossdressing becomes compulsive – the urge to do it is so strong that you feel you have to do it, even though there's a part of you that doesn't want to – or you obsess about it to the point where it's getting in the way of the rest of your life. If sexual fantasies about crossdressing are becoming increasingly intense to the point where you are constantly thinking or worrying about them, a trans-friendly health professional can help you regain balance.

If there's nothing wrong with being trans, why do I feel messed up?

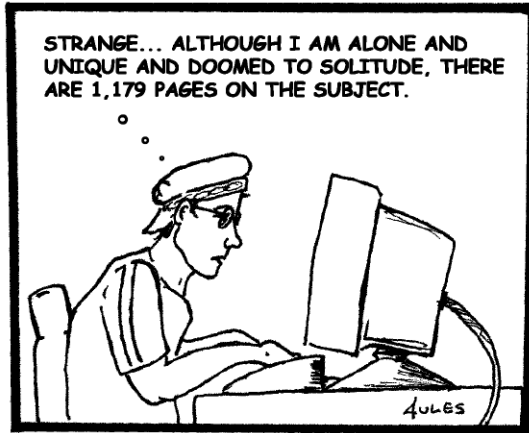
In many cultures gender roles are very important, defining how people are supposed to relate to each other and how families, communities, politics, and the economy are structured. In dominant North American society, assumptions and expectations about gender start as soon as you are born. Some non-trans people feel confused, upset, or threatened by the existence of trans people because transgenderism challenges societal rules and beliefs about gender, or because they assume trans people are gay/lesbian (i.e., they are homophobic). Trans people can internalize these

negative messages and feel embarrassed, ashamed, guilty, or disgusted about being trans.

Many trans people find it very stressful to live in a society that has rigid rules about gender. It hurts to be treated like a freak, feel you have to hide who you are, or be alone with nobody who knows who you are inside. If this is overwhelming, counselling and peer support can be helpful.

A small number of trans people have gender dysphoria. “Dysphoria” means “hard to bear.” Some trans people feel this is a negative term, implying that there is something wrong with trans people. Others believe that the term accurately describes the intensity of how uncomfortable they feel.

For some trans people there is social dysphoria – a mismatch between how you feel about yourself and how other people perceive you (e.g., people thinking you’re a boy even though you feel like a girl).



For other people there is physical dysphoria – feeling that you are in the wrong body because your body doesn’t match how you feel inside (e.g., being uncomfortable with having breasts and getting your period because you feel like a boy and want to have a boy’s body).

There are a range of ways people deal with having gender dysphoria. For some people it’s mild and not a big deal. For other people the discomfort is so intense that changing gender role/appearance or the body is the only option.

If gender dysphoria is stressing you out or is getting worse, a trans-friendly health professional can help you sort out what is happening, and consider your options.

What if I’m not sure if I’m trans or not sure what I want to do about it?

Having doubts and questions is a normal part of figuring out who you are and how you want to express yourself. It’s important that trans people feel okay with taking as much time as they need to explore options, without any pressure to identify or live in any particular way. The only “right answer” for what you need and who you are comes from what feels right within yourself. Everyone’s path is different in coming to that “right answer.” Options include:

- finding out more about transgenderism: internet, books, movies, trans community
- meeting one-on-one with a peer counsellor
- being part of a trans peer support group
- talking with a trans-friendly professional counsellor
- writing about trans feelings and questions (e.g., in a journal)

For many people, trying out changes to see what they feel like is a big part of the process. Even if you have a very clear idea of what you want to do, trying it out in real life might be very different than what you expected it to feel like – it might feel absolutely right, or you might feel it’s not the right choice at this point in your life.

Some changes can be tried on your own, without telling other people. For example:

- thinking of yourself as trans, a boy/man, a girl/woman, androgynous, bi-gender, etc.

A trans-friendly health professional can help if you are:

- so bothered by gender issues that you are finding it hard to relate to other people or go out in public
- ashamed, embarrassed, guilty, worried, overwhelmed, stressed out, or depressed about gender issues
- thinking about crossdressing or gender issues so much that you’re having difficulty focusing on anything else
- uncomfortable about having male or female body parts, strongly wishing you had a different body, or otherwise feeling that your body doesn’t match who you are inside

For anonymous & confidential help, call/TTY the Transgender Health Program: 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC)

- trying out a different name or a different pronoun (he/him, she/her, or a gender-neutral pronoun like sie/hir) when you refer to yourself in a diary or journal, or online
- wearing girls'/boys' underwear
- changing your clothes, hair, or makeup in private
- shaving off your facial/body hair, or gluing on facial hair in private
- wearing breast forms (prosthetic breasts) or prosthetic testicles/penis
- binding your breasts or tucking your penis/testicles (get someone with experience to show you how to do this safely)

Other changes involve letting other people know you are trans. For example:

- coming out: telling friends, family members, and other people in your life that you're trans
- asking people to call you by a different name or use a different gender pronoun
- changing your appearance in public (e.g., going out crossdressed)
- getting help from a speech professional to make your voice more feminine/masculine
- using hormones to make your body look and feel more feminine/masculine
- having surgery to make your body look and feel more feminine/masculine



Coming Out

“Coming out” refers to a process of getting comfortable with your own identity and telling other people in your life about it. Regardless of who else you come out to, coming out to yourself – acknowledging and accepting who you are – is a milestone worth celebrating.

In some situations there is no choice about coming out: there is something about you that doesn't fit how women or men are expected to look, act, or dress, or someone in your life finds out by reading your diary or finding you crossdressed. Many trans people talk about learning to hide any evidence of being trans because they received messages early in life that being trans was weird, freakish, deviant, or otherwise not OK. Having to hide creates a lot of internal pressure, both from keeping the secret and not being able to fully express yourself to the people around

you. Coming out is one way to deal with this pressure. Other people deal with it by coming out in some parts of their life and not others, or by talking with friends, other trans people, or professional counsellors.

Some people consider being trans a private matter and don't tell others. Others find it important to come out to people who they are close to, or to be out as trans in day-to-day life. When making decisions about coming out, it's important to remember that you are under no obligation to tell anyone that you are trans. Coming out is something you do for yourself. It's OK not to be out to other people. What matters is that you are OK with the decision you have made.

Planning how to come out

If you have kept trans issues secret, coming out is a big step. Friends and family members typically go through stages of adjustment, involving shock, disbelief, fear, anger and betrayal, sadness, and eventual acceptance (although some people are never accepting). Some people move through the initial discomfort quickly and feel pride at the courage of the trans person, but it can take a long time to reach that point.

Deciding who to come out to, what to tell them, and when to tell them is a personal decision that only you can make. You may want to ask yourself:

- How important is it to me that this person knows about my being trans?
- What do I want them to know, and how will I tell them?
- How would it be for me if they are not supportive when I come out? Do I feel strong enough in my own identity and the rest of my support system that I would be okay?
- Would I be safe if this person knew this about me being trans? What are the possible consequences if they are angry or upset? (e.g., Is there a risk of getting kicked out of the house, or of violence?)
- If this person had a negative reaction to my coming out, could it affect my ability to go to school or to keep my job?
- Where could I go for emergency help if I needed it? Where could I go for support?

Many people start by telling people they think will respond reasonably well and be understanding – a trusted friend, family member (e.g., sister, brother, cousin, grandparent), youth group facilitator, counsellor, youth

health clinic worker, or teacher. Starting with the people who you think will be accepting helps you build up support before you tell the people who might have a harder time with it.

Coming out as trans is similar in some ways to coming out as lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB), but the processes aren't exactly the same. Even though heterosexuals aren't always supportive of LGB people, they generally recognize and understand what it means to be LGB. In contrast, many non-trans people don't know what trans means, don't understand it, and find it confusing.

As part of planning, it's helpful to think about information and resources you can use to help people understand your specific circumstances. At first, shock and surprise makes it difficult to take in information, so it's helpful to just let the person know that the information is there if they want it (without pushing it on them). Counselling can be helpful for people who are having a hard time accepting that you are trans. Advocates can help educate teachers or other professionals in your life who are not understanding about trans issues. Resources are listed at the end of this booklet.

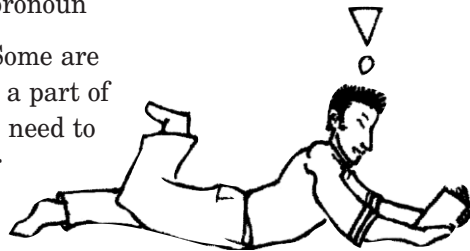
Gender Transition

Gender transition is an option for trans people who are dysphoric or are uncomfortable with the difference between internal feeling and outward expression. Gender transition is a change in the way you live in your day-to-day life – from female-to-male (FTM), male-to-female (MTF), single gender to bi-gender, gendered-to-androgynous, etc.

Transition involves changes in some or all of the aspects of life that are gendered:

- physical appearance: hair, clothes, jewelry, makeup, body (via hormones and/or surgery)
- behaviour: posture, gestures, language, voice
- identification: name, gender pronoun

Not all trans people transition. Some are happy with having trans issues be a part of their private life and don't feel the need to change their day-to-day life. Other people may want to transition



but don't for reasons relating to health, money, family, community, culture, or spirituality. Some people transition slowly and gradually, while others do it as quickly as possible.

According to the international guidelines (available from the Transgender Health Program) for health professionals who work with people undergoing gender transition, youth under age 18 who want to change their bodies need to be seen by adolescent health specialists who have training in trans medicine. The specialists may recommend three types of treatment, depending on the youth's age:

1. **Delaying puberty:** Trans youth whose dysphoria gets worse when puberty starts can be prescribed medication that will temporarily stop puberty. If you change your mind about transition while you're on these drugs, they can be stopped and you'll go through a normal puberty: in other words, this stage is fully reversible.
2. **Taking estrogen/testosterone:** At age 16, cross-sex hormones (estrogen for MTFs, testosterone for FTMs) can be prescribed. This will bring about most of the changes of puberty for the gender the person identifies as – MTFs will grow breasts, FTMs will grow facial hair, etc. The Transgender Health Program (see last page) has more information about what estrogen and testosterone do. These effects are partially reversible; some are permanent even if you stop hormones, and some are reversible.
3. **Surgery:** After age 18, possible surgical options include: breast implants, removal of the testicles/penis, creation of a vagina/clitoris/labia, facial surgery, voice surgery (MTF); or chest reconstruction, removal of the uterus/ovaries/vagina, creation of a penis/testicles (FTM). If hormone treatment has started early enough, chest/breast surgery, facial surgery, and voice surgery are usually not needed.

If you are sure you need to change your body, it's frustrating to have to wait until you reach a certain age to do this. But the health professionals involved in your care are responsible for making sure you are physically, mentally, and emotionally ready for the changes. You can use the time while you're waiting to make yourself

If your frustration is building up to the point where you feel hopeless, suicidal, or need to use drugs/alcohol to cope with the stress, talk to a health professional about ways to get more support. Hurting yourself won't speed up your transition.

as ready as possible, to demonstrate that you're mature and stable enough to go ahead, and help the changes go as smoothly as possible. The kinds of things to consider are:

- getting information for your parents, your family doctor, and any others involved in your care so they understand what you want
- how you will come out to family and friends, at school/work, etc. (as they will notice changes)
- transition changes you can make before you start hormones: e.g., finding a name and clothes that feel right for you
- preparing a support network (peer support, professional support, etc.) so you have people to talk with as you go through the changes

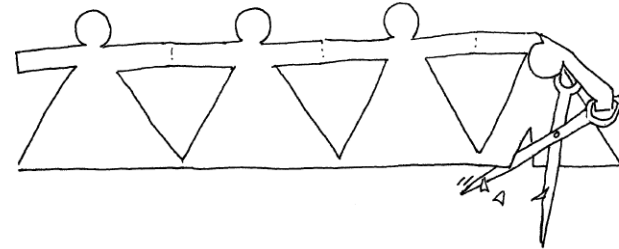
How do I deal with the rest of the world and deal with being trans?

As trans people and as professionals who have worked with many trans people, we believe it's not only OK to be trans, but that being trans offers unique insight and perspective. But not everyone feels this way. Many of the trans youth we have worked with described experiencing repeated discrimination, name-calling and other verbal harassment, threats, or in some cases even violence. Even when there isn't blatant mistreatment, growing up trans in a world that denies the existence of trans people or suggests that it's freakish to be trans can be traumatizing. Dealing with everyone else's baggage while you're dealing with decisions about being trans is a lot to face.

The good news is that despite all the difficulties, many trans people are happy and healthy. Everyone finds peace and happiness in different ways. The following are things that trans youth we have worked with have described as helping to cope with the stress of living in a transphobic society:

- having a sense of humour, keeping perspective that being trans isn't the end of the world
- making time to focus on other parts of who you are, not just being trans
- activism – using personal experience to try to change things for the better

- physically blowing off steam – weights, running, etc.
- having a creative outlet: art, writing, music, 'zine-making, etc.
- knowing other trans youth (e.g., through the internet, peer support groups, the Transgender Health Program's trans youth drop-in)
- having supportive friends
- having a supportive cultural/faith community
- spending time in nature; looking after animals/having pets
- peer counselling or professional counselling



Questions? Contact the Transgender Health Program:

Office: #301-1290 Hornby Street, Vancouver, BC V6Z 1W2

Phone/TTY/TDD: 604-734-1514 or 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC)

Email: transhealth@vch.ca

Web: <http://www.vch.ca/transhealth>

The Transgender Health Program is an anonymous and confidential free service for anyone in BC who has a trans health question or concern. Services for trans people and loved ones include:

- information about trans advocacy, medical care, hormones, speech change, and surgery
- help finding health/social services, and help navigating the trans health system
- non-judgmental peer counselling and support; trans youth drop-in
- support and information for family members, partners, friends, and other loved ones
- information about trans community organizations and peer support groups

Links to other youth resources:

<http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/resources/links/peer.html#peeryouth>



© February 2006 Vancouver Coastal Health, Transcend Transgender Support & Education Society and Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition

This publication may not be commercially reproduced, but copying for educational purposes is encouraged.

This booklet was written by A. J. Simpson and Joshua Mira Goldberg as part of the **Trans Care Project**, a joint effort of Transcend Transgender Support & Education Society and Vancouver Coastal Health's Transgender Health Program. We thank the Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition and Vancouver Coastal Health for funding this project. We also thank Emily Hodge, Roey Malleson, Heather O'Shea, Susanna Quail, and Caroline White for their input and Julian Gunn for his artwork.

For more copies, email the Transgender Health Program at trans.health@vch.ca or call/TTY 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC) and quote Catalogue No. GA.100.L569.