

The AEGIS Transition Series

Dealing with your feelings

*A guide to coming
out for persons with
gender dysphoria*

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NOTICE

This booklet is published as a public service. AEGIS and the author are in no way responsible for any decisions made or actions taken by any individual. If you are troubled about your gender, we urge you to seek help from a counselor or psychologist with special training and expertise in gender and human sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Many transgendered persons are quite comfortable with themselves. They are proud of who they are, and would not change things if they could. They have incorporated their individual expressions of gender into the fabric of their lives. Some become supremely confident, hiding nothing, happy and secure, expressing their gender as they see fit, with few or no negative repercussions.

Such confidence is not gained overnight. Most transgendered persons engage in a slow and often painful process of self-exploration which can last for years. They educate themselves, and they educate others about themselves. They "come out." That is, they come to accept and become comfortable with their nature.

Unfortunately, many transgendered persons remain alone and afraid. Fearing rejection, they never share their feelings with anyone. They live their lives, and sometimes terminate them prematurely, without ever coping with the thing that troubles them most.

This booklet is for those persons who have not yet come to terms with themselves. Its purpose is to help them to deal with feelings of guilt or insecurity, to explore and perhaps seek help for their gender dysphoria, to make the expression of their gender identity a part of their existence, and to hopefully live happier and more productive lives.

GENDER DYSPHORIA

Growing up with a pervasive and intense inner desire which one cannot (or feels one cannot) share with others and which one cannot or can only rarely satisfy is surely one of the most distressful experiences in the human condition. Many persons with gender dysphoria fit this description. Gender dysphoria is a sense of discomfort and unhappiness in the gender in which one has been assigned. It may be manifested in a wide variety of ways, and with varying levels of intensity.

If you are gender dysphoric, you may have only occasional and mild feelings of discontent or curiosity, or you may have a deep and abiding belief that your body does not match your psychological state and a resulting conviction that a change of sex is the only thing which will satisfy you. You may wish at times that you were more masculine, and at other times that you were more feminine. You may have an occasional distaste for

your genitalia or secondary sex characteristics, resulting in a temporary desire to be rid of them through hormonal therapy and surgery. Other times, you may be completely comfortable with your body as it is. You may have a compulsion to dress either totally or partially in the clothing of the other gender. You may or may not become sexually aroused by crossdressing or by fantasies of crossdressing. You may find yourself obsessed with thoughts of a particular activity or article of clothing. You may have labeled yourself a crossdresser, or a transgenderist, or a transsexual person—or, you may have no label for yourself.

You may suffer great conflict because of your desire to crossdress or change your sex. You may feel angry, confused, isolated and alienated, fearful, unacceptable and unaccepted, frustrated, or envious of the opposite sex—and sometimes you may feel all of those emotions at

once! You may think that you are the only one who feels the way you do. You may have tried to learn about yourself, only to find that information was difficult or impossible to obtain. Those to whom you would ordinarily confide—family, friends, lovers, teachers, ministers, and even psychologists or physicians—may have been denying, disapproving, or openly hostile. You may have never told anyone about your gender dysphoria.

Wherever you fit in the spectrum of gender dysphoria, it is important that you come to terms with yourself. Denial and guilt are unproductive and debilitating emotions, and, if unresolved, can cause grave problems in your life. Dissatisfaction with your gender, especially when not dealt with, can affect you in a variety of negative ways, some of which you might not consciously realize. Understanding your feelings will not provide a magical cure—there are no cures for gender dysphoria—but it can free you of conflict and make expression of gender a positive force in your life.

Sexuality

Sexual preference and gender identity are two different matters entirely. Sexual preference or orientation has to do with one's object choice in sexual activities. Your preference may be for men, for women, or for both, or for neither. It is not uncommon for persons with gender dysphoria to be unsure of their sexuality.

Gender identity, on the other hand, is your personal idea of self—

your sense of being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. Gender identity need not correspond either to your assigned gender or to your outward appearance. And gender identity has no relation to sexual preference.

Persons with gender dysphoria often express their sexuality in a typically heterosexual manner. Many marry and have children. Others find themselves attracted to persons who are of the same biological sex, but they experience this attraction heterosexually. Because they feel as if they were members of the opposite sex, they think of the relationship as heterosexual. This differs from ordinary homosexuality in that persons with gender dysphoria fantasize or believe that they are of the opposite sex. Homosexual men and women typically do not have such fantasies. They simply prefer sexual partners of the same sex.

Whatever your sexual preference, keep in mind that your sexuality has nothing whatsoever to do with your gender identity.

Common Misconceptions of Transgendered Persons

Much of the available information about gender dysphoria is biased and sensationalistic, and tends to perpetuate stereotypes which are generally not true. Transgendered persons often have misconceptions about their condition based on lack of information, or on faulty information. Chances are you believe or have at some point in the past believed one or more of the following.

I'm the Only One

One of the most common misconceptions is that you are the only person in the world with such feelings. This is far from true! There are tens, and perhaps hundreds of thousands of crossdressers, and there are tens of thousands of transsexual people, both male-to-female, and female-to-male. Chances are that you have known and had dealings both with transsexual people and crossdressers, and not known it. Transgendered persons are not readily visible, but they are everywhere in our society—flying planes, passing laws, or enforcing them, teaching our children, preaching sermons, ministering to the sick, building our houses, and repairing our cars.

Whatever your feelings, there are many who share them.

It's Only a Phase

You may have been told by persons in authority—by parents, clergy, teachers, or doctors—that you will outgrow your gender dysphoria, and you may believe it yourself. It won't happen. Whether you are a crossdresser or a transsexual person, your feelings will persist for the rest of your life. They may be weaker at some times than at others, but they will always be present. The quicker you face up to your gender dysphoria and realize that it is a part of your basic nature, the quicker you will be able to deal productively with it.

I Can Control This

You do have some freedom with regard to your behavior. Whether

you change your sex, or whether you choose to crossdress at any particular time is a matter of personal choice. But you cannot control your desires. The need to crossdress or change your sex will always be there, sometimes stronger than at other times, and it cannot be willed away. It will be very easy to succumb to it. Different persons choose different pathways. If your choice is to not crossdress or to not change your sex, you will need a great deal of willpower, and you will more than likely need professional help to maintain your resolve. And if you do crossdress, and even more so if you decide to change your sex, you will need peer support and professional help.

I Must Be Gay

Many persons with gender dysphoria go through a period of believing that they are homosexual. This generally happens because they do not understand the difference between sex and gender. Gay people rarely experience feelings of gender dysphoria. They like their gender and their sex lives the way they are. Effeminate male homosexuals and masculine female homosexuals are not indicative of the gay community as a whole. Most gay people pass for straight, and those who are openly homosexual can hardly all be classified as effeminate males and masculine females. The media sensationalizes and stereotypes gay people in the same way that it does transgendered people.

Gender dysphoria is separate and distinct from homosexuality.

I Must Keep This A Secret

Many men and women have revealed their gender dysphoria without experiencing significant rejection. Others have encountered grave difficulties. It is difficult to predict who will be supportive and who will not, but it is unlikely that you will experience blanket condemnation. You should take a realistic approach to the issue of revealing yourself, keeping in mind that the way you yourself feel about your gender dysphoria will be perceived by others, and will color their reactions. If you are comfortable with yourself and act as if it's no big deal, then others are more likely to accept you than if you act hesitant, ashamed, or uneasy.

I Will Become Transsexual

A desire to wear the clothing or to appear as a member of the other gender does not necessarily make you want to change your sex. If you are not already transsexual, cross-dressing is unlikely to lead to a serious desire to change your gender. A very few crossdressers sometimes become severely dysphoric and decide to change gender, but this is quite rare; these individuals typically admit to having transsexual feelings all of their lives. If you do not already want to change your gender, you will not want to do so in the future.

If you do want to change your gender, then appearing in the clothing of the other gender may strengthen that desire—but the desire will already be present, and you will no doubt know it.

I'll Go To Jail if I Crossdress in Public

In some locations, there are laws and ordinances against appearing in public in the clothing of the other gender. For the most part, these laws are not enforced. And while it is possible to run into a law enforcement officer with a personal prejudice, most encounters, if the transgendered person is not otherwise breaking the law, result in indifference, or even mild curiosity. This is true even in rural locations. Remember: your attitude will impact the law officer. If you are nervous or shaky, the officer may be likely to suspect something is wrong and give you extra scrutiny.

You should at all times carry your true ID and present it when asked for it. False identification will get you in trouble. So will a complaint by another citizen—but that is unlikely to occur unless you somehow offend someone. Most incidents center around public bathrooms. You should definitely avoid them unless you are supremely confident of your ability to pass as a member of the other gender.

If you are in therapy, you might ask your counselor or psychologist for a letter which explains that you are authorized to crossdress in public.

I'm Normal, But Other Transgendered Persons Aren't

If you decide to meet other transgendered persons, you will find that they are some of the nicest people on Earth. Outside of their gender dysphoria, transgendered people are pretty much the same as the general

population. They may be young or old, black or white, male or female, Catholic or Protestant, rich or poor, blue collar or white collar. It is possible that you will run across someone of questionable moral character, but this is no more likely to occur than it would in your everyday dealings with nontransgendered persons.

In the Closet

If you have not dealt with your feelings about your gender dysphoria, then you can be said to be "in the closet." That is, you are keeping a major part of you a secret from the world, and perhaps even from yourself. Being in the closet is something that transgendered people share with gay people, who invented the term to describe their own painful processes of self-denial and social isolation. The term applies equally well to persons who have a desire to crossdress, or who wish to change their sex.

Those who are in the closet may cope by any of a variety of social and psychological mechanisms. These coping mechanisms may be quite effective, or they may barely work at all—and strategies which work most of the time may prove quite ineffective during times of stress and change.

Being in the closet is not a comfortable place to be. Most people, once "out," are relieved and grateful, and gladly say so. But some gay men and women, and some transgendered persons, willingly stay in the closet. That is their choice, and it should be respected. If you are in the closet, you should not be forced out,

but you should be offered every opportunity to come out, if you so wish. Lack of information or support should not keep you in the closet.

A Tour of the Closet

Being in the closet can affect you in a variety of negative ways. You may (or may not) find that one or more of the following sections describe a strategy you have used or a behavior you have exhibited.

Denial

Perhaps the most common course of action is to take no action at all. If you attempt to repress and ignore your thoughts or desires, then you are engaging in denial. Your denial may be limited to others, or you may disavow your true nature even to yourself.

Denial does not work consistently. You may be able to successfully repress your feelings for a time, only to have them burst forth, causing you to engage in behaviors that you later find frightening. For example, you may pluck your eyebrows or shave your legs, even though you know it will cause you difficulty at a later time. You may desperately seek help, but even when help is forthcoming, you may not be able to take advantage of it, but will withdraw because of guilt, shame, or fear.

Keeping Your Gender Dysphoria A Secret

Keeping your feelings and activities from others can limit your opportunities for growth and exploration.

Any indulgence in crossdressing, or even reading of magazines and books will of necessity be done in secret, forcing you to engage in deceptive behavior. The less privacy you have, the fewer will be your opportunities to partake in such secret activities, and the more difficult they will be to conceal.

Chances are that you have hitherto been able to successfully keep your feelings and activities secret from your family, spouse, lovers, children, friends, and co-workers. A problem with such secrecy is that it will leave you vulnerable to discovery and "outing." Telling those you love about your crossdressing or transsexualism can be disastrous, but accidental discovery is almost certain to be. If your stash of counter-gender clothing and paraphernalia is discovered, it can lead to serious misinterpretation of your nature and motives, such as "My spouse is having an affair," or "My son is really gay." Confrontation may follow. Needless to say, such an encounter will not prove optimal for explaining your motives and intentions, and may lead to a family, marital, or job crisis. More than one such discovery has resulted in ostracism, divorce, or loss of employment. Your spouse, children, parents, or friends may themselves turn to denial in an attempt to cope with information which is at variance with their picture of you.

You are much more likely to find understanding and acceptance by explaining your feelings at a calm time of your own choosing, and perhaps even in the presence of a therapist.

Who to tell and when to tell them is a personal decision, and should be given a great deal of thought and planning (see the appendix).

Suicidal Thoughts

If you deny your feelings to yourself, you may become depressed, and may have thoughts of suicide or self-mutilation. Suicide statistics for transgendered persons are considered to be quite high.

If you are seriously depressed, or if you have persistent thoughts of killing or hurting yourself, or if you engage in behavior which is otherwise dangerous to you or others, you should seek the help of a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Self-Injurious Behavior

The literature contains a considerable number of reports of genital self-mutilation. This usually consists of self-castration by males who have been frustrated in their desire to change their sex, and is often undertaken only after careful study of anatomic textbooks. However, genitals are sometimes attacked during periods of frustration, and for reasons which are far from rational. Schizophrenics, for instance, sometimes develop strange rationales for destroying or removing parts of their bodies; these notions are entirely dependent upon their schizophrenia, and disappear when these individuals are treated with antipsychotic medications, or upon remission of the illness.

A very real danger of genital self-surgery is destruction of tissue which

will be needed for sex reassignment surgery, should you decide to have it. Vaginoplasty for male-to-female transsexual people uses most of the external penile and scrotal material; if you damage or excise this tissue, your chance of successful sex reassignment surgery will be greatly reduced. And of course, you may render yourself infertile and incapable of having sexual relations if you elect to remain in your gender of original assignment.

Whatever your motives, if you are considering self-surgery, you should immediately seek professional help. Genital modification should be done only by skilled surgeons, and then only at the end of a long and carefully supervised process of transition, after you have demonstrated that you can successfully live and work in the gender of choice. By providing systematic and progressive steps when changing gender, the Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc., provide safeguards for transgendered persons. If carefully followed, they will greatly reduce your chance of damaging yourself. If you do not follow the Standards of Care, you will be placing yourself at considerable medical and psychiatric risk.

Your Lifestyle and Career

If you are in the closet, you may compensate for your gender dysphoria by choosing a vocation which is highly sex-typed, and even hyper-masculine or hyperfeminine. In an attempt to prove your manhood, you may enlist in the military. You may marry primarily because you think it

will "cure" you. You may have children more to prove your manhood or womanhood than for their inherent value. Your hobbies and avocations may be similarly sex-typed—and, if you are a male, may involve needless risk-taking.

If you are suppressing strong feelings, or if your feelings are ambivalent or fluctuating, you may exhibit erratic or purposefully (or subconsciously) self-defeating behaviors. This may manifest itself in a variety of ways. You may be sloppy in your dress and lax in your grooming. You may have allowed yourself to become obese or overly thin. You may abuse alcohol or other drugs, avoid social and sexual relationships, or engage in compulsive sexual activity. You may keep yourself perpetually busy in order not to have to deal with your gender problem or to deny yourself time to crossdress. You may act in a hostile or hateful manner towards others. Or, you may modify your body in a way that "signals" your gender dysphoria, and immediately regret it.

Sexuality

In your sexual life, you may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual. If you are comfortable with your sexual relations, then there is no problem, whatever your choice. If your sexual orientation makes you uncomfortable, however, then you may feel guilt or anxiety about your sexual activities or partners. Especially if you feel that you are a member of the opposite biological sex, your sexual urges may be particularly puzzling to you. Keeping these feelings

in the closet will lead to worry and anxiety, and may cause you to engage in needless sexual risk-taking.

Facing Up

Coming to terms with your feelings will not automatically change your life situation or personality characteristics, but it may help you to avoid mistakes. For instance, if you realize that you need not continually prove your masculinity or femininity, you may choose an occupation which is more to your liking, and which you may be able to retain if you eventually decide to switch gender roles. Or, you may be able to express previously suppressed parts of your personality and thereby achieve greater stability and balance in your life.

Coming Out

Coming out of the closet is a psychological and social process in which an individual's image of himself or herself in society, and society's image of the individual changes to incorporate a new facet of identity. The person comes to view himself or herself as a member of a special group; a label is attached.

Although coming out can cause great changes in your life, it need not. You can come out only to yourself, accepting and trying to understand your nature. You can come out to a select few persons of your choosing. Or, you can come all the way out, keeping it a secret from no one. You need come out only as far as you wish.

You will find that there is a level in your life which allows you to express your total self, and at which you are reasonably comfortable. This level may change during the course of your life. To some extent it will depend upon your lifestyle and interpersonal relationships. In some locations, and in some circumstances, you may feel more comfortable than in others. At times you may find it advisable to retreat, and at others to advance. You may find that there are ways that you can structure your life to give you more freedom without jeopardizing yourself (for instance, by renting a post office box to receive mail or by traveling to other locations to crossdress).

You may find your level by simply admitting to yourself that you like to crossdress, and making opportunities to do so, or you may come to the conclusion that nothing short of sex reassignment will make you happy. You may decide to maintain the status quo, keeping your activities and desires secret from your loved ones. You may decide to tell a select few persons. Or you may decide to be quite open with everyone. Remember: everyone has a different level. One person's is not the same as any other's, and your level may change as you go through life. You must find the level that is right for you, but you should find it after working through negative emotions. You must not allow yourself to be limited by shame or guilt.

How to Come Out

Coming out is something you can do completely on your own, or with

the help of other people. You will probably find the assistance of others of great benefit.

Self-Education

Learning about gender dysphoria is learning about yourself. There are a surprising number of resources available, and they are not difficult to find, if you know how. You will be surprised to discover how much you can find out on your own. There will, however, come a time when you will need to talk about your gender dysphoria with someone else. Whether you choose a friend or family member, see a counselor, psychologist, clergyman, or physician, or join a support group, the day you tell someone else will be an important day in your life.

Keep in mind that even well-intentioned people can give bad advice. You should ideally have several persons to confide in, or be a member of several support groups, so that you can sample their diversity of opinion and experience.

Reading

Reading about gender dysphoria can be helpful, and is a good place to start, for it involves little risk. There are a considerable number of helpful books in print. Some are better than others, of course, but most will prove useful. You should read more than one so you can benefit from the differing perspectives of the authors.

There are a variety of types of books available. 'Celebrity' transsexual people such as Christine Jor-

gensen, Reneé Richards, Canary Conn, Jan Morris, and Tula (Caroline Cossey) have written autobiographies which are largely accounts of their gender dysphoria and how they have dealt with it. Sociologists and popular authors have studied groups of cross-dressers and transsexual people and written about them. Psychologists and psychiatrists who have worked in gender programs have written textbooks. There are books about historical personalities who lived cross-gender, books about the history of female impersonation and cross-dressing, and photographic studies of crossdressers.

To locate books on gender dysphoria, you might try looking up the terms crossdressing, transsexualism, transvestism, gender, gender dysphoria, and sex change in the card catalog in your library (more and more libraries are putting their holdings on computer; if your library has such a system, you need only type in the search term). Libraries of major universities, and especially universities with affiliated hospitals or medical schools are likely to have much more material available than the public library.

You will not find many books on the shelves in the bookstore. It will probably be necessary to special order the titles you want. You might look up the terms gender, transvestism, transsexualism, and change of sex in *Books in Print*. Many titles are available in paperback at reduced price.

If you are lucky, you may find used books, including some which

are out-of-print, by looking in the Alternative Lifestyles section of your favorite used bookstore. For a low fee, most bookstores will advertise nationally for titles you need. This is another way to locate rare and out-of-print books.

There is a professional literature of gender dysphoria, consisting in large part of book chapters and articles in professional journals. These articles are typically written by psychologists or physicians, and examine gender dysphoria from a number of perspectives. There are case studies of transsexual persons and cross-dressers; reports of successful and unsuccessful behavioral, pharmacological, surgical, and psychotherapeutic treatments; studies of the outcome of sex reassignment surgery; discussion of surgical and hormonal techniques; papers arguing for and against sex reassignment surgery; discussions of the legal issues surrounding crossdressing, and particularly transsexualism; investigations of the etiology of crossdressing and transsexualism; and discussions of the personality characteristics of those who crossdress or request sex reassignment—and that is but a partial list of the types of articles in the literature.

The subject population of the professional literature is largely limited to those who have sought help for their gender dysphoria, and so is inherently biased—that is, those who were studied may have exhibited significantly more psychopathology than the general population of persons with gender dysphoria.

Although much of the literature is objective and scientific, it includes a surprising amount of emotionalism and bias; this surfaces as name-calling and belittling of crossdressers and transsexual persons, reports of unreasonable refusals to grant hormonal or surgical assignment, attempts at "cures" which rely on use of aversive treatment with medication or electric shock, and conclusions which often fly in the face of available data and common sense. As is true for the social sciences in general, well-conceived and well-controlled studies are the exception, rather than the rule. You should read the literature with some skepticism.

Your public library is unlikely to have the journals which contain the professional literature, but the libraries of university libraries will carry many of them. As is the case with books about gender dysphoria, universities with medical schools or hospitals are apt to have more titles. Some university libraries charge fees for those who are not students, faculty, or alumni.

If you are unable to locate a book or journal, you can request it through inter-library loan. For a small fee, your library will borrow the title from another library and give you access to it.

Many books about gender dysphoria contain extensive reference sections which can direct you to journal articles. Psychological Abstracts, PsychLit, Index Medicus and other databases list articles by topic, author, and subject, just like the card catalog. Most public libraries will not

have these databases, but they will have the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, which will identify articles in the popular press.

Many universities have databases on CD-ROM. This eliminates the need to plow through multiple books full of tiny print, hand-copying references. By doing an electronic search, you can in minutes identify hundreds of articles. Usually, you can print the list of references or save it on MS-DOS diskette for later perusal.

If you have never used such a database, the reference librarian can quickly show you how to work the system.

Some support groups maintain small libraries. Others sell or distribute pamphlets and books. A brief reading list can be found at the end of this booklet. Additionally, the author has compiled an extensive bibliography of gender dysphoria, which is constantly being updated. The bibliography is available for a nominal fee from AEGIS. Information for subscription or purchase can be found at the back of this booklet.

Films and Video

Daytime television talk shows frequently feature transgendered persons. Although these shows tend to be somewhat sensationalistic, they do sometimes include useful information and sources for information. Transcripts of the shows can be purchased for a nominal price. During each show, the address for transcripts is put on the screen.

There are a number of films and videos about crossdressing and transsexualism, but they are unlikely to be found in your local discount department store. The magazines and newsletters of transgender support groups often carry advertisements for videotapes at reasonable prices.

Adult bookstores sometimes contain magazines and videos which feature "she-males" and female impersonators. The information content of these materials is practically nil, but occasionally a legitimate publication finds its way onto the shelves. Of course, it is difficult to discriminate information from pornography when everything is sealed in plastic bags. It is good practice to avoid adult bookstores.

Publications Available Within The Gender Community

The loose association of gender clinics, support groups, service provider, and information distribution centers has been called the gender community, for there is a considerable amount of interaction, crossreferring, and information exchange between the different groups. The various factions of the gender community publish newsletters and magazines, "how-to" books, fiction, and self-help materials for crossdressers and transsexual people. This literature is almost exclusively written by transgendered persons. Service providers sometimes contribute articles, however. Catalogs of products, phone numbers of computer bulletin board systems, and audio and video cassettes are also available. National and regional seminars, conferences, and conventions are also advertised.

The International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE) serves as an umbrella organization for the gender community. Every issue of IFGE's magazine, *The TV-TS Tapestry Journal*, provides a complete list of active gender organizations, as well as advertisements, articles, and personal listings. Make no mistake about it: a copy of *Tapestry* is a doorway into the gender community. IFGE also markets a number of mass-market publications which deal with gender issues. IFGE's address can be found at the back of this booklet.

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc. (HBI/GDA) is an organization whose membership is comprised of physicians, psychologists, and others who work with persons with gender dysphoria. Transgendered persons can join as associate members. HBI/GDA's address is in the back of this booklet.

Support Organizations

There are perhaps a dozen full-service gender clinics in the United States. They offer a continuum of care to transsexual persons, ranging from initial diagnosis to postoperative care following sex reassignment surgery. To those who do not wish to change their sex, they offer counseling and other support.

The "everything under one roof" approach may be favored by some, but there is considerable cost associated with gender clinics. Many transgendered persons prefer to comparison shop for service providers. This is most easily done by contacting a

support group or other service organization.

There are many support groups and organizations which assist in transition, and charge moderate to small fees. They vary in size, focus, and quality, ranging from informal gatherings of 3 or 4 persons to being just short of a gender clinic. Most major cities in the United States have some sort of support group for transgendered persons. The nature and target populations of these groups vary.

The relative merits of open and closed groups can be and have been argued. Open groups serve persons with a wide range of interests. Members may include fetishistic crossdressers, effeminate gay men who work as female impersonators, transgenderists, and both female-to-male and male-to-female transsexual people. They are open to anyone interested in gender issues. Closed groups limit themselves to one subgroup; the most usual separation is that of heterosexual crossdressers from transsexual people.

Support groups are bastions of support and information. You should look for a group which is a good fit, but you will probably find that any group is preferable to no group. If you are able to find a group which is tailored explicitly to your needs, then by all means, join! If there is not a local group which completely meets your needs, it may be to your advantage to join a group which you consider tangential. Even groups which do not explicitly suit you can be of great emotional and practical bene-

fit—and chances are you will find other members who share your problems, enthusiasms, and concerns. Many transsexual people, for example, are at one time or another members of The Society for the Second Self (Tri-Ess), an organization for heterosexual crossdressers. Membership offers a chance for camaraderie, sharing of experiences, and self-exploration, and will put you in touch with providers of services and groups which you feel may be a better "fit."

Support groups offer safe havens for crossdressing, the opportunity to socialize and perhaps find friends, and opportunities to learn more about presenting yourself in the gender of choice. Programs often feature service providers or other persons with special knowledge of gender dysphoria.

Many support groups have newsletters and lending libraries; some have clothing exchanges. There are occasional trips en masse to conventions which large groups of crossdressers and transsexual people attend. Some groups have peer support or "big brother/big sister" programs which pair newcomers with experienced members. Others have telephone support lines.

You should take steps to ascertain that the people who run the support group—and the other members—have an appreciation of your need for confidentiality. You should seek persons who have been around and are knowledgeable of the gender community and of gender dysphoria, but every group must have its beginning; most groups are started

because of the mutual needs of its members, and many start with people who are equally in need of information and assistance. Groups tend to be transient in nature, and the recent growth of the gender community has resulted in many newly formed support groups. You should not reject a support group out-of-hand simply because it is new, or its leaders inexperienced.

Groups should be nonsexual in nature, unless you are specifically interested in exploring your sexuality in such a context.

And of course, your group should be designed to support you, and not to support someone else with your money. Fees should be low to moderate, and services which are promised should materialize promptly. You should keep in mind, however, that almost all of the groups are run by volunteers, most of whom must work for a living, and that every group has many more takers than it has givers. Most groups run on a shoestring, often bankrolled by the personal funds of the founders, who, when it comes right down to it, would rather buy a stamp out of their own pocket than let someone's needs go unmet. Don't expect miracles from the group leaders. You should, in fact, pitch in and lend a hand. It will be to your benefit, for you will learn a lot, and you will feel better about yourself.

Confidantes

Many transgendered persons have one or more special people to whom they can bare their souls. In some

cases this is a spouse, sibling, or parent; often, it is a close friend who has been entrusted with the very private revelation of crossdressing or transsexualism. It may be a member of a support group or a co-worker, or a physician or clergyman.

Choosing the right person is of paramount importance. More than one transgendered person has confided in what he or she thought to be a friend, only to find that the news was all over town by the end of the week. It is difficult to predict who will maintain confidentiality and who will not. You must use your judgment and decide whether to take the risk. You can minimize the risk by choosing someone who does not know the particulars of your life—perhaps a fellow support group member, someone you know in another town, or an old friend who has moved to another city.

A confidante is someone to whom you can turn in times of stress. You can let them know your true feelings, ask advice, and perhaps even spend time with them crossdressed. Confidantes need not be physically present. You may cultivate a phone pal, or a pen pal. Tri-Ess and IFGE both have personal listings, complete with photographs. You can write transgendered persons in other cities or states, revealing to them only that information which you wish for them to know. You might want to rent a post office box for correspondence, as it will keep your home address secret.

If you decide to meet a pen pal in person, you can arrange to meet in a neutral location.

You'll find that pen pals soon become real pals; after several rounds of correspondence, you'll feel more comfortable about sharing your phone number and other personal information. And your pal will no doubt become more comfortable with you, and share similar information. Remember: your pen pal has the same privacy needs that you do. Treat all information as confidential. You should never give the name, address, or telephone number of a transgendered person to anyone without their explicit permission to do so.

Therapy

Counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, ministers, social workers, and others in the helping professions can be of benefit in the coming out process. Unfortunately, few therapists are knowledgeable about transsexualism or crossdressing. Most will be willing to learn, but this may prove to be an expensive process (for you), and will require additional commitment on both your parts. It might behoove you to shop around for a therapist rather than accepting the first one you interview. You are not obligated to continue a therapeutic relationship which you feel is not benefiting you. Your therapist will probably be happy to refer you to a colleague.

There is a danger that the unknowledgeable therapist will think you can be cured of your transsexualism or crossdressing. Although the literature contains scattered accounts of such "cures," they remain unreplicated and should be viewed with considerable skepticism. A psycholo-

gist or psychiatrist who is convinced that therapy will rid you of your feelings of gender dysphoria (as opposed to helping you to become better adjusted and at ease with them) will probably not be of help to you, and may even do you harm.

This is something it would be better not to have to write about, but it must be addressed: be careful in choosing your therapist, for on a few occasions confidential information has been leaked from the offices of clergymen, psychologists, and physicians. It takes only one talkative office staffer for the news of your gender dysphoria to be all over town. Crossdressing and transsexualism are juicy news tidbits. If you live in a small town, you might consider traveling elsewhere for medical and psychological help—but by all means, don't let overconcern about your security keep you from seeking help. Therapists and physicians take great pains to protect the confiden-

tiality of their clients and patients, and mistakes are only rarely made.

Your therapist can help you to explore your feelings, and can also help you to explain your crossdressing or transsexualism to your spouse, your parents, your children, your employers, and others. You should not expect miracles, but you should expect helpful observations and suggestions which will help you get through your everyday life. You can also expect diagnosis of your condition, and, if you are transsexual, letters which will allow you to begin hormonal therapy, and, later, a letter which gives you the go-ahead for sex reassignment surgery.

Your therapist should be knowledgeable of the Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc. If not, the Standards can be ordered from HBIGDA; their address can be found in the back of this booklet.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, you are the one who is in charge of the coming out process. Only you can put feelings of shame and guilt to rest. Books, therapists, and support groups may help make you more comfortable with yourself, but it is up to you to bring yourself out.

How can you do this? Well, it will take courage, and it will take work. You must look objectively at your gender dysphoria, and try to integrate it into the fabric of your life. You must come to terms with yourself.

Remember—you need only come as far out of the closet as you wish—but you can come as far out as you wish.

No one is keeping you in the closet. You are there because of your own fear and denial. You can come out if you want. It will be a lot of work, and not without risk, but the risk can be minimized, and there will be people who are willing to help you, especially if you contact a support group or a knowledgeable professional.

APPENDIX

COMING OUT

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When we think of communications, many thoughts may come to mind. Conversing on the telephone, chatting through computer modems, speaking to friends and family, or even our own gender leaders educating a group of budding psychologists—all these are different forms of communication. As individuals experiencing various levels of gender issues and self-awareness, we often find ourselves becoming more in touch with our feelings and needs. Equally important to discovering new levels of self is sharing the discoveries we have made, so that we may enrich our experiences and fulfill our newly identified needs.

"Coming Out" can be a powerful experience, often serving as a catalyst in revealing our special secret self, while at the same time improving our overall communication skills. Sharing our gender and sexuality issues with people close to our hearts can be intimidating. In our

pre-established relationships (i.e., family, partners and close friends), we often become comfortable in speaking about daily needs and occurrences. Often, we overlook communication as an important tool which cements our relationships together, assuming that those individuals "know what our needs may be." In revealing important issues like coming out, we must deal with the focus being directly aimed at us. We may draw on the fear of "I may be rejected," or "I feel a lot of shame surrounding this issue." Hence, we perceive coming out, like other communication challenges, as risky business.

In disclosing deeply personal issues, such as coming out, one guideline therapist Roger Peo endorses is the fundamental question, "Will this improve my relationship with this person?" This is an excellent measure in determining necessity versus risk.

Revealing our needs has always been a risky business. There are, however, a number of tools we can use to minimize risk, which are illustrated in the following:

Prepare for Communicating

Much like going to a business meeting, it can be helpful to prepare a list of items you wish to discuss. Also, talking with a knowledgeable friend or counselor can be helpful. Dan, our imaginary gender person, is about to tell his wife, Karen, about his gender issues. Dan first spoke with his therapist about his feelings, then strategized a communications plan, and finally, he defined a level of confidentiality to request from Karen.

Make an Appointment

The first thing Dan did was to ask Karen whether she would feel comfortable talking personally over dinner.

Validate the Relationship

This is an important door opener. It reaffirms the relationship and its strengths. Dan stated, "Karen, I want you to know I've drawn a great deal of happiness from our eight years of marriage. What I have to share is very personal, and I feel I can trust sharing it with you." Dan also sought a confidentiality agreement at this time.

Relieve Stress by Revealing

Just about now, our imaginary character is starting to sweat a little.

Like many great communicators, he found that by telling Karen that he was feeling a little nervous, he had put Karen in an empathetic mood. Feeling a little more comfortable, he can now move on.

Share the Facts

"Karen, I'm a crossdresser and have even thought about having a sex change." There—Dan did it! He then continued to share the facts he knew about himself and gender issues, all the time respectfully answering Karen's questions. He also deferred questions to which he didn't know the answers to a future discussion.

Affirm the Other Person's Beliefs and Feelings

It is at this point that we "may not hear what we want." The other person does have the right to their own beliefs and feelings. Recognizing this can serve only to strengthen your communications. Dan followed this by listening while Karen expressed reservations about his crossdressing around their children. He told Karen he would talk to his therapist to see if crossdressing around children was harmful.

Seal the Communication

In any good communication, it's important to have a proper closing. Karen had stated, "I'm not very happy about this, and there is a lot I don't understand, although I am willing to learn more without passing judgement." In closing, Dan thanked Karen for being there for him, while

restating that he valued his relationship with her, and then gave her a warm hug.

Communicating individual needs like gender and sexuality issues won't always be this easy. However, you have just seen some powerful tools that you may include in your communications repertoire. With

practice, as you increase your communication skills, you will find an increased sense of empowerment and satisfaction. Do remember that after sharing something as stressful as coming out, you may be well-served by spending time alone, positively reflecting on your personal success... and if you wish, rewarding yourself in a special way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gianna Eveling Israel is the founding director of the Gender and Self Acceptance Program in San Francisco. She provides individual and small-group workshops, counseling, and education for those focusing on gender, self-acceptance, and life-transition issues. Nationally, she provides ongoing telephone counseling by monthly retainer. Her published writings reflect her empathetic and intuitive skills, which have benefited her transgendered peers in their everyday lives, empowering them to live fulfilled and integrated lifestyles.

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GLOSSARY

Crossdresser: One who wears the clothing of the other gender. Heterosexual males who crossdress for erotic reasons, formerly called transvestites, tend to prefer this term.

Gender: Being a woman or a man, a boy or a girl. Gender is a social construct, and is distinct from sex, which is the individual's state of maleness or femaleness (a biological quality).

Gender Dysphoria: A sense of persistent discomfort or inappropriateness in the gender of assignment.

Gender Identity: One's sense of being a man or a woman, a boy or a girl.

Homosexuality: Sexual preference for those of the same sex.

Sex: The biological quality of maleness or femaleness, as opposed to gender, which is a social construct.

Sex Reassignment: Modifying the body to make it as much as possible like that of the opposite sex, and permanently living in the social role that is associated with that sex.

Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS): Surgical refashioning of the genitalia to resemble the external genitalia of the other sex.

Sexual Orientation: Sexual preference. Choice of erotic partner of the same or opposite sex. An individual may be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual.

Standards of Care: A set of minimum guidelines formulated by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc., and designed to safeguard both transsexual persons and those who provide professional services to transsexual persons. By imposing various requirements on both the service provider and the consumer, the Stan-

dards minimize the chance of an individual regretting the decision to change gender.

Transsexual: An individual who is profoundly unhappy in the gender of

original assignment. The transsexual person wishes to change the genitalia and secondary sex characteristics to be as much as possible like that of the opposite sex and to live in the gender normally associated with that sex.

READING AND RESOURCE LIST

Benjamin, Harry. 1966. *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. NY: Warner Books.

Bolin, Anne. 1988. *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage*. MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Elizabeth, Sister Mary. 1990. *Legal aspects of transsexualism—1990 edition*. J2CP: San Juan Capistrano, CA.

Hodgkinson, Liz. 1987. *Bodysock: The Truth About Changing Sex*. London: Columbus Books.

Jorgensen, Christine. 1967. *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography*. NY: Paul S. Ericksson, Inc.

Morris, Jan. 1974. *Conundrum*. NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Richards, Reneé (with John Ames). 1983. *Second Serve: The Reneé Richards Story*. NY: Stein and Day.

Stuart, Kim Elizabeth. 1983. *The Uninvited Dilemma: A Question of Gender*. Portland, OR: Metamorphous Press.

Many of these books are available from:

The International Foundation for Gender Education (IFGE)

P.O. Box 367
Wayland, MA 01778
Phone: (617) 899-2212

Heterosexual crossdressers might consider contacting:

The Society for the Second Self (Tri-Ess)

P.O. Box 194
Tulare, CA 93275

The Standards of Care are available from:

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc.
HBIGDA
1515 El Camino Real
Palo Alto, CA 94306
(415) 326-4645

The following booklets are currently available from AEGIS:

Discovering Who You Are: A Guide to Self-Assessment For Persons With Gender Dysphoria.

Deciding What To Do About Your Gender Dysphoria: Some Considerations For Those Who Are Thinking About Sex Reassignment.

Dealing with Your Feelings: A Guide to Coming Out for Persons With Gender Dysphoria.

Coming in late 1991:

Information for Family, Friends, and Employers of Persons With Transsexualism.

Information for Family Friends, and Employers of Heterosexual Cross-dressers.

Booklets are \$6.00 each, postpaid.

The 300+ page AEGIS Bibliography of Gender Dysphoria is available for \$10.00 on MS-DOS 3.5 or 5 1/4 inch diskette, postpaid. Hardcopy is available for \$30.00, postpaid.

Or, join AEGIS by sending \$30 (\$40 outside the U.S. and Canada), and receive four issues of Chrysalis Quarterly, our magazine, and any three Transition Series booklets.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dallas Denny has nearly twenty years experience in the mental health field, and has worked with persons with gender dysphoria since 1989. She is a Qualified Mental Retardation Professional. She is licensed as a psychological examiner in Tennessee. She has a B.A. from Middle Tennessee State University and an M.A. from the University of Tennessee, and has completed the coursework for the doctoral degree from Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. She is a prolific writer, and has been published in both peer-reviewed professional journals and popular magazines.

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The American Educational Gender Information Service (AEGIS) is a not-for-profit business which disseminates information to persons interested in issues of gender. AEGIS provides free referrals to support groups and gender clinics, and free referrals to physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, social agencies and private social workers, ministers and attorneys to those not within range of a gender clinic or support group. We maintain a worldwide database of helping professionals, including surgeons who perform sex reassignment. Our magazine, **Chrysalis Quarterly**, is published four times a year, and we will be offering other publications as they are readied. We work actively with our sister organizations, exchanging newsletters, information, and referrals, and helping to organize cooperative projects and events.

AEGIS supports the Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc., and makes referrals contingent upon documentation of

adherence to these standards. We actively support the professionalization and standardization of services for transgendered persons. We promote nonjudgemental and nondiscriminatory treatment of persons with gender dysphoria, and advocate respect for their dignity, their right to treatment, and their right to choose their gender.

AEGIS was founded and is managed by a licensed human service professional with knowledge of the professional literature of gender issues and more than a decade of experience in the delivery of psychological services.

The word AEGIS means, variously, shield, protection, and sponsorship. We will strive to live up to our acronym by at all times maintaining confidentiality and by helping transgendered persons make reasoned and informed decisions about the ways in which they will live their lives.

aegis (e'jis), n. 1. in Greek mythology, a shield or breastplate used by Zeus and, later, by his daughter Athena; hence, 2. a protection. 3. sponsorship; auspices.

*Webster's New World Dictionary
of the American Language*

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