

# THE TRANSSEXUAL JOURNEY

## Guidelines for Family, Friends, and CoWorkers

By Peter Muniz

### TRANSSEXUALISM

Many developmental phenomena occur during the nine months that transpire before birth. Relatively few of them are understood. Among these are the factors contributing to the condition known as transsexualism. There are, of course, research based theories and conjectures, but we do not yet have a definitive body of knowledge that helps us understand the elements underlying transsexualism. Researchers, sexologists, and counselors do not even agree on the use of such key words as "gender" and "sex."

In this section, I make no attempt to reconcile the prevailing theories about transsexualism. Nor am I trying to present a definitive, scientific paper on the condition. I leave that up to the researchers and practitioners who address transsexualism. The resources listed at the end of this article provide additional information on the existing scientific explanations of transsexualism.

This section presents a short description of transsexualism based on existing theories, so we can then move on to the major objective of the article, which is to provide an understanding of the personal and interpersonal aspects of transsexualism. Moreover, the article focuses on the crucial role of the persons surrounding the transsexual.

One prevailing theory about trans-sexualism is that, during the nine months before birth, the fetus is programmed in accordance with the body that is slowly developing. Females are programmed to live in a female body. Males are programmed to live in a male body. After birth and throughout life, the person's feelings, psyche, and sense of identity are synchronized with the body that he or she developed in the womb.

Sometimes — through no fault of the parents, the child, or society — the program is not synchronized with the body. According to a growing number of professionals, this is caused by a hormonal change within the uterus before birth. A person born with a male body has been programmed as a female. A person born with a female body has been programmed as a male. Such persons are known as transsexuals.

Transsexuals are a distinct group from others with whom they are often confused. As occurs in the broader population, some transsexuals may be homosexual. For the most part, however, transsexuals are not lesbian or gay, whose condition is characterized by sexual orientation toward persons of their own gender. They have no desire to change their bodies. Some gay men may want to appear feminine, and some lesbians may want to appear masculine. But they do not wish to change their bodies surgically. They are content with cosmetic, wardrobe, and behavior changes.

Transsexuals are sometimes confused with transvestites, who dress in clothing that

society deems appropriate for the opposite gender. Their behavior may be a fetish or may be based on an erotic need. Transvestites have no wish to change their bodies surgically. Their identification with the opposite gender is limited to the use of wardrobe appropriate to that gender. This is sometimes accompanied by temporary physical changes such as men shaving their legs and underarms, or women binding their breasts tightly to diminish their chest size when wearing men's clothing.

From the time that they are children, transsexuals are plagued by the immense, uncontrollable difference between their programmed gender identity and the body in which they live. Rarely do they understand their condition before adulthood. Many suffer in silence, unable to describe what is happening to them and unable to comprehend why they are so different from others whose bodies look like their own. They experience increased discomfort with — and sometimes hatred of — the body they have lived in since birth. These feelings are labeled Gender Dysphoria by psychologists and psychiatrists.

Once transsexuals understand their condition, they are confronted with two choices:

1. To continue suffering gender dysphoria, which may also be complicated by the need to continuously hide their condition from family, friends, and co workers. This option is often accompanied by intense, lifelong suffering and emotional distress which sometimes lead to suicide.

2. To change their bodies surgically to agree with their seemingly irreversible, internal program that is appropriate for a body of the opposite gender. They are trapped in a situation in which two major aspects of their being are completely out of synchronization. One — the program — apparently can't be changed. The other — the body — could be changed. In selecting the option to change their bodies, transsexuals make a commitment to a journey which is expensive, long, arduous, and painful. Moreover, the decision often causes family, friends, co workers, and society to oppress, ridicule, or reject the transsexual. In some cases, transsexuals who decide to undergo gender change surgery are totally rejected by one or more of those groups. Their parents, for example, may completely disown them.

"We brought a girl into this world and we will never accept you as a man!" or "If you go through with that operation, you can forget about us for the rest of your life!" Friends and coworkers may not be as vocal as family, but their behavior quickly tells the transsexuals that relationships have been severed forever.

The rest of this paper refers to those transsexuals who choose to resolve their dilemma surgically. They embark on a journey that will change the body they were given at birth to the body for which they were irreversibly programmed as they developed in the womb. Will the change be perfect? No. But they prefer an 80% or 90% imperfect match to the 100% mismatch they received at birth.

Embarking on this journey involves several risks. Besides the possible loss of some or all of the people who may be part of their support system — family, friends, coworkers —

transsexuals must undergo intense therapy and soul searching to arrive at a decision which will eliminate a major source of unhappiness but which does not guarantee happiness. The surgical procedure is irreversible. In addition, transsexuals also risk sanctions of the society at large as they implement the steps required for their journey. These sanctions could include loss of jobs and interruptions of careers. Moreover, during this transition, the transsexual is confronted with huge bills for medical and other expenses.

### The Journey

The transsexual journey is long, arduous, expensive, and painful. It usually consists of the following steps:

#### STEP 1: *Awareness.*

After considerable turmoil, which lasts from early childhood through post puberty, transsexuals recognize a distinct discomfort with — and sometimes a hatred of — the gender and role they were assigned at birth.

#### STEP 2: *Research.*

The transsexuals begin an investigation of the condition in which they find themselves. This is often done clandestinely, through serendipity, or by confiding in a small circle of friends or acquaintances because they fear sanctions, oppression, or rejection of their family, friends, or coworkers. Eventually, transsexuals discover support groups consisting of others like themselves. This rapidly expands their knowledge about their condition. It also provides them with much needed acceptance, understanding, and emotional support.

#### STEP 3: *The Decision to Change.*

The transsexuals decide to implement the long and risky process of gender change. At this point they may explain their decision to some family members and friends. Because of economic and career risks, coworkers are often left out at this stage.

#### STEP 4: *Implementation of the Change.*

This usually involves:

- a. At least three months of therapy culminating in a decision to continue the process if such a decision is appropriate.
- b. Beginning of lifetime hormone treatment to change the body's chemistry that governs gender identity. Soon after treatment begins, changes become evident. Female to male transsexuals may, for example, start to grow facial hair; voice pitch may get lower. Male to female transsexuals may start to develop breasts; their body contours may get softer.
- c. One year of working and living 24 a hours a day in the new gender role. This often includes a legal name change.
- d. Reassignment surgery to change the sex organs to coincide with the new gender.

### *STEP 5: Adjustment.*

This involves continuous physical, emotional, and societal adjustment to the new gender.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Family, friends, and co workers of a transsexual can be a negative or a positive factor as the person travels the journey leading towards the desired gender change. One of the first things you must do is recognize and accept the fact that the transsexual — your family member, friend, or coworker — has finally come to grips with the gender dysphoria that has been a major source of anguish and torment for most of the person's life. The person has already paid a high price for living in turmoil up to this point.

The person has said: "Enough!" and has decided to embark on a perilous journey — gender change — with the expectation that a major barrier to the enjoyment of a full life as a human being will be eliminated. The person will need your acceptance, help, and understanding (even though you will never fully understand what they are experiencing). You don't have to agree with the decision. But you must accept the person's right to make and implement that decision.

Gender change does not necessarily mean personality change. If anything, transsexuals may change for the better because they are finally confronting and changing a condition that has tormented them for years.

Here are some of the things you can do to help your family member, friend, or coworker who has embarked on the journey that will culminate in the gender change he or she craves — physically and emotionally.

1. If you have accepted the person to this point, don't reject them because they have decided to confront and resolve their own gender dysphoria. Your acceptance and understanding are important to them as they travel their journey.

2. Learn about gender dysphoria and transsexualism.

3. Try to understand what the transsexual has experienced; the emotional price that the person has paid as a result of gender dysphoria and the decision to change the situation surgically.

4. Try to understand the person's feelings about and reasons for the decision; but do not pity or feel sorry for the person. Transsexuals need understanding and acceptance, they don't need pity.

5. Be aware of your thoughts, opinions, biases, and stereotypes about transsexuals. Tuning into these can help you understand your reactions to, behavior toward, and acceptance of transsexuals.

6. Learn to discuss transsexualism openly with others.

7. Ask the person any questions you may have about transsexualism.

8. Continue to treat the person as a human being. The transsexual condition or

journey does not negate or diminish the person's status as a human being.

9. Discourage rumors or jokes about the transsexual.

10. To the extent possible, ensure that the transsexual does not suffer loss of job or career interruption as a result of the decision to undergo gender change. Coworkers can make insidious remarks to each other and the boss to turn people against the transsexual. As a coworker you can refuse to engage in such behavior. As a boss, you must be alert to such comments and their probable intent.

I hope this article provides the information you need to understand transsexualism. Moreover, I hope it encourages you to give the understanding, love, support, and acceptance that the transsexual needs from you — whether you are a parent, sibling, friend, or coworker.

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Stuart, Kim Elizabeth, *The Uninvited Dilemma: A Question of Gender*, Portland: Metamorphous, 1991.

#### ORGANIZATIONS

##### **Renaissance Transgender Association, Inc.**

987 Old Eagle School Road, Suite 719

Wayne, PA 19087

610-975-9119

email: [info@ren.org](mailto:info@ren.org)

<http://www.ren.org>

##### **Ingersoll Gender Center**

1812 E. Madison

Seattle, WA 981222843

##### **International Foundation for Gender Education**

P.O. Box 367

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