

Tips for Working with a Transgender Client In Session

Most transgender clients will come in wanting to address the same life issues and stressors as all other clients who enter your office. Not all transgender clients wish to discuss their gender in therapy. Avoid asking questions about whether they have had surgeries, are on hormones or what their previous name was, *unless it is entirely relevant to your work with them.*

You hear: “I’ve never told anyone this before.” Assess the client’s needs after disclosure including fears you might reject them based on what they shared. Be extremely cautious about the need to bring their family members into the discussion of gender. Transgender people are at high risk for assault or homelessness upon disclosure to parents, a spouse or family members.

You’re thinking: “She’s too pretty ever be seen as a man” or “He’ll never pass as a woman.” Do your best to set aside your judgments. The goal of your work is help clients feel comfortable with themselves including their body, gender role and how they present. This does not always mean society (or you) will be comfortable with the result. Your support and acceptance are of the utmost importance in reducing shame and self-hate associated with internal gender conflict.

You can ask: “Any other name you like to call yourself?” Ask your client which pronouns and name they prefer you to use in session. Clarify if the client wants all staff including reception, or only you to call them by their chosen name/pronouns. Put the chosen name in parenthesis or write in “Prefers the name: X” in chart. Using a preferred name can be an incredibly liberating and validating experience. Using your client’s chosen name does not mean you are necessarily validating any particular diagnosis. Therapy is an appropriate place for clients to experiment using different names or gender presentations. Your office should be a safe place for clients to come to sessions crossdressed. You can consider arranging safe places for clients to change, if needed, before and after sessions.

Let them know: “You are not alone in your experience.” If a client is newly identifying a gender issue, you may help them learn vocabulary to speak about their experience through educational resources including books and websites like IFGE.org, Laura’s Playground and FTMI.org. Consider the Internet as one place they can first explore their gender, reduce isolation and find transgender community.

Know when to refer out . Therapists who are not trained in gender issues **can** create a safe environment for clients to feel free to express and explore their gender identity. However, the gender issues a client presents with can be quite complex, especially if clients are dually diagnosed. It is a great burden and inappropriate for clients to serve as your main educational resource. An formal assessment is often required by doctors before clients can seek hormones or surgical interventions (see *The World Professional Association of Transgender Health* Standards of Care www.wpath.org). It is important to seek consultation when working out of your scope of practice.

Locate a Gender Specialist for consultation. A gender specialist must have a minimum of two years supervision or consultation with a Senior Gender Specialist. Their work may include taking a gender history, psychotherapy, preparation for hormones or surgery, collaboration with health care providers, family therapy, workplace consultation, and referrals to groups. **Consider consultation with a gender specialist via phone/web cam.** Locate a gender specialist through WPATH.org (612) 624-8078.