



Navigating Transphobia

Transphobia is the fear, hatred, disbelief or mistrust of people who are transgender, thought to be transgender or whose gender expression doesn't conform to traditional gender norms. This definition can be extended to include gender queer or gender fluid people.

Transphobia includes negative attitudes and beliefs; prejudice against trans, gender queer and gender fluid people; irrational fears; ignoring preferred gender identity/pronouns; name-calling or using degrading or belittling language; and bullying, harassment, abuse and violence. (1)

Transphobia can present itself in obvious ways (e.g., verbal abuse) or it can be subtle (e.g., denial of services, jobs or housing).

Transphobia and Health

A number of studies have shown that minority stress experienced by transgender people is associated with negative mental and physical health. (2, 3) Trans individuals who experience gender-related discrimination have higher levels of psychological distress, higher rates of depression and poor health. Poor health status can be a result of both direct and indirect impacts of discrimination.

Individuals who face discrimination are more likely to engage in self-harm, substance use and smoking, all of which can lead to poor health. Stigma, discrimination and minority stress can lead to physical effects, such as increased blood pressure and increased cortisol levels (the ‘stress hormone’). Chronic activation of the body’s stress response can impact your health over time, leading to chronic health issues such as diabetes and hypertension (high blood pressure). Additionally, chronic stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Transgender people are more likely to have unmet healthcare needs due to stigma and discrimination and the inability to find suitable healthcare professionals that can meet their specific needs. (4)

To help build and maintain your mental health, build your resilience. Family support—and social support from friends—helps build resilience. Community support, activism, spirituality and self-awareness (identity pride) are additional areas where strength can be drawn from and can have powerful benefits for mental health.

Your Rights

If you are experiencing bullying, harassment and discrimination as a result of your gender identity, understanding your rights and developing self-advocacy skills are two tools that can help you navigate these types of challenges.

Remember, you have rights under the law to be free from discrimination and harassment. If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination at work, in a public space or system, in an educational environment, or in a healthcare environment, educate yourself about human rights legislation that applies to where you live. Take appropriate steps, including practicing self-advocacy skills and speaking with someone in a position of authority.

You are worthy of dignity and respect. Knowing your rights and engaging in assertive communication are strategies that may help you navigate transphobia.

Trans Rights BC (5) suggests the following assertive communication strategies as part of self-advocacy efforts:

- Share observations of the problem that are specific, and reference the time and place.
- Express your needs rather than judgments about the person or organization you are having the problem with.
- Avoid criticism. When people hear criticism, they are more likely to resist what you are saying.
- Use positive language and ask for what you want, rather than what you don't want. Be clear and concrete rather than vague and abstract.
- Make requests, not demands and make sure the person understands your request.
- If the person dismisses your request, ask them what they would suggest. If their suggestion does not meet your needs, give clear reasons why. This actively involves the other person in generating solutions.

An example of assertive communication for self-advocacy:

“Roger, you referred to me by the wrong pronoun in our meeting yesterday. I know gender neutral pronouns are new and can be difficult. Please use they, them and their when you refer to me.”

If you are experiencing violence of any kind, prioritize your safety. The safest response may be to remove yourself from the situation and get help rather than trying to deal with the situation alone.

Accessing Washrooms

Accessing public washrooms can generate a tremendous amount of anxiety for trans people. Washrooms are often a place where trans folks experience misgendering, harassment and violence. Remember that you have the right to access the washroom that you determine best fits your gender. If you encounter negative reactions from others in gendered washrooms, you may wish to practice some of the following strategies:

- Bring a person with you to the washroom if you feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Use the washroom stall closest to the exit if you feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

- Prepare in advance how you will respond if someone confronts you in the washroom. Repeating simple responses like, “I am in the right place” are helpful for some people.
- If you have a negative experience, debrief it with someone or get help if you feel unsafe. You don’t have to deal with unsettling experiences alone.

Connecting with Resources, Supports and Service Providers

As you navigate your own gender journey, you can benefit by connecting with other trans people as well as gender affirming supports and services. Not all supports and services are gender affirming, so it can be helpful to ask other trans people for recommendations. If you are trying to connect with medical professionals, counsellors, estheticians, lawyers, hair stylists and other professionals, you may want to consider asking some of the following questions, to get a sense if they are familiar working with trans people:

- Do you have experience working with trans clients?
- How many trans clients have you worked with in the past?
- Have you received any training on working with trans people?
- If so, can you share with me briefly some of the important things you learned in your training?
- What is the washroom access like in your office/working space?

Remember that you are deserving of dignity, respect, care and support as you navigate your gender journey. Seek support and allies as you find your way through this process, and remember you are not alone. For assistance locating supports and resources, contact Homewood Health: homewoodhealth.com or visit our members only website at homeweb.ca.

To learn more about Homewood’s workshops and sessions, to arrange for a workshop at your workplace, or for personal support, please contact us.

References:

1. Planned Parenthood. What’s Transphobia? Retrieved from <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/transgender/whats-transphobia>

2. White Hughto JM, SL Reisner, JE Pachankis (2015) Transgender stigma and health: a critical review of stigma determinants, mechanisms, and interventions. *Social Science and Medicine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953615302185?via%3Dihub>
3. Rood BA, SL Reisner, FI Surace, et al. (2016) Expecting rejection: understanding the minority stress experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. *Transgender Health*. Retrieved from: <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/trgh.2016.0012>
4. Ontario HIV Treatment Network (2017) Barriers to accessing health care among transgender individuals. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohtn.on.ca/rapid-response-barriers-to-accessing-health-care-among-transgender-individuals/>
5. Trans Rights BC. (2016) Self-Advocacy Guide. Retrieved from: <https://www.transrightsbc.ca/take-action/self-advocacy-guide/>

General Resources and Supports:

Ontario Human Rights Commission (www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-because-gender-identity-and-gender-expression)

Families in TRANSition: A Resource Guide for Families of Transgender Youth (<https://ctys.org/wp-content/uploads/CTYS-FIT-Guide-2020-English-1.pdf>)

Trans Rights BC (www.transrightsbc.ca)

Egale Canada (www.egale.ca)

Qmunity (www.qmunity.ca)

PFLAG Canada (www.pflagcanada.ca)

Alberta Trans (www.albertatrans.org)

Trans Pulse Project (www.transpulseproject.ca)

The Transgender Project (<http://www.thetransgenderproject.com>)

Trans Equality Society of Alberta (www.tesaonline.org)

[Trans Lifeline \(www.translifeline.org\)](http://www.translifeline.org)

Health Resources:

[CPATH \(www.cpath.ca\)](http://www.cpath.ca)

[WPATH \(www.wpath.org\)](http://www.wpath.org)

[Transgender Health Information Program \(www.transhealth.phsa.ca\)](http://www.transhealth.phsa.ca)

[Rainbow Health Ontario \(www.rainbowhealthontario.ca\)](http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca)

[Options for Sexual Health \(www.optionsforsexualhealth.org\)](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org)

[Sex Smart Resources \(www.smartsexresource.com/topics/transgenderresources\)](http://www.smartsexresource.com/topics/transgenderresources)

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