

19

The Experiences of Parents of Transgender Individuals Who Transition in Adulthood

Katherine Rachlin, PhD

The gender transition of a child is a major event in the life of a parent. As transgender and gender nonconforming people are increasingly visible in the culture at large, those who come out as transgender have more positive, supportive, and even unremarkable responses from their friends, coworkers, and employers. In contrast, many parents will be shaken to their core by the disclosure that their child is transgender, may transition, or is transitioning.

At the first meeting of a support group for parents, we went around the room as people responded to the prompt “Tell us about yourself.” One woman said: “Well, I have two sons and a daughter. My oldest son is a teacher and lives in Maryland. He is married and has two girls. My youngest is single and lives in Los Angeles, and my daughter is a writer. She and her husband live near me. They have three children—two boys and a girl.” The original question to her was “Tell us about *yourself*.” A parent’s self-definition is partially constituted by the presence of children and grandchildren, who are, in turn, partially defined by gender. Changes made by one family member inevitably mean changes for the family. More specifically, a person’s gender transition is not theirs alone. It is a transition for their parents, siblings, and extended family as well, an emotional journey that requires time and support.

Parents whose children come out as transgender or gender nonconforming in adulthood have unique challenges. Adult children may inform their parents that they are exploring gender, that they have come to a new understanding of their gender, or that they intend to undergo a gender transition; they may have had this wish all their life, or they may have had a recent unexpected awakening; they may desire only a change in name and pronoun or a complete social and medical transition from one expressed gender to another.

As a therapist, I see the full range of positive and negative reactions of parents when their adult children reveal an intention to transition. One of the differences

REFERENCES

- Auldridge, A., SAGE, Tamar-Mattis, A., Kennedy, S., Ames, E. L., & Tobin, H. J. (2012). *Improving the lives of transgender older adults: Recommendations for policy and practice*. Washington, D.C.: Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders and National Center for Transgender Equality.
- Boss, P. (2007). Ambiguous loss theory: Challenges for scholars and practitioners. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 56 (2), 105–111.
- Brill, S., & Pepper, R. (2008). *The transgender child: A handbook for families and professionals*. San Francisco: Cleis Press.
- Cook-Daniels, L. (2006). Trans aging. In D. Kimmel, T. Rose, & S. David (eds.), *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender aging: Research and clinical perspectives* (pp. 21–35). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ehrensaft, D. (2011). *Gender born, gender made: Raising healthy gender-nonconforming children*. New York: Experiment.
- Giamattei, S. V. (2015). Beyond the binary: Trans-negotiations in couple and family therapy. *Family Process*, 54, 418–434.
- Krieger, I. (2017). *Counseling transgender and non-binary youth*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Lev, A. I. (2004). *Transgender emergence: Therapeutic guidelines for working with gender-variant people and their families*. Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Press.
- Norwood, K. (2013a). Grieving gender: Trans-identities, transition, and ambiguous loss. *Communication Monographs*, 80 (1), 24–45.
- Norwood, K. (2013b). Meaning matters: Framing trans identity in the context of family relationships. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 9 (2), 152–178.
- Tittsworth, E. S., Dykes, J., & Cabuses, C. (2008). Family relationships and their correlations with transsexual well-being. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 4 (4), 419–432.
- Wahlig, J. L. (2015). Losing the child they thought they had: Therapeutic suggestions for an ambiguous loss perspective with parents of a transgender child. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 11 (4), 305–326.
- Witten, T. M., & Eyler, A. E. (2012). Transgender and aging: Beings and becomings. In T. M. Witten & A. E. Eyler (eds), *Gay, lesbian, bisexual, & transgender aging: Challenges in research, practice, & policy* (pp. 187–269). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Zamboni, B. D. (2006). Therapeutic considerations in working with the family, friends, and partners of transgendered individuals. *Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 14 (2), 174–179.