Healthy boundaries for partners of trans people

During and after a partner's gender transition

The gender transition of a transgender partner holds many challenges for the Partner of a Trans Person (sometimes referred to as a cisgender partner). We've compiled this list of boundaries that couples can negotiate together.

ROMANTIC/SEXUAL ATTRACTION TO THE TRANS PARTNER

When a trans person begins gender transition, the Partner of the Trans Person may experience changes in their sexual or romantic attraction to their trans partner. They may or may not find their trans partner sexually or romantically attractive during or after transition. This is normal.

Partners of Trans People often hear the phrase, "love the person, not the gender." For some Partners of Trans People, the gender identity or expression of their trans partner will not make a material difference to their feelings of love, romantic attraction or sexual attraction for the trans partner. For other Partners of Trans People, it will make a tremendous difference. It is vital Partners of Trans People are not shamed or invalidated if gender identity/expression are linked to their own feelings of sexual/romantic attraction toward their trans partner. They need permission to "love the person, and the gender," in alignment with their own authentic sexualities.

As Partners of Trans People work through the changing landscape of sexual engagement with a transitioning partner, it is vital that they have full permission to initiate, demure, accept or decline any and all sexual and intimate contact with a transgender partner. Many couples find a new relationship that does not include sexual contact at all. All parties need to be free to take space away from sexual contact if that is needed while feelings of attraction and desire are sorted through.

Feelings of sexual/romantic attraction/desire for a trans partner may fluctuate over time. Partners of Trans People must have full permission to take the time they need to process and identify feelings of love, affection, sexual attraction and desire. Sometimes, love and affection are linked to attraction and desire, and sometimes they are not. All feelings are valid and must be able to be explored.

FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Gender transition can be expensive. In some cases, transition costs can easily run over $100,000. Medical procedures may or may not be covered by insurance.

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Medical expenses can include:

- HRT (hormone replacement therapy)
- GAS (Gender Affirmation Surgery)
- Mastectomy or breast augmentation
- Hair plugs, hair removal

Non-medical expenses may include:

- New wardrobe
- New hair and makeup
- Voice training

The financial costs of transition impact the financial well-being of both partners and entire families, whether a couple remains together or not. Transition can cause families to accrue significant debt, which is shared by both partners if they are married. In cases of divorce, marital debt is generally split 50/50 in the US.

It is critical that couples negotiate who is responsible for what expenses and how those expenses will be paid. It is vital that the Partners of Trans People have agency over their financial well-being and can assert financial boundaries if they need to when it comes to financing transition.

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

Many Partners of Trans People report that personal boundary violations are an issue during their partner's gender transition. Partners of Trans People must be able to establish boundaries when it comes to the following:

- Sharing clothing, jewelry, accessories.
- Sharing lingerie, underwear
- Sharing makeup or personal grooming/hygiene products

Partners of Trans People may have no problem sharing their belongings, or they may want clear boundaries such as no sharing at all, or not sharing without permission first. These boundaries help Partners of Trans People to have a sense of agency at a time when little is within their control. They cannot stop a partner from transitioning, but they can insist that their property be respected, and it needs to be.

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In addition, children's clothing and personal care items need to be off limits from the trans parent. Taking or borrowing children's clothing is a boundary violation of the children and needs to be discouraged.

Finally, gender transition is often a quest to find how far a person must transition until they feel at home in their body and identity. This is often a difficult period of limbo for Partners of Trans People. They may negotiate boundaries, "I'm ok with you wearing makeup at home, but I will struggle if you need to wear makeup while we're in public." Often the trans partner can agree to a temporary limitation, but eventually they may need to exceed that limitation. This sets up a dynamic where boundaries are continually set, pushed and ultimately violated. This has profound impacts on the emotional well-being and trust levels for Partners of Trans People.

While Partners of Trans People often cannot control the pace of their partner's transition, they can decide what their own boundaries are, and once those limits are reached, know that they have options.

Partners of Trans People need to understand what they can and cannot control in this process. Ultimately, they can control very little, but they do have the power of their responses.

LANGUAGE

Names & Pronouns: The trans partner will likely have a new set of pronouns and a new name and they will request that all family members use this new language. Many Partners of Trans People will be supportive of these changes and readily adopt their language preferences. Other Partners of Trans People will make a good faith effort, even if they are grappling with their own feelings about the language changes.

Children and Partners of Trans People must be given grace to make mistakes. People need time to adapt to big changes in language. Language use is more than habitual, it's cognitive, and re-wiring those brain synapses takes time.

In addition to cognitive challenges, there is often emotional attachment that must be navigated. Partners of Trans People and children need time to grieve the loss of the parent or partner that is transitioning, and the emotional journey is often reflected in the linguistic changes. Patience and compassion are warranted.

Occasionally, some Partners of Trans People may refuse to oblige their trans partner in using their preferred language. This may or may not originate in prejudice or transphobia. Many times, a refusal to comply with language is grounded in the feeling that the Partner of a Trans

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Person is losing their own reality. They married a person of one gender, and to acknowledge that partner is the opposite gender upends their sense of their own reality and negates their own history, and that can be profoundly psychologically distressing and even destabilizing. This is complex psychological territory and must be handled with care.

It can be challenging to strike a balance between the trans partner's language needs and the family member's language needs. Language is central to how we understand our realities. Partners of Trans People should never be compelled to use language that is anathema to their core identities or understanding of their reality.

Titles: If the couple has children, some trans partners may request to be called by the honorific of the other partner. Male-to-female trans people may want to be called "Mom," and female-to-male trans people may want to be called "Dad."

Some Partners of Trans People may have no issues with sharing parental titles, but others will. This must not automatically be taken as a sign of prejudice or transphobia. Human beings have attachments to their identities and roles within a family, and what those titles mean to each individual is valid.

In addition, kids may or may not have difficulty calling their parent by a new title. They must have room to voice their opinions and feelings on the subject. Calling their father "Mom" may engender feelings of loss and grief for the parental role they are losing in their lives. They must not be forced or guilted into using language that is anathema to their feelings or their reality.

Outcomes tend to be better for families when the entire family discusses what the trans parent will be called. "Maddie" is one example of a hybrid of "mom" and "daddy." When families work together and validate the feelings of all involved, everyone can move forward with new language that is respectful to all family members.

In addition to honorifics, there's the question of Mother's Day and Father's Day. As with the titles "mom" and "dad," Partners of Trans People may or may not be ok sharing these holidays. Creative solutions, such as an alternative day of celebration, seem to work in situations where one parent chooses not to share the holiday. Being unwilling to share a holiday is not necessarily an indication of prejudice.

IDENTITIES

When a partner comes out as trans, the Partner of the Trans Person has a transition to go through as well. If the couple stays together, the Partner of a Trans Person may question their own sexuality or sexual identity. "If my partner was a man/woman and is now a woman/man, does that make me a lesbian/gay?" The Partner of a Trans Person may have to reframe their

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own sexuality or sexual identity in light of their partner's gender transition. This can take time. Some Partners of Trans People will embrace a queer identity, or the idea that they are now also homosexual, others will not. They will continue to identify as heterosexual or straight.

Partners of Trans People need to be given room to explore these identities and adopt or discard them in accordance with their own authentic view of themselves. Partners of Trans People should never be shamed or guilted into adopting an identity that is not in alignment with how they see themselves.

EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSE OF THE PARTNER OF A TRANS PERSON

Partners of Trans People have a right to all of their feelings, no matter what they are. They may feel at turns accepting, open, happy, enthusiastic or affirming of their partner's transgender identity, or they may feel anger, betrayal, embarrassment, shame, grief or loss. Having negative feelings about a partner's gender transition is not in itself an indication of transphobia. Negative feelings are a normal part of grieving the loss or change in status of an intimate partnership. Partners of Trans People need space to have all of their feelings, and the recognition that those feelings are valid.

The trans partner is adopting a new gender identity, and often a new persona to go along with that identity. Partners of Trans People have to navigate the loss of their partner as they knew them. They have to grieve the loss of their family history. For example, a trans partner may want to take down family pictures from before their transition, and so the Partner of the Trans Person may experience a loss of their own sense of family history.

Partners of Trans People may or may not be ready to emotionally support or champion their trans partner in their transition. And that is ok.

SUPPORT FOR THE PARTNER OF A TRANS PERSON

Partners of Trans People need, deserve and have a right to support. If a trans partner is not "out" to family or to the public, some or all of a gender transition may occur "in the closet." Partners of Trans People who are still in the closet are in the closet right along with the trans partner, and that can be severely isolating and stressful place for the Partner of the Trans Person.

In order to be able to get that support, they must be able to disclose that their partner is trans to any therapists or counselors, and/or to select family or friends. Emotional isolation is damaging and counter-productive to healing. Partners of Trans People may need to join support groups or online spaces where they can share their experiences with others. Disclosing in order to get support is not the same as "outing" someone.

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