

FOR PARTNERS ONLY

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

For partners only? Well, no, not really. However, partners' issues are given such short shrift, it seems appropriate to give them center stage and exclusive attention for a time. The focus of this article is on the experience of the non-trans partners of people who consider and/or undergo transition from one sex to another.

If this has not been your experience, consider for a moment how you would feel if your biomale partner came to you one evening and said, "I just can't stand living as a man any longer. I'm planning to transition to female." Or, if your partner is biofemale, try to imagine how you would feel if "she" came to you one day and said, "I've always felt like a man inside and if I had the money I'd have an operation tomorrow."

Another particularly difficult situation is one in which a partner hears, "I have always felt uncomfortable with my gender and need to explore it further. I don't know if this means I will transition or not." This ambiguous statement, spoken in all honesty, can propel the partner into a state of flux that is extremely uncomfortable for most people, especially those raised in a western culture. We "westerners" are not comfortable with ambiguous identities and are most at ease with people we can easily categorize and pigeonhole visually, which we generally do on an autopilot basis. We do not appreciate it when people change pigeonholes, particularly when it comes to personal identities such as sexual orientation and gender identity. And most especially, we do not appreciate it when someone doesn't know which pigeonhole they belong in, or states they don't belong in either the male or female category.

Some people reading this probably feel they know their partners so well, they can't even imagine their partner saying such a thing. If you are in this category, consider this: Many people in just this situation, with transitioning partners, would have said exactly the same thing you're thinking – "I couldn't imagine my partner saying this" – until it happened.

Let's consider *why* it is so unimaginable (until it happens), and *why* people in this culture tend to be so uncomfortable with the idea. While I will examine these questions with partners in mind, keep in mind that the concepts also apply more generally to the lack of acceptance trans people experience in this culture.

First, the unimaginable... Gender emerges as an aspect of core identity when a person is so young, we simply can't remember the first time we were aware of ourselves as owning the identity "boy" or "girl" or "neither of the above, English has no word for me." Toddlers play with gender, trying on various roles and modes of expression, learning not only the social mores of their culture, but also what feels right to them as individuals. However, because our cultural view is that gender is determined by the sex of the body, a fixed part of reality, non-trans people don't view toddlers as *figuring out* their gender. Their play is viewed as *learning how to be the gender they've already been assigned*. By the age of 3 or 4, if you ask a child, "Are you a boy or a girl?" the child knows the answer. If they are being raised in an atmosphere

supportive of their individuality, they will answer you honestly even if the answer is not what you expected based on how you've pigeonholed the child's gender.

However, when a gender-variant child begins interacting with large numbers of peers (nursery school, kindergarten, and on through the school years), the child quickly learns that only certain roles are truly "okay," and that they have no control over which gender pigeonhole is assigned them. This is a child who will grow up with a conscious awareness of the pigeonholes, because they are put in what feels to them the "wrong" one. They also learn very quickly that it is unsafe to express their true gender, and may stuff their feelings to the extent that they feel "different" but can't name why any longer. A gender-variant child of 3 or 4 may have a clearer conception of their gender identity than that same child during adolescence.

A child who is not gender-variant, who does not feel uncomfortable with the pigeonhole assigned them, *is not even aware of the pigeonhole*. Certainly they can answer the question, "Are you a boy or a girl?" but beyond that, they don't see the categories as pigeonholes, but as reality. Not only have they learned the cultural expectations of their gender role, they have also learned that in this culture, gender is viewed as the same thing as the sex of the body and as a fixed part of reality. The person who feels like a "square peg in a round hole" has an awareness of the hole because it chafes, it's uncomfortable, it's not a good fit. The round peg in the round hole can't feel the hole at all because it is not uncomfortable, there is no friction to irritate the mind into conscious awareness that it has been placed in a category.

Thus, the trans person grows up with an awareness of gender, and of "difference," that is not the experience of their non-trans partner. The trans person can imagine changing gender roles and bodily sex, because they grow up with the perception of having been that "square peg in the round hole." To the non-trans partner, however, unaware of the pigeonhole, the concept of changing genders is unimaginable, in a very literal sense. The partner cannot imagine changing what they have grown up seeing as a fixed part of reality.

Partners who are gay, lesbian or bisexual may have memories of feeling "different" also, growing up queer, but not trans. Such partners are able to understand from personal experience the feelings of "difference" the trans-variant child experiences, but are unable to understand the need to transition because their feelings of "difference" were not based in gender identity, but in sexual orientation. Unfortunately, this semi-intersection of experience can lead some gay/lesbian/bisexual partners to resist the idea of transition all the more, suspecting the feelings of gender dissonance are not real, or indicate some kind of difficulty adjusting to not being heterosexual.

But why is the partner often so uncomfortable with the idea of actualizing a new gender identity, if this is truly what is needed for happiness and self-fulfillment? After all, it's not as if they are being asked to transition *their* gender. So why the extreme discomfort many partners feel? After all, this is the role partners play for each other, to support each other in growing through life. One answer dovetails with why it is so unimaginable to the partner in the first place – the concept of changing gender roles, changing sexes, creates a cognitive dissonance in the partner's psyche. "Wait a minute! You can't change your sex anymore than you can make

the sun rise in the west instead of the east." Of course the partner is uncomfortable, if they have viewed gender as a fixed reality, assigned at birth and incontrovertible.

Beyond this, however, one must consider that relationships don't exist in a vacuum. These people live on a street, with neighbors, in a community, with friends, in a city, with family. If a person transitions from one sex to another, the relationship also transitions. From being perceived as heterosexual, theirs will be perceived as a same-sex relationship. From being an accepted part of the lesbian community, they will change to being seen as a heterosexual couple. From being gay men, they will change to being seen as straight. Bisexual partners have it somewhat easier. They live a life of constant invisibility anyway, being seen as straight if they are involved with someone of the "opposite" sex and being seen as gay/lesbian if they are in a same-sex relationship. A transitioning partner isn't going to change this invisibility, just the perception of the relationship.

The ramifications of changing sexual orientation are profound for the partner. One obvious consideration is homophobia. However, it's too easy to say of a heterosexual woman, "She's against her husband transitioning because she's homophobic and afraid people will see her as a lesbian." If a heterosexual woman has qualms about being identified as a lesbian, one must take into account the legitimate question of whether or not her discomfort is justified. If she truly feels heterosexual and not lesbian or bisexual, why should anyone expect her to be joyful about her husband's transition to female? Of course homophobia is going to be a factor, but one must give serious consideration and credence to the partner's own experience of sexual orientation and not brush aside their fears as based exclusively in homophobia.

Those whose transition removes them from the lesbian or gay community may face the opposite assumption, that they will be happy to be escaping the potential danger and social discomfort brought on by living with homophobia. Sometimes, such people are seen by their gay or lesbian friends as betraying their community. However, a lesbian partner faces a similar struggle as her heterosexual counterpart mentioned above. If she has done her soul searching and embraced the identity "lesbian," how easy is it going to be for her to be seen as heterosexual? How easy is it going to be for her to truly see her partner as a man and herself as a straight woman? She will have legitimate fears of losing friends, of losing the strong ties that are inherent in the lesbian community.

Then, of course, there is the matter of sexuality. For instance, if a biofemale partner really likes her husband's penis and values it as a core part of their sexual life together, she is going to be less than thrilled by the idea that "his" penis is going to someday become a vagina. Often, trans people don't have enough money for such surgeries, so quite possibly that penis is going to remain intact for a long time. However, the partner's "husband" is probably not going to view her penis as a gender-contented biomale views his. I know one transwoman who viewed her penis as an overgrown clitoris prior to surgery, and her biofemale partner (who identified as bisexual) did the same. Furthermore, hormone therapy dampens the male sex drive and shrinks the male genitalia. A heterosexual biofemale partner is going to have to do some mental gymnastics and the couple may have to use a great deal of creativity to reinvent their sexual life in a manner that is satisfying to both partners. If the partner desires children, this is another conversation the couple will need to have prior to transition. There may be solutions –

frozen sperm, surrogate mothers – but no solution can be found if the issues aren't on the table in an aboveboard manner.

I have met partners who have managed to wrap their minds around transition, and embrace their new role. Some have thought deeply about language to describe themselves. One biomale whose wife transitioned female-to-male now describes himself as “queer but not gay,” recognizing that they are no longer a heterosexual couple, but also acknowledging that he is not attracted to other men. If these two ever break up, the biomale partner will be involved with women in future relationships, not with men. The two of them love each other deeply and their relationship has survived transition. This is often not the case, however. What are some factors that make the difference between a relationship surviving, or not?

First, the partner has to be able to sustain the relationship without a whole lot of help from their transitioning partner. Transition is a necessarily self-centered process. The trans person has to put themselves first for a time, go through a personal process of self-knowledge that borders on wallowing in oneself. I saw a *New Yorker* cartoon recently that sums up this process beautifully. Several people are standing in a large bookstore. The heading of one section reads “Self Improvement,” while right next to it is a section labeled “Self Involvement.” The partner has to be strong enough to allow their trans partner to become self involved for a time, in the name of self improvement. Eventually, the transitioning partner will become less self-involved and able to be a full partner in the relationship again, but this is an indefinite process that varies in length from individual to individual. There is no predicting how long it might take, or whether the relationship will survive on the other side of transition. The two may find they are no longer compatible for various reasons and may break up anyway. It's a leap of faith to take the chance, another factor in whether a relationship survives transition or not.

Sometimes, the partner feels the transitioning partner remains self-involved for too long and the transition never seems to end, leaving the partner feeling they are bearing too much responsibility for sustaining the relationship. This is a very difficult position for the partner, not knowing whether things will change in the future, whether they are being selfish for wanting more of their partner's emotional attention, whether they are merely being co-dependent. Being able to talk with other partners, either in person or on the internet, can be a good reality check, as well as feeling able to bring up their concerns and insecurities to the transitioning partner. If the partner “stuffs” these feelings in the name of being supportive, this repression can poison the relationship and lead to extreme resentment, unacknowledged anger, and passive aggressive behavior. Good communication skills and boundaries, then, are another factor that can help sustain a relationship through transition.

Yet another factor is adaptability and flexibility. Partners who have a very rigid world view, who do not incorporate new ideas or allow their beliefs to be challenged, are likely to have great difficulty with the concept of transition. They are likely to cling to the view of gender as a fixed reality. These partners will also have difficulty changing their perception of their own sexual orientation, or even entertaining the possibility. While it is not a given that such relationships will automatically end, it is going to be more difficult for this type of partner to adjust because adjustment does not come easily or willingly to them. The transitioning partner can help here by constantly remembering that a rigid world view is often a fear-based attitude,

a fear that change means chaos or loss of control. A good therapist may be able to help an overly rigid partner come to understand where their fears are based, allowing them to relax a little about the concept of big changes. Still, there is no doubt that transition will be a big challenge, possibly insurmountable, for a very rigid partner.

Those partners who have been through an addiction recovery process, or supported someone through recovery, may find much of this information feels familiar. Going through a recovery program successfully involves a reinvention of self, a discovery of who the self is when not propped up by a drug or by alcohol. It's a very difficult process, and necessitates a time of self-centeredness and deep self-exploration, facing who one really is. Transition from one sex to another is a parallel process. The partner, then, is in much the same position as those who attend Alanon meetings.

If one attends an AA meeting, the tone is often upbeat, jubilant, sometimes joyous. These are people who are facing their demons, and are on the road to a healthier experience of themselves. On the other hand, Alanon and ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics) are often more somber, "heavier" meetings. There is little joy to be found in having borne the brunt of involvement with an alcoholic or drug addict. These are people who are learning not to be co-dependent, how to have decent boundaries, how to communicate, how to forgive, and how to be honest about their feelings. There are many parallels to be drawn between the AA experience and that of transitioning, and the Alanon/ACA experience and that of the partner of a trans person.

In *all* cases, support is a key aspect of success. If there is a therapist-moderated trans support group in your city, encourage the therapist to consider facilitating such a group for partners. If there is neither, it might be helpful if you can organize partners to meet once in awhile. Knowing through honest sharing that one is not alone in one's experience can be a huge benefit, and another factor in helping sustain a relationship through transition. Seeking support from peers is crucial, as partners often find little support elsewhere in their effort to stay with their partners through transition. In fact, their friends and especially family members may actively encourage them to leave the relationship.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge partners who try to stick it out. They are too often unsung heroes. It's one thing to go through a transition because one must, because it is one's personal destiny in life. It's quite another to marry into it. My hat's off to you.

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