

# INTRODUCTION TO GENDER AFFIRMATIVE COUPLE THERAPY WITH TRANSGENDER/GENDER EXPANSIVE COUPLES

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1

*“Therapists will help trans couples survive and thrive, not by focusing on their difficulties, but by recognizing the brilliance, creativity, and resilience inherent in their bond.”*

~ Shawn V Giammattei, PhD



2

# SHAWN V GIAMMATTEI, PHD

No Disclosures

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3

3

## WHY I DO THIS WORK...

- *I am passionate about working trans people and their families*
- *I am passionate about helping clinicians provide culturally attuned gender affirmative care*
- *I am LGBTQ*
- *My life's purpose is to be a bridge to build connections & heal separations*
- *I believe the intersection of science and indigenous (innate) ways of knowing should inform our work*



4

# OUTLINE



1. Gender Diverse Couples/Relationships
2. The Gender Affirmative Model
3. Clinician Competencies & Clinical Considerations



5

# WHAT IS A TRANS COUPLE/RELATIONSHIP?

- *Transgender (binary) /Cis-partner is transitioning*
- *Two trans partners*
- *Non-binary /gender expansive (cross dresser, gender queer, bi-gender)*
- *Monogamous, Non-monogamous, Polyamorous*
- *Mixed orientation*



6

# TENETS OF THE GENDER AFFIRMATIVE MODEL



# FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

- **Gender & Sex are not the same thing**
- **Gender Identity & Gender Expression are not the same thing**
- **Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation are different constructs that influence each other**
- **We all have both!**



# THE GENDER AFFIRMATIVE MODEL

➤ **Gender Variations are not Disorders**



➤ **Gender presentations are diverse and varied across culture, requiring cultural sensitivity/humility**

# THE GENDER AFFIRMATIVE MODEL

**Gender likely involves an interweaving of:**

- *Biology*
- *Development and Socialization*
- *Culture and Context*
- *Develops over time*



## THE GENDER AFFIRMATIVE MODEL

- *A person is the expert on their gender regardless of age*
- *Gender may be fluid and is not binary*



## GENDER AFFIRMATIVE APPROACH



- *We do not inadvertently blame the clients for the impact of discrimination and internalized transphobia.*
- *Pathology, when it is present, is often related to interpersonal and cultural reactions to a person*
- *Therefore, pathology more likely lies in the culture rather than the person*
- *Expressing one's gender may be the cure, rather than the disease*

# COMPETENCIES FOR WORKING WITH TRANS COUPLES



## GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- Know the terminology
- Self of the Therapist
- Know the limitations of your model
- Understand potential negative experiences for both partners
- Understand the influence of transphobia & Minority Stress
- Don't Assume that being trans is the primary issue
- Understand gender journeys
- Be aware of the resilience present

# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- *This is always changing, so stay on top of it*
- *Use the language the couple uses - including describing their relationship and sexual orientation.*

Know the terminology

Self of the Therapist

Know the

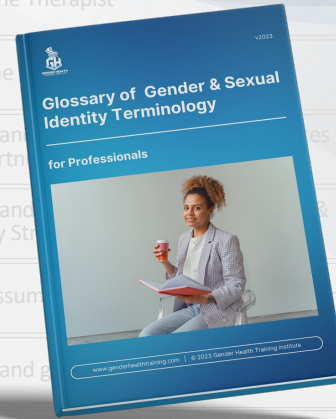
Understand both partners' needs for

Understand Minority Stress

Don't Assume

Understand

Be aware of the resilience present



**“EVERYONE... TRANS YOUTH,  
FAMILIES, PROVIDERS, YOU AND  
ME, HAVE A JOURNEY ON  
THE DEVELOPMENTAL ARC OF  
GENDER AND GENDER  
AFFIRMATION.**

**Your understanding of this process for  
yourself and your patients is key to  
gender affirmative treatment.”**



# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- *Usually requires unlearning and relearning what you think you know*
- *Starts with understanding yourself and your own gender story/journey*
- *It involves uncovering your biases, privileges, and beliefs around gender*
- *Learning what you believe is or isn't possible regarding gender*
- *What was your response to the gender affirmative model?*

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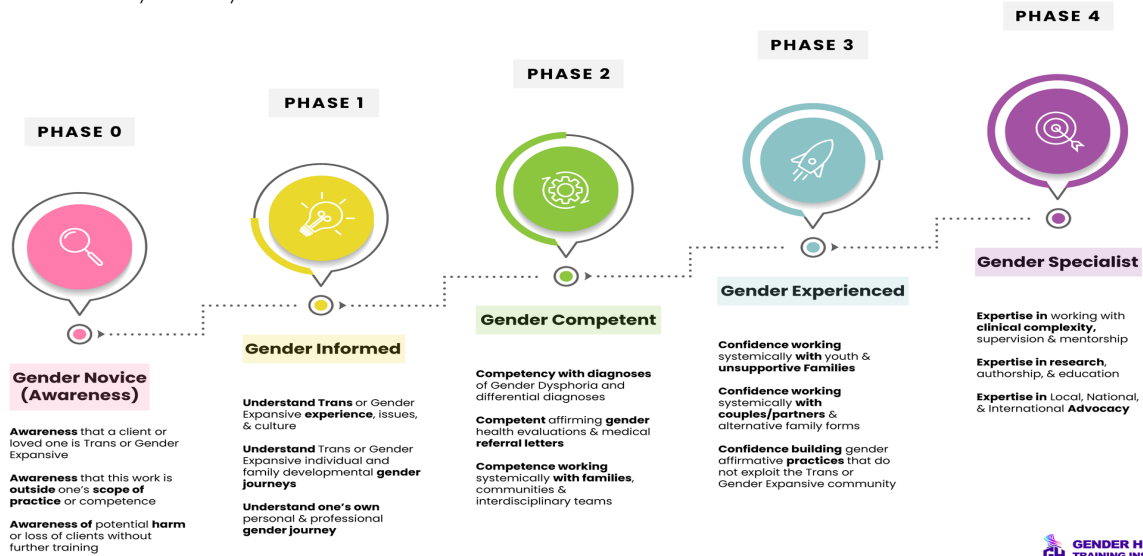
Be aware of the resilience present



17

## THE GENDER AFFIRMATIVE THERAPIST JOURNEY


From Uncertainty to Clarity and Confidence



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18

# UNPACKING AND CONTEXTUALIZING GENDER



- **What is your gender identity?**
  - How old were you when you had a clear sense of this?
  - How did you figure it out? What made it clear to you?
- **What is your sexual orientation?**
  - How do you know?
  - How old were you when you figured this out?

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19

# UNDERSTANDING YOUR GENDER WEB




- **How do you express your gender?**
  - Who or what influenced this expression?
- **Have you ever been blocked from expressing your authentic gender or doing an activity based on your sex assigned at birth?**
  - How did this feel?
  - How did this impact your gender expression?
- **How do you know it is not a phase?**


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20

## THE INFLUENCES OF YOUR GENDER JOURNEY

**It's important to understand that your biases, both positive and negative impact your approach & questions.**

**Know your areas of privilege and how these might impact on your ability to be affirming or understanding of gender diverse people and their families.**



21

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21

## GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- ***Is it Heteronormative?***
- ***Does it pathologize consensual non-monogamy /polyamory***
- ***Is it cis-normative and upholding of binary gender systems***

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21

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22

# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- *Not all experiences are negative*
- *Don't assume these, but find out if they are present*
- *Grief / Ambiguous loss, especially for cis-gender partners*
- *Spousal abuse in a trans context*

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23

## CLINICAL CASE MARIA & JANET CIS/TRANS COUPLE IN TRANSITION

Maria identifies as female, Latinx, heterosexual, is an educator and comes from a family that struggled financially  
Janet identifies as female, white, bisexual /questioning, is an MD/PhD and comes from wealthy family.  
They both identify as a Christian and came from a fundamentalist background.

They met while attending an Ivy League college where both were high level athletes.  
They have been married for 12 years and have 4 school age children.  
Both profess deep love for each other and share values around family

Janet came out 3 years ago after a medical crisis as a result of self-surgery and taking hormones that weren't prescribed and almost died.  
Maria describes their life before all of this event as ideal Janet feels like she was living a lie.



24

# COMING OUT IN A MARRIAGE

## IMPACT ON CISGENDER SPOUSE

- **Significant Impact on Marriage Dynamics**
- **Emotional and Mental Health Impact**
- **Identity and Self-Reflection**
- **Support Systems**
- **Social and Cultural Influences**

(Porter et al, 2024)

# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- **Transphobia can be both overt and covert**
- **Both partners and the therapist can be under the influence of these beliefs**
- **Trans clients may have experienced repeated traumas over their lifetimes.**
- **The effect of these experiences will have a profound impact on their relationships with partners, families, mental health professionals, the legal system, and medical care personnel.**

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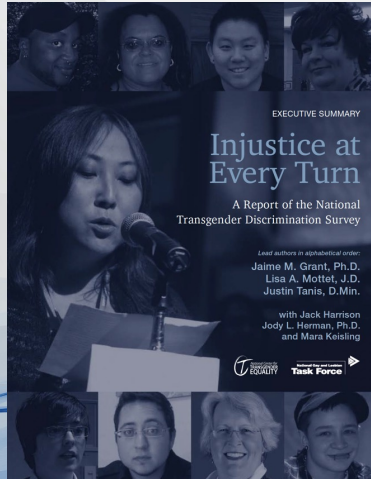
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## UNDERSTAND THE LEVELS AND IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION



### Pay attention to the political climate

- *Transgender people are discriminated against in all areas of their lives*
- *For many this is continuous*
- *The combination of anti-transgender bias and persistent, structural racism was especially devastating*
  - *People of color in general fare worse than white participants across the board*
  - *African American transgender respondents fare far worse than all others*

(James. et al, 2016)

27

## UNDERSTAND THE LEVELS AND IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION

- **40% of respondents reported attempting suicide compared to 4.6% of the general population**
  - ✓ 55% for those who lost a job due to bias
  - ✓ 51% for those who were harassed/bullied in school
  - ✓ 61% for those who had low household income, or were the victim of physical assault
  - ✓ 64 % for those who had been sexually assaulted

(James. et al, 2016)

28

## IMPACT OF FAMILY SUPPORT

- *Forty-three percent (43%) maintained most of their family bonds, while 57% experienced significant family rejection.*
- *In the face of extensive institutional discrimination, family acceptance had a protective affect against many threats to well-being including health risks such as HIV infection and suicide.*
  - *Families were more likely to remain together and provide support for transgender and gender non-conforming family members than stereotypes suggest.*

*(James. et al, 2016)*



[youtu.be/IS-3ZqdtPvw](https://youtu.be/IS-3ZqdtPvw)

# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- **Regardless of which models are chosen, work with these couples should address the issues presented by the couple, not what the clinician thinks is most important**
- **Many of the issues that trans couples present with are similar to other couples**

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31

Jason identifies as transmasculine (he/they), two-spirit, Native bisexual, works in city planning, and was raised on a reservation by his grandmother.

Laurie (she/her) identifies as queer, white/Native, bisexual, is a therapist, and was raised middle class off the reservation

They both identify strongly with the spiritual traditions of their tribe, but Laurie struggles with Jason's extended family dynamics.

They met working for a non-profit before Jason transitioned and have mourned the loss of queer community. Jason's new job has not been an affirming environment.

They have been married for 5 years and have a 3-year-old son. They had a strong sexual relationship before having their child, but that has become non-existent.

Jason was diagnosed as bipolar II and has managed it with therapy, diet, and exercise. He reports that the depression started when they were trying to get pregnant.

Laurie is confused by Jason's behavior and feels that Jason isn't interested in her anymore.

## CLINICAL CASE **JASON & LAURIE** **QUEER 2S COUPLE**



32



# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

- **Everyone is on a gender journey**
- **Where both partners are in their development is important to know when approaching them and knowing what models to use.**

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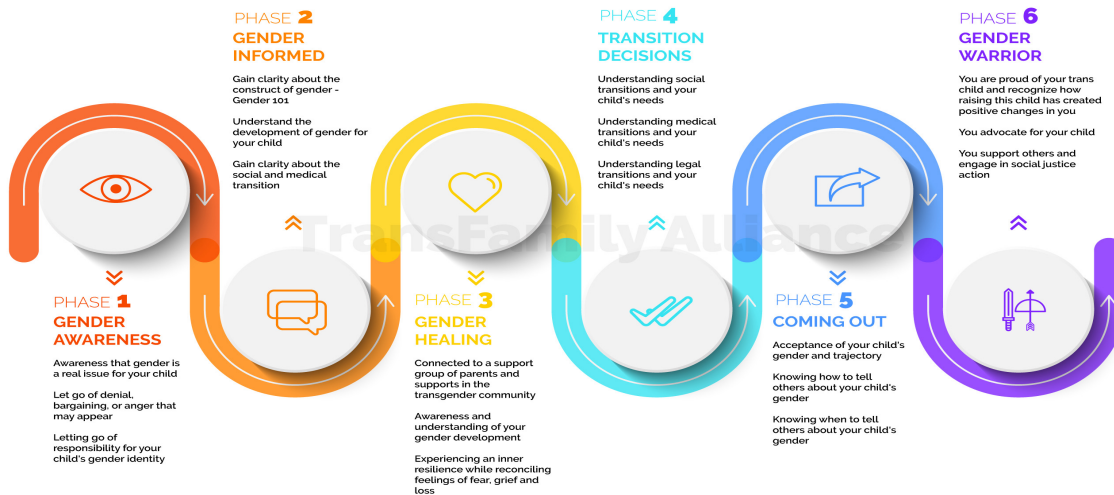
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## THE TRANSFAMILY GENDER JOURNEY FROM CONFUSION & FEAR TO CLARITY & CONFIDENCE



## THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

- Needs to be sensitive and gender informed
- Needs to address not only the transgender individual but also the needs of their cisgender spouses.



## THERAPEUTIC APPROACH



- Therapy should consider the impact of gender transition on the marriage/relationship, personal identity, and wider family dynamics
- **It is vital that therapy** recognize and support both transgender individuals and their partners and that psychological resources are tailored to support couples through transition processes.

# GENDER AFFIRMATIVE AREAS OF FOCUS

➤ ***Resilience is everywhere, especially considering the level of discrimination, oppression, and misinformation experienced***

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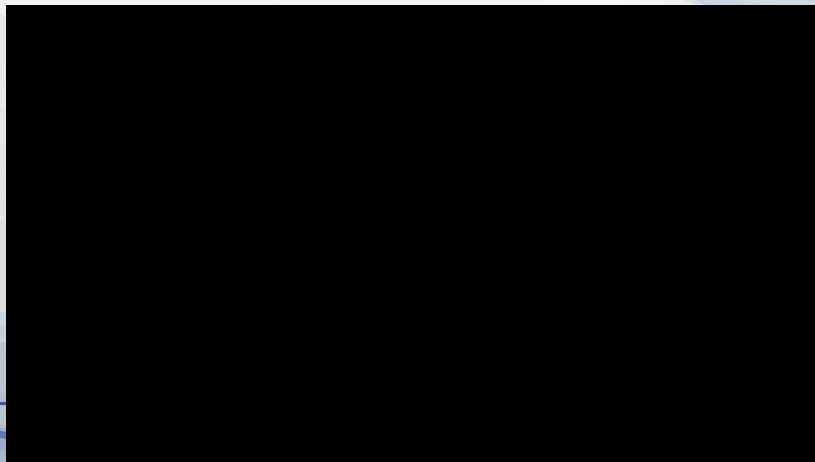
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# CIS – TRANS COUPLES IN THEIR OWN WORDS



<https://youtu.be/WKndya58NHc>

# QUESTIONS?



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41

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42