

Ask Matt: Gender Uncertainty is Stressing Me Out!

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Abstract

A reader writes: "I'm 18 years old and have lived under the assumption that I was a cisgendered female - identified as lesbian, never really felt dysphoric about myself beyond maybe a vague envy for the male body, feeling 'off' as a woman, a few times being curious about how 'the other half lived,' etc. [...]"

Article

A reader writes:

"I'm 18 years old and have lived under the assumption that I was a cisgendered female - identified as lesbian, never really felt dysphoric about myself beyond maybe a vague envy for the male body, feeling 'off' as a woman, a few times being curious about how 'the other half lived,' etc. Certainly didn't hate being a woman, didn't feel like I was trapped in the wrong body for the most part - until about two weeks ago.

"I was doing some research about a trans character I was going to include in a story and throughout my research, a few bells rung. 'Hormone therapy? You mean people can actually take hormones and develop the body they want?' Well, I began to wonder - am I really a woman?*

"And it all hit me, at once. Every doubt I'd had about being a woman, about being a man - all came to light. I've been worrying about my gender obsessively for the past two weeks or so, hardly eating, hardly sleeping. I mean, sure, even cisgendered people question their gender - but this much?

"I wonder if I'd be happier as a man, if I'd have a better future, and I can honestly see it. But I wonder if it's all just a phase and I'll wake up one morning, realize I was wrong and go back to being cisgendered without question.

"The reason I'm writing to you is this: Is there any way to know for certain what your identity is, or is it just what feels right at a given time?"

What you are describing is not as uncommon as you might think. Let's start with the last part first:

Most people do know for certain what their gender identity is, and the way they know is that they just know.

I personally believe that gender identity is innate - that you are born with it. It can change, but it can't be changed. And there are quite a few people who are absolutely certain that they are a man, a woman, both, or neither.

There are other people who define and live out their identity by what feels right at any given time. But

this is also a gender identity - it is just a fluid one. And I believe that this fluidity is also innate and that most people who identify as gender fluid, genderqueer, or bigender are also certain about this.[pullquote align="right"]Self-exploration and self-examination are almost always positive endeavors, and you will almost always come out stronger and more self-assured in the end[/pullquote]

But that certainty - for either group - does not necessarily arrive at an early age. For some, that certainty was there for as long as they can remember. For others, it took some time, and that certainty didn't arrive until well into adulthood, particularly when the information they needed to define their identity was not available to them and they have only recently discovered it.

And there are those people who are never certain. This might be because they have not been given the information, the tools, or the models to help them formulate a gender identity with certainty. This can be difficult, but we all live with ambiguity in some areas. This is just another adjustment to make.

There are some myths that still float around out there about gender identity, and those myths might be causing you this anguish, because they don't fit your particular experience.

Myth #1: If your gender identity does not align with your physical body or who the culture tells you that you are, you will know this and act on it in early childhood.

The reality is that, for many people, this is true. But for others, as I said above, this is not the case at all.

The textbooks will often point to very young children who insist, "I am a boy" or "I am a girl," when their physical body says otherwise. This is quite common, and these children are certain. They know who they are. But this is not the only experience, and this is not the gold standard to which you should compare your own feelings. This is one way that trans experience manifests.

Myth #2: If you do not feel like a man trapped in a woman's body (or vice versa), you are not really trans.

The reality is that most trans people don't use this analogy to describe themselves or their feelings.

I'm sure that this description fits some people to a "T" (pun intended), but my understanding is that it is actually a media creation that was used to describe trans woman Christine Jorgensen. The quote was attributed to her - that of being a woman trapped in a man's body - but I'm not sure that she ever said that.

So not feeling like this really gives you very few clues about your own identity. Don't use this cliché to determine the legitimacy of your own feelings.

Myth #3: All trans people hate their body, hate their genitalia, and hate everything about the gender they were assigned based of the sex they were assigned at birth.

The reality is that some trans people do hate their body and hate their genitalia and other sex characteristics that they possess. Some truly hate everything about being a "man" or being a "woman" in the culture because that's not who they are.

But this is not true of all trans people. Hating your body or your genitalia is not a requirement for

having a trans identity. It should not be a litmus test of whether or not you are trans, and it should not be a measure used to define your gender identity.

The same is true of hating or not hating everything about the gender you have been living. There are plenty of things I liked about being a woman, and there are some things I even miss. Some guys miss nothing about being female and think my nostalgia for high heels, dangly earrings, and seasonal eye-shadow palettes is quite a curiosity. But I don't mind saying that I sometimes miss that stuff. It doesn't make me less certain of who I am now.

So the first thing I would suggest is to try to let go of some of those myths. They are true for some people, but not for everyone. The next thing I would suggest is to try to lower your stress level about this. It's going to be more difficult to sort through everything and to figure things out if you are not eating or sleeping and if you are otherwise obsessed with this "gender thing."

You are eighteen and this is a recent discovery. I am not trying to downplay or dismiss what's happening for you, but what I do want to do is point out that you have some time to sort through this. Nothing has to happen today, tomorrow, next month, or even next year.

You are just now coming to a realization that you might be trans or that you might have a gender identity that is different from what you thought it was. This is something that needs to be explored, and that exploration can be exciting and eye-opening.

See if you can shift your thinking about what is happening and turn it into something positive and challenging - "Here is a puzzle for me to solve about myself." Self-exploration and self-examination are almost always positive endeavors, and you will almost always come out stronger and more self-assured in the end - although you might have to go through some rocky times to get there.

Because I believe that gender identity is pretty much hardwired, my personal feeling is that a person does not move from being cisgender to transgender and then back again. That does not mean that questioning doesn't happen - I think it happens all the time. That questioning and that exploration are what lead to the "certainty" of which you speak.

Is this a phase? I don't know. Only time will tell. I have read about medical students who tend to develop the symptoms of many of the diseases that they are studying, and even though being trans is not a disease, you are studying it in depth. It's possible that some of the things that you are researching are ringing true to you, as they might with anyone, trans or not, and this is worrying you when it shouldn't.

On the other hand, you chose to write a trans character into your story, requiring you to do extensive research. It could be telling that you made this decision in the first place. Again, I don't know. You're the only one who knows the answer, and I think that answer will eventually come.

There is no need to panic and no need to rush into anything. Live with this uncertainty for a little while and see what comes of it. Go to a trans man support or social group and see how you feel around trans guys. Talk to a therapist or someone else you trust and work through some of the feelings that you are having.

But first, take a deep breath, get some sleep, and have something to eat. It will help you think more

clearly and be better able to examine all the possibilities that are out there and within you. This is just one more step in an evolution toward who you really are, and there is nothing wrong with taking all the time you need to discover that.

Readers, what do you think?

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