

Ask Matt: Names, Labels, and Identities

By mkailey

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Abstract

We have two reader questions in one post today, and in order to catch up with my backlog of Ask Matt questions, I will be posting a Thursday edition this week as well, so be looking for that. Readers, as always, your insights and experiences are much appreciated, so please join the conversation in the [...]

Article

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Readers, as always, your insights and experiences are much appreciated, so please join the conversation in the Comments section. And here we are with today's questions:

A reader writes:

"My transgender daughter is legally changing her name next week and has decided to use my maiden name instead of her father's last name due to his not being acceptable of the whole situation. My question is: How will this affect my husband's legal responsibility towards her, health insurance and other scenarios. Plus, how does she handle telling my husband, who will not even begin to discuss the whole matter with me?"

First of all, thank you for being so supportive of your daughter. I'm sorry that your husband does not feel the same way - at least at this time.

I don't know how old your daughter is, but if she is a minor, and her father is named on her birth certificate or if he has legally adopted her, the fact that she changes her name will not change this. She is still legally his child.

I don't know if a parent is required to put a minor child on his/her health insurance policy (lawyers out there?). If not, he can probably drop her from the policy if he chooses. But with regard to his legal responsibilities toward her, he still has them unless he goes to court, files to have his parental rights terminated, and is successful in doing so (he is not likely to attempt to do this, and if he does, he is not likely to succeed).

I'm not a lawyer, but my understanding is that if your child is an adult (eighteen in the United States), your husband is not legally responsible for her in any way (and neither are you, for that matter). He doesn't have to provide her with health insurance or any other form assistance. Under the Affordable Care Act, he can keep her on his policy until she is twenty-six, but he is in no way required to do so.

As far as talking to him about the name change, if your child is an adult, she doesn't have to. However, if she still is on his health insurance policy, on his life insurance policy, or in his will, he will likely want to update these with her new name, although I don't think that a name change on her part would negate any of these, even if they reflect her old name for quite a while to come. But for the most accurate legal information, you need to consult an attorney if you can afford one.

But maybe before she talks to him about the name change, which is bound to be a very sensitive subject, she might want to deal with his general resistance to what's happening. She might have to go a little slower than she would like to. You both might want to check out this post: [My Husband Won't Speak to Our MTF Child](#). I would also recommend my e-book [My Child is Transgender: 10 Tips for Parents of Adult Trans Children](#).

Perhaps once he is finally able to come to grips with the overall situation, he will then be able to more easily handle the name change, and it will be easier to approach him with it. I advise taking things one step at a time. Readers, what are your thoughts?

A reader writes:

"I struggle with self-image. Ever since I had my first girlfriend in seventh grade, I've questioned who I am. I was born with a vagina, and am comfortable with the fact, but at the same time feel like I was born the wrong gender.

"My sexual orientation has nothing to do with it. I just have days (multiple times a week) when I feel so out of place, like I'm living a false life. I identify more comfortably as a male, but am so used to being female in public. Being female is fine because I do like aspects of being one, but I want a chance to be viewed as a man for once. But I am terrified to, simply for the fact that I wouldn't be supported by my friends and family. To them I'm strictly a girl. I just don't understand who or what I am."

While I don't always like labels, I think that they have their place. They can sometimes help us self-identify and tell us where we fit. So while, in some circumstances, I would tell you to stop worrying about labeling yourself and just live your life as the person you are, in this case, I think it might be helpful to search for a label, and thus, a community.

Once you are at least partially comfortable with your label and your community - once you have found an identity that at least seems to fit, even if it is not perfect - then you can cast off or adapt the label, if you so choose.

It's possible that you are transgender in the traditional sense. There are many trans guys out there who have a vagina and are comfortable with that fact. It's possible that you are bigender, having "two (or more) different and distinct gender presentations," as described by the founder of Bigender.net. It's possible that you are genderqueer, blending two (or more) genders or identifying as both genders or neither.

Regardless, I recommend doing some Internet surfing, checking out various websites, YouTube channels, and blogs. See what "looks like" you. Are there certain sites you are drawn to? Are there certain people with whom you identify? Are there certain groups that you are more inclined to join? That might help.

I would also recommend creating “a chance to be viewed as a man for once.” This might mean going somewhere away from your family and friends for a day or an evening. If you are a teen, see if there are any LGBTQ youth spaces in your area with support groups or drop-in hours where you could just go as a guy and try it out. If you are older, perhaps there is a club or event that you could go to as a guy. Maybe there is a trans man group in your area that also welcomes those who are questioning.

The most important thing is to be safe, so don't go anywhere that seems like an unsafe space. An organized group or activity at a reputable location is best. Even though your friends don't know how you feel, perhaps you can enlist your closest or most open-minded friend (one you trust to maintain your confidentiality) to go with you. See how it feels to be a guy for a change. If you like it, do it again. If you don't, no harm done.

I do want to add that, even though I encourage you to at least check out some “labels,” there is a danger with labeling yourself, and that danger is feeling as if you have to conform to all aspects of that label, whatever it is. Labels usually come with definitions, and sometimes those definitions can be rigid. You don't have to fit into every possible nook and cranny that goes with a particular label.

For example, just because you go to a group for trans guys, you don't have to be a “trans guy” in a certain way. If you like some aspects of being female, then keep those aspects. If you like some aspects of being male, then adopt those aspects. Or if you find that you like the idea of going back and forth, then do that.

There are plenty of women who present to the world as men some of the time. They dress in traditional “male” clothing, adopt traditional “male” mannerisms and behaviors, and sometimes even pack their pants, but they have no desire to transition to male, and they are perfectly content being female most of the time. They might call themselves transgender, trans*, butch, or something else.

Once you have explored the various identities that are already out there, and once you have done some research and some experimentation, you might come up with your own label or your own way to define yourself that feels right to you. In addition, if you have the funds to see a therapist who is savvy about gender issues, I would recommend it. That therapist might be able to help you sort out some things as well.

I wish you the best of luck. Readers, what are your suggestions?

Cross-posted from Tranifesto

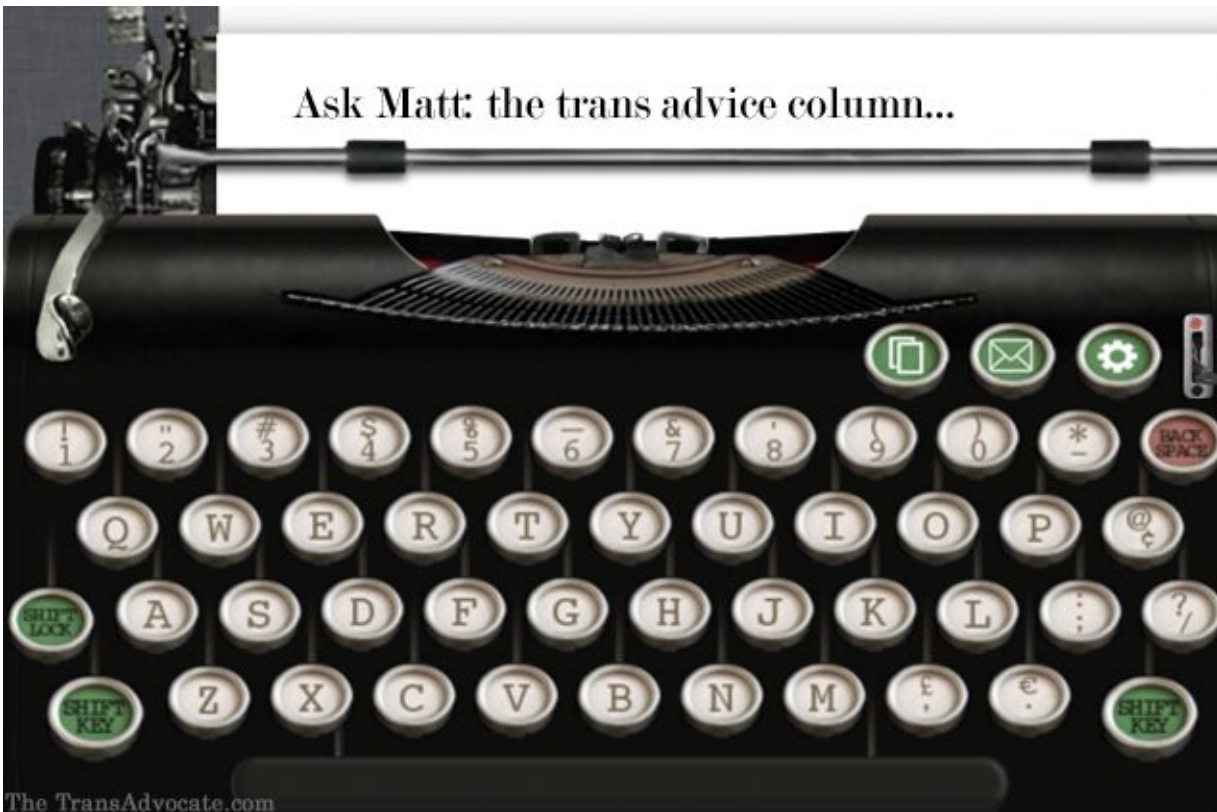


Figure 1. matt

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