

Ask Matt: What Are the Most Common Trans-Related Questions You Get?

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Published March 11, 2013

https://www.transadvocate.com/ask-matt-what-are-the-most-common-trans-related-questions-you-get_n_8882.htm

Abstract

A reader writes: I'm FTM, still in the closet, and I was wondering: What are the most common questions you get? I would like to know because I want to be able to think about questions that I may get asked when and if I come out of the closet." The questions never stop coming, [...]

Article

A reader writes:

I'm FTM, still in the closet, and I was wondering: What are the most common questions you get? I would like to know because I want to be able to think about questions that I may get asked when and if I come out of the closet."

The questions never stop coming, and sometimes I still get caught off guard. Because I live in this "trans world," I forget how little people actually know about this issue, even today. The good thing is that people are asking them, which means that they want to know more.

And although we all get tired of answering them sometimes, I try to look at the positive side of being a walking and breathing Google search engine - at least people want to be educated. And this is never a bad thing.

The questions I get depend in large part on what I'm doing. If I'm in an educational role of some sort - speaking in front of a group or to the media, for example - I would say that the top ten questions are as follows (in no particular order):

1. What does transgender mean and what is the difference between transgender and transsexual?
2. Who are you attracted to and who do you date?
3. How old were you when you "knew"?
4. Have you had "the operation"?
5. How did your family react?
6. What discrimination/prejudice have you experienced?
7. What do hormones do? Do you have to take them for the rest of your life?
8. What are the health risks of transition?
9. How did you feel when you "knew"? What was it that made you know that you were trans (or a man)?

10. What are some of the differences you see between living as a man and living as a woman?

One question that I used to get a lot, but that I rarely get anymore for some reason, is: What does being a man mean to you? Another one that I usually don't get, but that I have been getting a lot lately since I have been doing media around a trans girl in Colorado who has been denied access to the girls' restroom, is: How young is too young to know your gender?

And because the media often doesn't understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, I will sometimes get a lot of questions about sexual orientation when they really intend to be asking about gender identity. I also sometimes get questions about intersex issues, because people tend to confuse the two. I make it clear that I'm not an expert on this topic, but I do explain the difference.

When I come out one-on-one to an acquaintance or someone I met who I think needs to know, I usually don't get a lot of questions (primarily because I think they are afraid to ask). But the top five in this case are probably:

1. What does that mean? (I get this sometimes when I say "I'm a trans man" or "I'm a transsexual man.")
2. Are you done? (This is basically synonymous with "Have you had 'the operation'?", but probably considered slightly less intrusive by the asker.)
3. Do you know this trans woman in Bulgaria named Dixie? (This question changes based on who they know or think they know who is trans.)
4. What do you think about _____ (the little trans girl who can't use the girls' restroom or Chaz Bono or the trans woman who was using the women's locker room or whatever trans story happens to be prominent in the news at the moment)?
5. Is it difficult? What kind of problems do you face?

People will often want to tell you about people they know who are trans, and they will sometimes want to tell you how brave you are. They will also want to tell you that they never would have known if you hadn't told them.

This last one used to be a compliment when I was first transitioning, but now I never know how to respond. The person means it as a compliment, but to say "Thank you" implies that there's something wrong with being trans and that I'm happy that the person can't tell. Usually I just smile, or sometimes I will say, "Testosterone is a very powerful hormone."

Since we're on the subject, I would just like to add a few tips for both the askers and the answerers (trans people). For the askers, I would like to say:

1. Unless you are in an educational setting, or unless the trans person has said to you, "Ask away - I'll answer anything you want to know," don't ask anything that you wouldn't ask a non-trans person in the same situation.
2. Trans people don't always want to talk about being trans. Even if the person has come out to you, that doesn't mean that he/she/ze wants to answer questions at that moment - or ever. If the person doesn't invite questions, it's probably better to just go on with the conversation as it was. (Of course, this doesn't apply if you are in an educational setting and the person has come specifically to

talk about being trans.)

3. If you do have questions, I would suggest saying, “I would really like to know more about this. Is there a time that we could get together to talk about it, or can I e-mail you some questions? I understand if you would prefer not to.”

For the answerers (trans people), I would like to say:

1. If you are tired of answering questions - particularly very basic, 101-type questions - don't agree to do educational presentations. You don't have to. It's not your job to educate. But if you do agree to speak to a class or to the media, be prepared for extremely basic questions, language used incorrectly, fumbling and struggling with regard to how to ask a question, and very personal questions. If you can't handle this without being annoyed or offended, don't do the presentation.
2. If you are presenting to a group, doing media, or even coming out one-on-one, let your audience/host/acquaintance know right away what questions you will not answer - “I won't discuss my body” or “I won't discuss my family” or whatever. This stops these questions before they are even asked and prevents awkward situations.
3. Start your presentation, discussion, or conversation by defining the language that you are going to use. Even if you are presenting or talking to people who have some background in this subject, the definitions that they have acquired might not be the same definitions that you use. Make sure you're on the same page with your audience/host/acquaintance to allow for smooth sailing and to prevent misunderstandings.

Someone is always going to surprise you. You think that you've heard it all or that you are prepared for every question that anyone could throw at you, but there is always one more - something that no one has ever asked you in the years that you have been answering questions. So you are, in some ways, always winging it. It keeps things fresh.

Readers - what questions do you get asked?

Cross-posted from Tranifesto

Suggested citation

mkailey. "Ask Matt: What Are the Most Common Trans-Related Questions You Get?." TransAdvocate, March 11, 2013.

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