

Ask Matt: Why Do Trans People Make Me Uncomfortable?

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Abstract

A reader writes: "I am a straight male and consider myself fairly liberal. One of my best friends is openly gay and I have never felt uncomfortable around him. Yet the thought of being around a transgender person is extremely uncomfortable to me and I don't exactly know why. "I can understand the scientific reasoning [...]"

Article

A reader writes:

"I am a straight male and consider myself fairly liberal. One of my best friends is openly gay and I have never felt uncomfortable around him. Yet the thought of being around a transgender person is extremely uncomfortable to me and I don't exactly know why.

"I can understand the scientific reasoning for having a different gender than one's do-dads would imply, yet some part of me cringes whenever I hear the words "tr***y, transgendered or transsexual" or read anything about it. (Asterisks mine - MK)

"Does this make me a bad person? How can I consider myself a liberal person who respects and judges everyone based on their character if I am uncomfortable with the concept of having a different gender identity? Is there any way for me to come to grips with this and perhaps regain my own self-respect?

"I hope this question was not offensive in any way, and if it was, I apologize wholeheartedly."

I was not offended by your question. Some people might be, but in my opinion, it takes guts to do some self-reflection, realize that you have an issue, and take steps to try to resolve it. For this same reason, I don't think you're a bad person.

I also don't think that, currently, you can consider yourself a person who respects and judges everyone based on their character, but I think that you can consider yourself someone who is trying to get there.

I'm going to throw a couple of thoughts out that might or might not apply, and then I'm going to suggest some questions that you might ask yourself as you're doing some looking inward. Here's something to think about:

Western culture has established very specific and very strict parameters for being a "man" and being a

“woman.” And as much [pullquote align=“right”]Misogyny lies behind these concepts. The unwarranted devaluation of women and the feminine, along with the unwarranted elevation of men and the masculine, lies behind these concepts.[/pullquote]privilege as straight men have in this culture, you are constantly walking an extremely narrow tightrope in order to stay within those parameters and maintain your acceptable standing as a straight man.

Masculinity, as our culture defines it, is highly valued, and as a straight man, you are expected to possess it - in exactly the way it is defined. You are not only supposed to possess it, but you are supposed to value it at least as much as the culture does.

If you fail to do so, you are somehow considered “deficient” as a man - you are not “manly” enough, you are not “masculine” enough. Something is wrong with you if you don’t value traditional, culturally defined masculinity and do everything you can to cultivate it, maintain it, and celebrate it.

The existence of trans women can be a threat to the concept of traditional Western masculinity. If something so highly valued and prized can be cast aside - if a person who inherently has this privilege can reject it and “take a step down” in society’s eyes - then it might not be so great after all. It actually might be pretty shaky. And if it’s shaky at best, then where does that leave you?

Trans men can also be a threat to the concept of traditional Western masculinity. Maybe they are “usurpers,” trying to take something that is not really theirs to claim. And if people who were assigned female at birth can come in and take over something that is not legitimately their birthright, then maybe that thing is not really so special after all. How great is it, really, if just anyone can lay claim to it? And if it’s not so great, then where does that leave you?

Misogyny lies behind these concepts. The unwarranted devaluation of women and the feminine, along with the unwarranted elevation of men and the masculine, lies behind these concepts.

We know - at least those of us who have been paying attention - that trans women don’t “reject” masculinity and male privilege. They are not “men” to begin with, although outward appearance at birth and societal expectations based on that insist that they are. They cannot reject something that they never were.

They have not “chosen” to “take a step down.” Society devalues women, and so when a trans woman transitions (not a choice), she ends up on a lower societal rung - this has nothing to do with her and everything to do with the misogyny inherent in our culture. But on the surface, to those who don’t understand that transition is generally a medical issue, it all gets convoluted.

By the same token, trans men do not transition to gain male privilege. We are not “usurpers,” trying to “take something away” from non-trans men. But again, it all gets convoluted. And what happens is that non-trans men can feel very threatened by it all, even if they don’t realize exactly why.

This is just one thought and one possibility for your feelings. There are many others. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you do your own self-exploration:

- Am I comfortable and secure in my own masculinity? Do I feel that trans people threaten this in any way, and if so, how?
- Am I comfortable with my own body? Does the idea of someone changing his/her body threaten my

security with my own body?

- When I am with a trans person, am I worried that other people will think that I am trans also? Why do I care so much about other people's opinions of me?

- Do trans people make me worry about my own identity? Am I afraid that I might be more like them than I care to admit? If I sometimes really hate being a guy or hate the roles and expectations that society has placed on me, does that make me worry that I'm trans? (Most people hate at least some of the roles and expectations that society has placed on them because of their gender. It does not mean they are trans. It means they are like just about everyone else.)

- Knowing that I have probably met and interacted with trans people at many times in my life without being aware of it, would my feelings change about those people if I found out that they were trans? Why?

- Do I feel any sense of sexual arousal, interest, or curiosity when I think about trans people? (You might have to dig really deep to answer this one, and you might have to be brutally honest with yourself. That's okay - no one else will know.) If so, is this what concerns me, and why? (Attraction to trans women would simply reinforce your heterosexual orientation. Attraction to trans men might throw you into a tailspin, but you can figure that one out later.)

Once you have examined some of these questions, you just have to move to the bottom line, which is: Why does this bother me so much? What does it really have to do with me at all? Why am I not able to let this go?

There's a thing called "reaction formation," and basically what it means is that, when a person is drawn to something that he/she finds abhorrent or disgusting in some way, he/she reacts strongly in the opposite direction. For example, if a conservative minister is turned on by pornography but believes this to be unacceptable, he might be leading the charge to close down all the adult bookstores. If a person cannot accept being gay or lesbian, that person might be the biggest homophobe on the block.

I'm not saying that this is you. I don't know. But it's something to think about.

One thing that research has found is that, once a person "knows one" - a member of a group that the person fears or dislikes - that person tends to become more accepting and less apprehensive about that group. To help you get over your negative feelings, you could force yourself to spend some time around trans people.

Don't use anyone. Don't make anyone an "experiment." Just go to some venues where trans people might be, such as a conference or an event. Go with your gay friend to an LGBT event - there are bound to be at least a few trans people there. Then talk to them.

You don't have to talk about "trans stuff" - trans people have a lot of interests. Talk about sports, the weather, taxes, television shows, movies, music - you're likely to find something that you have in common. Once you do this, you might find that your fear or disgust starts to dissipate.

Trans people are an "unknown" to you right now, and you have us all in this one big category filed under "people who make me uncomfortable." Once you start relating to trans people as individuals, and once you are able to dissolve the walls of the box that you have established for us, you will be able to see that, yes, some of us do make you uncomfortable, just like some non-trans people do, and some of us

don't make you uncomfortable, just like some non-trans people don't.

It's just a matter of relating to individual people rather than a category of people. Look at it this way - you know I'm trans, and you were not too uncomfortable to write to me. That's already a start. I wish you the best of luck.

Readers, what are your thoughts?

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