

# Trans Etiquette: When is a Compliment Not a Compliment?

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## Abstract

*By Matt Kailey It's not tough to compliment trans people. Like anyone else, we like to be told that we look nice, or that you love our new shirt, or that we did a good job on our speech or our term paper or winning the World Series. But there is a confusingly fine line [...]*

## Article

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Figure 1. Closet 1

It's not tough to compliment trans people. Like anyone else, we like to be told that we look nice, or that you love our new shirt, or that we did a good job on our speech or our term paper or winning the World Series.

But there is a confusingly fine line when it comes to certain compliments doled out by non-trans people - and that confusingly fine line might be enough to discourage compliments at all!

The problem comes in when I come out. And the problematic conversation goes something like this:

Me: "I'm trans. I transitioned from female to male."

Would-be complimenter: “Really? Oh, my gosh, I could never tell! I never would have known! You look so ... Gosh, you pass so well! You look just like a guy!”

Now, this is where the fine line comes in, because 13 years ago, when I first started transition, I might have really taken that as a compliment. But now - well, I don’t. Let’s examine the problem.

“Really?”

Yes. This is not the kind of thing that people make up. But I understand that this is an instinctual reaction, so I can live with it.

“Oh, my gosh, I could never tell!”

That’s kinda the point, but the problem here is what is unspoken. “I never would have known. You look so ... normal.” I have a pretty good idea that’s what was almost said - or at least, that’s what was in your head.

“You pass so well!”

Some of us still use the word “passing,” but a lot of us don’t. In the beginning of transition, it can be a very helpful concept to measure progress. But the reality of the word when used in this context is that it signifies that we are “passing” as something that we’re not, which only reinforces the mistaken notion that trans people are somehow trying to trick or fool people. We’re not. We simply don’t have the time or energy to plot these subversive schemes. We are who we say we are.

“You look just like a guy!”

There’s a reason for that. My driver’s license, my birth certificate, and my passport say I am, and who am I to argue with computer-generated (and sometimes even laminated) official documents? And even if they didn’t say that, I look just like a guy because I am a guy.

Okay, so now that I’ve made you really nervous and you’re vowing never to speak to a trans person again for fear of saying something wrong, I’ll answer two questions that you might have:

“So what do I say when you come out to me?”

Different people will have different preferences, but for me, this is as good as anything: “Oh, that’s interesting. I’m sure I’ve got some questions about that. If you ever feel like answering the same old questions that you probably always get, let me know and I’ll start asking.” Or “Oh, that’s interesting. So where do you want to go for lunch?”

“How can I give you a compliment?”

Say, “Man, you’re hot. I’ll bet you hear that all the time, but you’re the best-looking, sexiest guy I’ve ever seen!” Or “Nice shirt.”

Thoughts?

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