

Becoming an ally to transgender and gender nonconforming people

Transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) people are individually, systemically, and structurally oppressed in American society. Harassment and discrimination based upon TGNC gender identity and expression are widespread and well-documented (*The 2015 United States Transgender Survey*). TGNC activists have been striving for equal rights and basic safety within this society for decades. Some of these struggles have been salient in the news lately, often focusing on the use of bathrooms in schools. Overlooked too often and too long is the widespread violence toward TGNC people, sometimes resulting in murder.

If you are a cisgender person, i.e. someone whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth, the struggles of TGNC people may seem foreign and distant to you. You might feel moved when you learn of individual cases of discrimination and/or harassment/violence, focusing on how it is wrong for these acts against TGNC people to occur. Moving from concern into action for social justice for TGNC people is an important step to take. A crucial aspect in aspiring to be an ally is raising one's own consciousness. When we view the struggles of TGNC people as being something about which we are concerned, but that do not directly involve us as cisgender people, we are missing the larger picture of how we are all immersed in a society that enshrines cisgender privilege. Similar to how men need to understand their being embedded in a sexist society and white people need to understand their being embedded in a racist society before they can truly work to end the society's oppression of women and people of color, respectively, as cisgender people we need to become aware of how cisgender privilege is something from which we benefit daily. Since we are usually unconscious of our privileges, it can be challenging to look at them. An initial response is often one of guilt and not wanting to engage further. It can be helpful to recognize that each of us occupies different social locations, some more privileged and some less privileged, so we need to understand individuals as being multifaceted. The intersection of different aspects of my personal identity means that in some ways I have more privilege, e.g. as a man who is white, while in others I have less, e.g. as a gay person who has a disability. It can be enticing for us to focus on the ways in which we are less privileged, rather than owning and examining the ways in which we are more privileged. Cisgender privilege allows many of us not to have to be concerned about our legal documents. This privilege allows us to get medical treatment more easily and usually without excessive need for that treatment be justified. Cisgender privilege is reflected in the lower rates of violence and of suicide attempts reported for cisgender people relative to TGNC people. Using a public bathroom is not a common source of anxiety and risk for cisgender people. Think about how fundamental the need to relieve oneself is and that being complicated by anti-TGNC prejudice.

You may have already decided you want to be an ally to TGNC people. That is great! Moving forward entails work within yourself and with others. Further your education about TGNC history. The Equality Health Center website has a transgender bibliography. A work I recommend especially is *Transgender warriors: Making history from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* by the late Leslie Feinberg. It is a good way to begin to learn more about the reality that TGNC people have existed across cultures and time. Visit the websites of organizations working for social justice for TGNC people, e.g. Freedom New Hampshire (<http://www.freedomnewhampshire.org/>), Transgender New Hampshire (<http://www.tg-nh.org/>), and the National Center for Transgender Equality (<http://www.transequality.org/issues/non-discrimination-laws?gclid=CNDD3KeMz9MCFZ5WDQodUqwDyg>). Volunteer for the local organizations and/or donate money. Engage in conversations both with people who think similarly and with those who think differently concerning social justice for TGNC people. Your own consciousness will be raised while you are also informing others. If you are in school or have children who are in school, learn what is being taught about the TGNC people, including both history and the present day. There are many, many

opportunities for you to make a difference. In the long run, you will not be doing this to “help” TGNC people because changing our society will also benefit you and other cisgender people. None of us can get there alone; all of us have to get there together.

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