Can this marriage be saved? Addressing male-to-female transgender issues in couples therapy

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It was once believed that if a husband had transgender issues it spelled the end of a marriage. Unquestionably, this can be a complicated scenario that is best handled by a therapist who has experience with such issues. Many marriages and comparable relationships can survive and even be enriched by such a revelation. Many couples can live happily together even when the husband has a transgender identity and even if “he” transitions to live fully in the female gender role. Several factors must be taken into account by a therapist when approaching this work. A thorough basic assessment of each individual and of the underlying strength of the relationship is essential. This should include: transgender-specific assessment of the husband, including self-awareness and intentions; learning when and how the wife found out about his transgender issues; and information about the relationship dynamics in the extended family. The therapist should be informed about things such as: the most common fears of the wife of a transgender husband; recommended approaches for coming out; and the broad range of normal human sexual behavior. This information will be useful when helping the couple explore the options available to them in their relationship with each other, in their sex life and in their family and social life.

Keywords: transgender; couple; transition; relationship; fears; support system; assessment; options

Introduction

When a therapist receives a phone call from a prospective client who identifies himself as a male-to-female transgender person, it is important to ask him about his marital status. If it is possible to include a wife or significant other in the therapy process, it is usually advisable to do so as early as possible. The longer the transgender person is seen individually, the more likely it is that the wife or partner will see the therapist as “his” therapist and not hers or theirs. There will be a growing risk that a wife will view the therapist as “the enemy” simply because s/he specializes in transgender issues and may therefore be perceived as “sympathetic”. Rapid intervention will be necessary in order to work successfully with such a couple. In order to avoid confusion in this article, male pronouns will be used when referring to the husband. In actual practice, there will be times when it is more respectful of the individual to use female pronouns. This will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

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When therapy with a couple centers around the husband’s transgender issues, the therapist needs to ask what precipitated the decisions to seek therapy. Often there has been some sort of a crisis, such as the wife accidentally discovering something about her husband’s transgender activities. She may have had no prior clue about his transgender feelings and it may have come as a complete shock for her to find out. She may have already known about his cross-dressing but wanted to keep it very private and then learned that someone else found out, either by accident or because her husband told them. Or perhaps the husband announced that he feels the need to take his transgender expression to a new level (Erhardt, 2007). Any of these scenarios can precipitate a crisis. If one or both of the couple is highly agitated, it is advisable to begin with crisis management.

Calming them down will be a necessary first step to avoid a deepening crisis, including agreement about the ground rules. Besides the usual understanding about the boundaries of therapy, additional rules will need to be discussed. At least, the couple should be asked to agree not to make any hasty decisions until they have had a chance to establish therapy goals and have allowed some time to work on these goals. Other important basic ground rules include an agreement that there be no recrimination outside of sessions for what is said in sessions. This may involve asking the couple to defer discussion of emotionally charged issues outside of sessions whenever such discussions become counterproductive or are likely to escalate negative emotions. There should be an understanding that the therapist may want to meet with each of them separately at least once, but possibly more than once. It should be spelled out clearly how the therapist will handle confidentiality between them relative to these individual sessions. There should be some discussion of how it would be handled in the event that it became advisable that they seek separate individual therapy. If these things are discussed before the couple has provided very much information, it decreases the chance that they will attribute the need for these rules to information conveyed in their individual situations.

While the therapist may offer suggestions and guidance, to the greatest degree possible the couple should be the ones who determine the rules. The therapist should keep in mind that people in crisis usually feel as if they are losing control of their lives. Anything that helps them feel more in control will reduce the crisis.

Once the ground rules have been established, the therapist can begin a comprehensive assessment. The order in which the components of this assessment are carried out should be at the discretion of the therapist with input from the couple and should be based on the presenting problems and needs of the individual couple. Therapeutic discussion and relevant digressions can be integrated into the assessment process so that progress will not be delayed unnecessarily.

**Assessing the strength of the relationship**

When transgender concerns are an issue in a marriage or a primary relationship, it does not provide automatic immunity to other diagnoses or to other sources of interpersonal conflict. There are times when the discovery of transgender feelings or behavior in a husband is the last straw and is surreptitiously welcomed by a wife as a “get out of jail free card”.
Similarly, the husband may have been careless in allowing discovery of his transgender issues, either because he was tired of hiding them but did not know how to open up the topic for discussion or because he, for his own reasons, wanted to end the marriage but did not want to take responsibility for doing so.

Just as with a couple who does not have transgender issues, sometimes an individual will come to couples therapy to assuage guilt about undisclosed intentions to leave the marriage or to let the other party down gently about this intention. If either party has come to therapy without a sincere intention of trying to save the marriage, it is best to clarify this before time and effort and money have been invested in a lost cause. This applies to situations where dissatisfaction with the marriage has been long term, predating the current crisis. Conversely, when the decision to leave is being made in the heat of crisis or where one of them is undecided about the best course of action, that is an entirely different matter. The greater the amount of time that has been invested in a relationship, the more carefully the decision to end it should be evaluated, especially when there are children involved.

If the couple lacks basic communication and problem solving skills, or lacks the ability to be sensitive and respectful of one another’s feelings, helping them improve in these areas should be included in the treatment goals. These skills are critical to the success of any couples therapy, independent of the presence of transgender issues. A therapist working with a couple around transgender issues should remember to use the same approaches that would be used with any couple and should not replace, but rather should supplement, these approaches with information and interventions specific to the issues and concerns unique to the lives of transgender people.

For a couple engaged in the process of coming to terms with a husband’s transgender feelings or behavior, a massive shift in their relationship will probably evolve. The therapist can help them look at the positive side of this change, to see it as an opportunity for personal growth. Each person may become more fully him/herself and may more fully know the other person. This can lead to enhanced intimacy and a closer relationship. Different is not necessarily bad. It can actually lead to better things once the couple lets go of their old image of the relationship and moves beyond fear of the unknown. Would they “rather bear those ills they have than fly to others that they know not of?” This “undiscovered country” might prove to be a wonderful place (Shakespeare, in Harrison, 1948).

There are several ways to decide when and how to see the husband and wife individually. These include completely separate appointments or a shared session in which they take turns using some individual time, while the other party sits in the waiting room. Some couples may feel uncomfortable waiting near-by and wondering what is being said, especially about them. Others may not mind this at all and if they come from a distance and it is part of a larger plan, such as shopping or a dinner out, they may prefer to come together. It is respectful to discuss this with the couple, perhaps letting them make the decision, but it needs to take place early in the process.

It is understandable that there may be things one or both of them would not tell a therapist except in an individual session. This should be discussed with both of them together. It should include an understanding in advance about how information that is obtained in individual sessions will be handled in conjoint sessions and with the other party. It should include respect for the privacy of the individual to the greatest degree possible, unless it will impede the progress of the couple’s therapy. An
individual may be fearful about a disclosure made in an individual session. If premature disclosure will not serve the best interests of the couple, the therapist should respect the privacy of the individual. Eventually it may be possible to help the individual reach a better point of openness.

Assessing the emotional stability and transgender status of the husband, including his intentions regarding therapy and the marriage

With regard to the husband, in addition to assessing his basic psycho-emotional stability, the therapist will need to assess various aspects of his transgender experience. This includes his intentions for transgender expression in the future. In what ways has he already explored his femme self? How does he view his transgender identity? Is he an occasional cross-dresser? Does he feel the need to transition to live fully in the female gender role? Is this a hastily formed intention, riding the crest of a euphoric reaction to no longer having to keep “the secret”? How, when and why did he tell his wife about it? What has he still not told her? Who else knows? What is the history of his awareness of his transgender feelings? What does he want to do about them? What are his hopes for the marriage? What kind of support system does he have? What are his strengths? Where are his possible stumbling blocks? Does religion play a role in his dilemma?

Along with this basic assessment of emotional stability, of which the therapist will already have a good sense from the initial conjoint session(s), it will be necessary to assess the degree to which the husband loves his wife and is committed to the marriage. Suppose he has discovered that he is attracted to men while in female mode and is unsure what he wants to do about it, if anything?

Many transgender people go through a flood stage, when, after a long period of suppression, they feel as if they can never spend enough time en femme (Samons, 2001). During this time, the person will be at risk for taking precipitous action. For example, he may be tempted to tell too many other people about his transgender identity or to tell his wife that he wants to transition to live fully as a woman. With time and more careful consideration of the implications, he may reconsider, but having said these things may have deepened the crisis in the marriage. It may be sufficient to explain this to the person and caution him about burning bridges prematurely. He may need help in deciding how to discuss these things with his wife. For example, he could be so concerned about the risk of her leaving him that he might make promises he cannot keep. Sometimes it will be possible to discuss all of these things openly with a wife. With some other wives, it will be necessary to go slower, so she will not become overwhelmed.

In some cases, the husband may have extensive experience with transgender awareness and expression. What he wants to do may be well thought out. In fact, his wife may have known about his transgender feelings from early in their relationship and be prepared to support him. However, if he is in a flood stage, he may say that he is ready to go forward with transition regardless of the outcome, regardless if it means the end of the marriage. Has he thought carefully about the implications, especially if there are children involved? Has he thought about the economic impact of divorce? Has he thought about the possible loss of his job?
He may have feelings about being transgender, or may have acted on these feelings, in ways he has not told his wife. Will it be wise to risk having her panic and bolt from the marriage if he makes an immediate full disclosure? If he tells her only a little at a time, how will she be able to trust or believe him when he finally tells her everything? Is there anything in his sexual behavior that could put his wife at risk for a sexually transmitted infection? These are difficult questions that will need to be explored with the husband.

The assessment of the husband should include asking about the presence of religious conflict about his transgender feelings, both within himself and in other significant people in his life. If these people learn about his transgender behaviors, he will be impacted by any religious conflict they may have, even if he has none himself. Will he have emotional support from some friends and family members in the event that some others reject him? Also, does he have any current or history of legal problems, suggesting that he could be at risk of incarceration? When any of these concerns are present, they will need to be included in the treatment plan and carefully addressed. Often, issues like these can be discussed in conjoint sessions, but the therapist will need to assess what can and what cannot be addressed that way. Additional individual sessions may be needed.

Assessing the emotional stability and transgender awareness of the wife, including her intentions regarding therapy and the marriage

The therapist will already have some idea about the emotional stability of the wife from the conjoint session(s), but will need to complete a basic assessment. If the wife has not already told the therapist, it will be necessary to ask how she found out about her husband’s transgender identity, how she felt about it then and how she feels about it now. This will include assessing the degree to which she is knowledgeable about transgender issues in general and her husband’s transgender feelings and behaviors in particular. How much does she love her husband and how committed is she to the marriage? Suppose she was ready to leave the marriage for other reasons, even before she learned about his transgender identity? Suppose she is coming to therapy only to appease him or other family members or to avoid being perceived as the one responsible for ending the marriage? Suppose she has every intention of leaving him once she can say she tried marital therapy?

In spite of what she says at first, it may still be possible that she will reconsider after engaging in therapy. The therapist will have to weigh that possibility when deciding how to proceed. If the couple still wants to go forward with therapy, it should be done with openness and honesty about the situation, recognizing that feelings may or may not change. Sometimes couples therapy can be focused on how to help a couple end their relationship with the least possible amount of acrimony. This will reduce the harm to either party and to others, such as children, who will be impacted by this ending. Although this is not the ideal outcome, it is nonetheless a valid one.

When a wife is planning to leave a marriage where transgender concerns are a factor, she may still want to keep the transgender issues a secret. If she sees the transgender issue as shameful, there can be problems associated with this attitude. This will be especially true if the husband wants to transition. If there are children
involved, the attitude of the wife can undermine the relationship between the father and the children.

Conversely, it can be easier to blame transgender issues for the failure of a marriage than it is to look at the other things that may be wrong with the relationship. If a wife is angry, she may decide to take vindictive action. She may tell others about her husband’s transgender issues, casting him in the most negative light possible. Just as in any high-conflict divorce, everyone will be harmed by acrimony between the parties, but this is especially true for the children. A therapist who is knowledgeable about transgender issues and non-traditional parenting may be able to help achieve a better outcome (Galatzer-Levy, 1999, pp. 319, 425). If the potential for high conflict is recognized, it may be possible for the therapist to help the wife think about the consequences before she acts out of anger. If not, the wife is very likely to drop out of therapy, leaving the therapist to pick up the pieces with the husband.

In some cases, a wife may have known about her husband’s transgender feelings from early in their relationship. She may be somewhere between tolerant and accepting of cross-gender activities. The couple may be coming to therapy for other reasons, unrelated to transgender issues or the husband may have disclosed the need to take his transgender expression to a new level. She may feel as if the rules have changed and that she did not have a voice in this change. Sorting out how much is the husband’s own issue, his need to come to terms with himself even though this has an impact on the marriage and how much of “the rules” should be subject to negotiation between the two of them may be a large focus of the therapy. To illustrate this point, he may not have a choice about being a transgender person, but he does have a choice about how much money will be spent on women’s clothing (Boyd, 2003; Erhardt, 2007).

Or, the wife may have just learned about her husband’s transgender issue and may be in shock. How she learned about it will be an important consideration. She will need time to learn more about what it means to have a transgender identity and to integrate this new information about her husband with her prior perception of him. She will need time to come to terms with changes this means for her own life. When she is allowed this time, she may be able to make peace with it. In the process, she will likely have many fears/questions. These include: Does this mean he’s gay? Is he sleeping with men? Who else knows or is going to find out? How far will this go? Will he want to transition to live as a woman? What else hasn’t he told me? I thought I knew him, but do I really know who he is? What will happen to our marriage, our sex life? Who can I possibly talk with about this? He may have his transgender support group, but where is my support? How much money is he spending on “her”? If I give an inch, will he take a mile? The therapist will need to address all of these questions, but will need to pace the rate of addressing them so as not to move more aggressively than the wife is able to handle.

As part of this process, it will be necessary to help the wife understand why the husband might not have been fully open about his transgender feelings at an earlier time and why he still may not be fully open about them (Samons, 2001, 2008). It may be helpful to look at what this nation’s divorce rate can show us about apparently well meaning people who marry in good faith. There are many unanticipated changes, not limited to transgender issues, that
alter relationships and life plans. One way to view this is to think in terms of both widening the focus in therapy and narrowing it. The wider focus will help to put things in perspective and will help the individual feel less alone. The narrower focus will zero in on the specific situation and the associated emotions and problems to be solved. Both are necessary parts of couple’s therapy.

Assessing extended family dynamics and support systems

Essential to a thorough assessment will be the gathering of information about the extended family of both parties and the support system of each. Creating and using a geno/ecogram is useful for this purpose. Such a diagram will include extended family members and other individuals who are part of the work and social life of the couple or people who are important to them in some other way, such as neighbors. This will lead to addressing the full context of the family dynamics and will be an excellent tool for assessing and keeping track of the process when it comes to telling others, if this step becomes necessary.

This part of the assessment will include noting the length of the current marriage, any previous marriages and any children of either partner. A former husband, wife or partner who is the other parent of any children of either the husband or the wife, can influence the way transgender issues will be handled by the couple, since these issues may need to be addressed with the child. It will also include the children the couple has together, the parents, siblings and families of siblings of each of them. The significant people who comprise the social system of the couple may be helpful as part of the couple’s support system, but could also be problematic if they are narrow minded and inclined to be judgmental or to gossip. Ages of children, religious beliefs, prior exposure and reaction to diversity; all of these will provide context for how the couple will deal with transgender issues. These are complicated issues that will require cultural awareness on the part of the therapist when attempting to address the issues with the couple (Lev, 2004).

Helping the couple decide about full disclosure

In this context, full disclosure initially refers to the question of whether or not it is a good idea for the husband to immediately become fully open with the wife about his transgender feelings and activities. This is always a thorny question for both parties and for the therapist. One of the best, but certainly not the only, way to begin addressing this question is by first discussing the topic in a general way with the couple, explaining the mixed feelings and possible risks for both transgender husbands and for their wives related to immediate versus gradual disclosure. Such a discussion will need to include agreement that each party will take responsibility for making their own decisions and for dealing with their own emotional reactions to the decisions of the other person.

The husband may not be willing to risk the loss of the marriage if he tells everything from the past or if he discloses his dreams for the future of his gender role and expression. On the one hand, he may truly not know where his transgender feelings will lead him and thus may be unable to give definitive
answers. Conversely, he may think he knows exactly what he wants to do, but may reconsider in the course of the therapy process. He may be wisely reluctant to sound an alarm that may prove unnecessary or may precipitate a crisis in the marriage. He will need to be sensitive to the feelings of his wife, recognizing that the joy he may find in his female self will probably not be shared by his wife, who may view his female self as “the other woman”. The wife, in turn, will need to respectfully allow the husband time to work out what he needs to do, as difficult and anxiety producing that may be for her.

The wife must think carefully about her readiness for full disclosure. If she asks for it, she must be prepared for the possibility of learning more than she wanted to hear. Is she prepared to avoid recrimination and to simply seek true understanding of her husband’s situation and feelings? Are there limits to what she will, or even should, accept? She may choose to resist disclosure, saying she simply doesn’t want to hear about her husband’s transgender feelings. Some wives seem to believe that even to listen would be a form of acceptance. They seem to hope that if they refuse to condone it, it will go away. Maintaining this stance for too long can widen the rift between her and her husband. She should be helped to understand that no one knows for certain what the future may hold and that she should not make unrealistic demands for promises about the future. The task of the therapist is to help the couple know themselves and each other as fully as possible, letting go of fantasy images and of blame for not being who the partner imagined or preferred the other person to be. This will be the foundation from which each of them can decide if they want to be in the relationship.

Once the couple has resolved the question of disclosure between themselves, they will then need to address the question of disclosure to others. Who else knows, who needs to know and how they should be told? If the husband is an occasional cross-dresser, telling others may be discretionary. They may not opt for complete openness, but at the very least each should have some room to make their own decisions about confiding in another person. Some other decisions should only be made by mutual agreement. For example, should he be free to decide about telling his own brother or sister? Should she be free to tell her mother or her best friend? Each may need outside support. But, will that support be positive or negative? Will the other person take sides or be a negative influence? When they agree to tell others, the best way to begin will involve building a base of constructive support. It will include choosing people who will respect their right to privacy and not tell others their personal business, but will leave the couple free to choose who and when to tell others.

Obviously, if the husband is going to transition, there will not be a choice about disclosure, but there will still be choices concerning how to go about it. Young children can be among the most challenging people to tell (Regan, 2001). A rule of thumb is to make the child the expert, to provide the child with enough age-appropriate information so he can feel confident in his understanding and in his ability to respond if others ask him questions about his transgender parent. Adults should not underestimate the ability of children to understand complicated issues with the help and support of understanding adults. With very young children, one cannot expect them to respect personal privacy and the therapist should “fire drill” with the parents as to possible sequelae.
Decisions about their future, one step at a time

Since the future is unpredictable for any person, and since there are even more unpredictable factors for couples dealing with transgender issues, it is wise for them to proceed slowly in therapy and in life. How they feel about staying together may change with time. The husband who cross-dresses today may find it necessary to transition tomorrow. The wife who thinks she could never accept cross-dressing in her husband may come to view this as minor compared to a husband who is abusive or irresponsible. A husband who cannot imagine himself being attracted to a male sex partner may find this changing as he becomes more comfortable in the female role (Samons, 2009). A wife who thinks she would be judged harshly by others if she opted to stay in a marriage with a transgender husband may find herself being supported or may even find herself less reliant on the approval of others. As she learns more about transgender issues, if she sees others responding with ignorance, she may even find herself in the unexpected role of defending her husbands’ transgender identity to others and trying to educate them.

A therapist can help the couple look carefully at all possible avenues, their outcomes and the feelings they have about each of these. Included may be the emotional and practical aspects of staying together versus divorce. But, always, there should be no assumption that staying together is not an option, as was often formerly the case among both couples and therapists when there was a transgender husband. The therapist should always remember that there are many different ways for people to live their lives and that the ultimate decision should rest with the ones who will be living it.

When there are children involved, the adults should be cautioned against making them pawns in the marital conflicts. Part of the role of a therapist is to help parents recognize when this is happening and to help them find more constructive ways of behaving. When one parent is not cooperating, the other parent can be helped to find constructive ways to deal with these behaviors, and to help the children cope with them (Ross & Corcoran, 1996).

Not all of the responses of children should be attributed to having a transgender parent. Divorce or fears about potential divorce may have a far greater emotional impact on them (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). When children are struggling with transgender issues in a parent, it is challenging for all parties, both parents and therapist, to be sure the feelings expressed are clearly those of the children and not a reflection of fear or anger in a parent. Are the feelings expressed by the child more about transgender concerns or about the possibility of divorce? More often, children are influenced by the feelings of the non-transgender parent. Since children are typically and developmentally concrete thinkers, they will feel the need to know who is right and who is wrong. When one parent is transgender, it is relatively easy to view the other parent as the injured party. But, even the feelings of the transgender parent may be influencing them. Sometimes a transgender parent feels unworthy or fearful of harming his children with his transgender identity. He may mistakenly attempt to shield them, possibly even thinking they would be better off without him, forgetting about the harm of losing a parent. Whenever possible, parents should be assisted in finding constructive approaches to helping their children with both the transgender issues and with fears about a possible divorce.
Use of support groups when available

When peer support groups are available, their help can be invaluable for the couple to use in conjunction with therapy. This is true for both the husband and the wife. For the husband, such groups can help him find support from others like himself. They can sometimes help him take a clear look at the reality of his gender identity and the costs and benefits of the various ways of living with it, as he learns from the experiences of others. For the wife, finding that she is not alone and having the support and role modeling of other wives who have chosen to stay in transgender marriages can be life altering (Boyd, 2007). Initially, she may also find it easier to discuss transgender questions with a transgender person other than her own husband. Seeing someone else who is cross-dressed is often easier for her and can be an intermediate step to prepare her for seeing her husband in the female gender role. This kind of experience may help her understand and calm down, if that is something she needs to do. She may also learn about resources for the children (such as COLAGE, which can be found on the Internet at http://www.colage.org) of which she may have been unaware.

Conclusion

In summary, because there is so much diversity among transgender people and there are so many options for transgender expression, comprehensive assessment is essential to working effectively with couples in therapy. So it is essential as well for the thinking of the therapist to remain flexible as the feelings of their clients evolve. There are many ways for people to live their lives and many marriages are non-traditional for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. A therapist who is open to the possibilities will help create an environment that allows couples to remember that preserving their marriage is an option, even in the presence of a transgender identity in one of them.

Notes on contributor

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References


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