

Supporting Your Trans or Gender Diverse Loved One: Ten Tips

If someone you love has told you that they're transgender, nonbinary, and/or gender diverse (TGD) you might be feeling a range of things about this. However, chances are if you started reading this resource, you genuinely care about this person and want to support them the best you can. Here are ten ways you can put that intention into action, at whatever pace and in whatever way you're able.

1. Aim to empathise first and understand later

When faced with new ideas and information, it's common to feel confused or even confronted. If a loved one tells you that they are TGD it's important to remember that this is first and foremost about their personal experience. It's unlikely their main goal is to change you or your views; rather, they're just trying to express how they feel, and in some cases, ask for what they need from you. Expressing empathy can mean just as much as – maybe more than – understanding concepts and terminology.

2. Break out your active listening skills

Active listening is a great tool for effective communication and showing someone that you are trying your best to understand where they're coming from.

Active listening is something you can demonstrate through:

- Being fully attentive and engaged.
- Using nonverbal cues to show that you are listening.
- Avoiding judgement or jumping to conclusions.
- Asking open-ended questions.
- Clarifying when you're not sure e.g. "When you say _____, what do you mean?".
- Summarizing to show that you've understood e.g. "It sounds like you're saying that you feel _____?".

3. Seek information in ways that work for you

Consider how you like to learn and let that inform your research. Would you rather read a book or an article, watch a YouTube video or documentary, talk to an expert, or talk to someone who has 'been there'?

It can be tricky to find reliable information online, so here are a few places you might consider starting with:

TransHub www.transhub.org.au

Transcend www.transcendaus.org

Minus18 www.minus18.org.au

Trans Health SA www.transhealthsa.com

4. Challenge your own assumptions

You might have some ideas about what it means to be TGD. No matter our gender identity, we all receive messages about what it means to be a TGD person, whether through word of mouth, media including films or social media, the internet, health professionals, or other sources. Supporting a TGD loved one might mean recognising some of your own assumptions about TGD people, or even gender itself.

As you learn more, the way you think about gender might be challenged. That's a typical response to finding out new information that contradicts old beliefs. Try to remain open, and maintain a 'both/and' attitude, rather than a black-and-white, 'either/or' approach.

5. Get comfortable with discomfort

Part of supporting someone who is part of a diverse community of which you're not a member is accepting that there will be awkward, uncomfortable, and challenging moments. You might say the right pronoun ten times in a row, and then accidentally say the wrong one on your eleventh try.

Try to think of these moments as opportunities to learn and grow, rather than something to be ashamed of. If possible, try to talk to a third party about how you feel, rather than the person you are trying to support. Regardless of your intentions, it is unfair to expect someone you have hurt to focus on your discomfort and minimise their own.

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6. Ask what you can do to help

It's not easy to know how to support someone who is experiencing significant change or challenges. It's especially tricky when you don't know what type of support might be wanted or needed. Communicating about this openly is the only way to truly know what would be helpful to your TGD loved one. They may really appreciate support in one area, but not want or need it in another.

You might try saying:

- That sounds like a lot. Can I do or say anything to support you right now?
- What could I do better to support you and your transition?
- Can I do anything to make this [major life event] easier on you?
- Would you like me to come with you to that appointment/community group/event? Or drive you there? Or call you afterwards?

7. Let the person you care about lead the way

It can be tempting to make suggestions that you think will help your loved one or encourage them to take the next steps in their gender journey – whatever those next steps look like. Just be sure that the person wants advice or is consenting to that nudge toward their goals first.

Transitioning, whether socially or medically, is deeply personal, takes a tremendous amount of courage, and must be done at a pace the person at the centre is comfortable with. Knowing that the people around you support you, accept you, and love you, regardless of where you are on your journey, is incredibly important.

8. Be mindful of the person's safety

While it can be uncomfortable to talk about, there are real safety issues for TGD people in public and private spaces. This is especially true for people who have multiple marginalised identities, including trans women and transfeminine people, gender non-conforming people, and trans people of colour.

Generally, TGD people are aware of the potential for harassment, discrimination, and on the extreme end of the spectrum, violence that can occur to us by no fault of our own. If your TGD loved one tells you they don't feel safe in a particular place, with a particular person, or doing a particular activity, listening, and trusting their judgement is critical. Be mindful that their tolerance for risk and uncertainty might be less than yours and try to see it from their perspective if possible.

9. Respect the person's boundaries and your own

Not all TGD people want to share details about their transition with other people. There might be some topics your loved one is more comfortable discussing than others. The same might be true for you – there might be certain things that you don't want to hear about. For example, details about surgeries might gross you out!

It's okay to communicate about what you are and aren't comfortable with sharing with one another. It's also okay to communicate about what kinds of support you are and aren't able to give. This may also change over time.

The important thing is to remember that boundaries are about you, and what you will do to maintain your wellbeing, not about changing the other person's behaviour. For example, you might say, "I'd love to go with you to your appointment for your first testosterone injection. If I go, I'll wait in the waiting room, though, because I hate seeing needles."

10. Reach out for support – for yourself or others

Ultimately, supporting your TGD loved one in finding, naming, and affirming their gender is a journey for everyone involved. While it's admirable to provide support to another person, it's important to also make time to care for yourself. If you are feeling stressed, anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed, be sure to ask for the support you need, by talking to a trusted person or reaching out to a support group like your local Transcend chapter.

You can also find information for support people, including partners, parents, friends, and colleagues, on TransHub.

- www.transcend.org.au
- www.transhub.org.au/allies

If you are providing day-to-day support to another person, even someone in your family, you may be considered an unpaid carer. This is especially true if the person needs support due to age, disability, or mental ill health. Resources and support for carers can be found at Carers SA: www.carerssa.com.au.