

Self-Advocacy

Trans and Gender-Diverse Self-Advocacy In Health and Social Services



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Many trans and gender diverse people have had negative experiences accessing health and social services. Trans and gender diverse people must often be their own best, and sometimes only, advocate to access necessary healthcare or social services. This resource was created to help trans and gender diverse people best advocate for themselves and their needs in health and social services.

Essential Context: Trans and gender diverse people are often pressured to change or simplify our stories, lives, needs and experiences in ways that providers will understand. While the landscape is changing, and more providers are building their understanding of trans and gender diverse communities, many providers continue to reinforce harmful notions about trans and gender diverse identities. While honesty and accuracy are important when accessing health and social services, you always have the right to choose to share whichever aspects of your identity and your story you are most comfortable discussing with your provider.

Preparing for a Health or Social Service-Related Appointment:

- 1) **Reflect on your priorities for the meeting:** Before an appointment begins, reflect on your key priorities for the conversation. Are there specific next steps you would like to explore? Are there specific issues, or concerns, you'd like to discuss? Write them out ahead of time, in or-

der of priority. This list can help guide you in your conversation with a provider.

- 2) **Do your research:** Health and social service providers don't always have all of the answers, or know what the required steps are, particularly when it comes to trans health and healthcare. If you are looking for transition-related healthcare, it can be helpful to do your own research ahead of time, to both help understand often-complex health issues, and to better understand the required processes to access specific health interventions, like beginning hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or gender confirmation surgeries.
- 3) **Invite a friend or loved one:** Having someone there with you can make a big difference. Bring a friend, partner or loved one along to support you, and talk through what you think you'll need from them during the appointment ahead of time. You can also reach out to local 2SLGBTQ+ organizations and they may be able to help connect you with a volunteer to accompany you to an appointment.
- 4) **Reach out in advance:** If you are worried about your experience accessing care as a trans person, and if this is your first appointment with a new provider, you have every right to contact them ahead of time (email is a good option.) and ask questions that matter to you. You can ask if they have experience working with trans people or have received training on trans-inclusive health services.

Advocating for Yourself During an Appointment:

- 1) **You have the right to be referred to respectfully:** While it's rarely a comfortable experience, and not one that you should have to deal with in the first place, care providers might not know the best ways to talk about, or respectfully talk with, a trans or gender diverse person. If you feel comfortable, you can correct a care provider who is using the wrong name or pronouns. In these moments, having a friend or loved one with you can make a big difference, and reduce the burden on you to always advocate for yourself.
- 2) **You can disagree with your provider:** Providers aren't experts on everything, and they won't always have all the answers. Patients know what they need best. If you don't agree with what your provider is recommending, you can voice your discomfort or uncertainty. You may also correct them if they are sharing inaccurate or out of date information.
- 3) **You can come back to what matters most:** As your session nears its end, reflect back on your key priorities – what were you looking for from this appointment? You should feel comfortable bringing up issues that weren't discussed sufficiently, or which you haven't yet had a chance to explore.
- 4) **If you need to, you can leave:** If the session is triggering, or the provider is not inclusive, you have every right to immediately end your appointment and leave the location.

You do not have to put up with mistreatment, misgendering, discriminatory or otherwise inappropriate behaviour.



Advocating for Yourself After an Appointment:

- 1) If you had a negative experience:** You have legally protected rights in Ontario and Canada as a trans and/or gender diverse person. Health and social service providers do not have the right to mistreat or discriminate against you. If you have a negative experience with a provider, you may contact the organization, or the provider's regulatory body (depending on their profession). Most health and social service organizations will have a patient complaint or ombudsperson whom you can contact with your concerns. Immediately after a negative appointment, if you feel comfortable doing so, write down what happened and what specific conduct was inappropriate. This will be helpful should you choose to make a complaint.
- 2) You can request to change providers:** If you don't feel comfortable with your provider, for any reason, you can request to change providers. While this is not always possible, or may result in delays, it is an option available to you.
- 3) You can send a follow up email:** If you felt there were issues that were not sufficiently discussed, or if there were next steps you need confirmed or clarified, many providers will permit you to send a follow up email. This is an effective way to ensure your priorities are understood by your provider.

- 4) You can care for yourself:** Talking about our health, physical or mental, can be particularly draining, or triggering, for many trans and gender diverse people. A key aspect of self-advocacy is advocating for our own right to take the time we need to be healthy. After an appointment, give yourself some time to decompress and process your experience.

Dating and Relationships for Trans People

Navigating dating and relationships as a trans person can seem daunting, especially for those of us who are recently out, during our transition (whatever that may mean to us), and/or who have had previous negative experiences in dating and relationships.

First and foremost, it is important to remind ourselves **that we are deserving of love, compassion, and care**. Our trans bodies are deserving of love, compassion, and care. While dating as a trans person can include challenges, many trans people find love and joy through healthy and reciprocal relationships and dating experiences.

Dating and relationships look different to each of us. We all have different experiences and different needs. This resource cannot answer every question. Rather, it strives to share information to help trans people safely navigate dating and relationships.

Safety shouldn't have to be top of mind while dating as a trans person, but it is an important consideration to think through. These tips are intended to help you plan and prepare, to maximize your safety in the world of dating and relationships.

A Complicated Question: Do I Disclose I am Trans?

You are not, and should never be, obligated

to disclose your trans identity to anyone, including friends, family, dates, or potential partners. You have the right to privacy, and you have the right to keep fundamentally private information to yourself. Your date does not have a right to know that you are trans.

Both choosing to, or choosing not to, disclose your trans identity comes with risks and benefits. It may be helpful to reflect on these risks and benefits to inform your decision.

If you do not disclose you are trans, and your date or potential partner figures it out, they may react negatively, or feel a sense of betrayal. Some people feel similar emotions if you disclose proactively. Other people's reactions to you being trans are not your fault or your responsibility.

Many individuals only understand trans people through stigmatizing stereotypes. Many non-trans people may feel like they had a right to know prior to a date. In making the decision to disclose or not, you may wish to think ahead about how your date might react if they find out or if you do disclose.

You can ask yourself:

- Has this person made 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive statements or comments? Have we talked about 2SLGBTQ+ or trans people before?
- What social circles is this person a part of? Is it likely that they've encountered trans people before?

If you are unsure about how they might react, you can find ways to mention trans people to test the waters. For example, you can reference a trans celebrity or talk about social justice issues to get a better sense of who they are, their values, and if they know much about trans people.

However – and it's a big however – we must also take steps to protect ourselves in intimate contexts. We are never obligated to disclose we are trans, but, acknowledging that other people can sometimes be volatile or unpredictable, we should plan for our safety.

Navigating Abusive Relationships as a Trans Person

Due to external factors, trans people may be more vulnerable to abuse and may have greater difficulty fleeing their partner(s) should they be stuck in an abusive relationship. Abuse comes in many forms, including financial, emotional, and physical abuse. Any person can find themselves in an abusive relationship, regardless of their confidence, income, or other factors. It is important to be aware of the signs of abuse in intimate relationships so that you can look out for yourself and your peers.

While abuse comes in many forms. The list below includes warning signs adapted from the Canadian Women's Foundation:

- Being called names, having jokes made at your expense, or being humiliated by your partner.
- Feeling like your every move is being watched, or like you can't do things without a partner's permission.

- Being pressured into sex or pressured to engage in sexual activities that you dislike and do not consent to.
- Feeling like you are always at risk of reprisal or violence (physical or otherwise), should you do anything your partner disagrees with.
- Having your privacy violated by a partner, such as having your phone calls, text messages or social media posts monitored.

If you find yourself in an unsafe or abuse intimate partner relationship, here are some steps you can take to protect yourself:

- 1) If you are in immediate risk, or feel unsafe in your home, you can leave. If possible, arrange to stay with a friend. You can explore shelter services available in your region here: <https://endingviolence-canada.org/getting-help/>
- 2) Be mindful of browser history. If you are worried your partner is monitoring your internet history, you can delete it routinely so that they don't know what websites you might be visiting. This is particularly important if you are concerned about your privacy and looking into domestic violence services and supports.
- 3) If you are worried about trans inclusive services in your area, you can reach out to your local 2SLGBTQ+ community centre, such as SPECTRUM in Waterloo, to help find services that you know are well-equipped to support you.

- 4) Remember that your experiences are valid. A key feature of abusive relationships is making those being abused question their own experiences, or to feel that they deserved to be mistreated. You deserve to be supported, to feel safe in your home and with your partner.

Safety Planning for a First Date

If you are heading out on a first date, or otherwise encountering someone in an intimate context for the first time, there are a few steps you can take to feel and be safer. These may not all be always relevant or necessary but are nonetheless worth considering as measures to promote comfort and plan for your safety.

1: Tell a friend

Ahead of your first date, let a trusted friend know where you are going and how to reach you. You may also consider confirming a time for a check-in after the date. This means that your friend will know when to expect to hear from you and gives you a convenient excuse if you need a reason to leave a situation or end a date.

2: Plan your escape:

While never something we hope to put into practice, having an exit strategy makes a big difference for both comfort and safety. An exit strategy can include: a predetermined code word you can text a friend in order for them to immediately call you and fake an emergency, or pre-planning an excuse you can use with your date to bring the event to an immediate close.

If your safety is at immediate risk, you can and should do whatever you can to leave the situation. This can include lying to your date about an emergency, heading to the wash-room and leaving, asking a server for help, or asking a friend to pick you up.

3: Meet up in a public space:

If you haven't met in person before, meeting up in a public space for your first date is highly recommended. By choosing a coffee shop, restaurant, or other high traffic area, there's a lower risk of issues, and it can be much easier to leave if needed. This also gives you an opportunity to get to know one another outside of an intimate space. Meeting up in public first is a good idea for dates, hookups or other kinds of engagements, and is recommended prior to heading to a private or intimate setting.

4: Think about your comfort:

Before heading into a date or intimate setting, it is important to reflect on our boundaries and our comfort level. Dates can go in all kinds of directions, or no direction at all. To help maintain our boundaries, we can reflect before a date. For example, how would you feel about sexual intimacy taking place during the date? What are your boundaries and needs pertaining to sexual intimacy, should it occur? Reflect on these questions ahead of time, and don't hesitate to communicate your boundaries to the person you are meeting in advance of the date – if you are all on the same page, you can both be more comfortable.

For more information about accessing sexual assault support services, or shelters, or women's crisis services in our community, visit: <https://www.sascwr.org/> and <https://wccswr.org/>. To find GBV and IPV services anywhere in Canada, visit: <https://endingviolencecanada.org/getting-help-2/>

Navigating Boundaries and Dysphoria While Dating

Dating while trans can be joyous, exciting, and liberating. It can also be hard, exhausting, and overwhelming. Often, it's a combination of all the above. While all people have (and have every right to) unique boundaries and needs in relationships, there are several considerations that are often particularly relevant to trans people.

You deserve to have your boundaries respected: First and foremost, you have every right to your boundaries, within and beyond physical intimacy. Your boundaries deserve to be respected. If a partner or significant other is unable to respect your boundaries, that is often a clear sign that something isn't working, or that this situation may not be safe.

Key Questions for Consideration:

What kinds of physical intimacy are you okay with? Many trans people have firm boundaries around sexual intimacy. You have every right to refuse to engage in forms of physical intimacy that push against your boundaries. For example, you can assert that certain acts are entirely off limits or that you don't want to be touched in certain places.

Are there things that will make you more comfortable? Many trans people have complicated relationships to our bodies. For example, many trans people opt to keep certain clothing on during intimate moments. Many trans people opt to stay partially clothed during sexual intimacy, often by wearing their binders, gaffs or other gender affirming gear. These are fair and reasonable things to do to keep yourself comfortable and should be respected by your partner(s).

Are there words or terms that are triggering, and alternatives that you prefer? We

often use unnecessarily gendered language to describe sexual intimacy or certain body parts, but many trans people use (or create) alternative language to describe their bodies. Are there certain words (for example, penis, testicles, breasts, vagina) that you don't want used to describe your body? Are there other words that feel better to use? Create a list of Good versus Bad words, and you can share this with a partner prior to sexual intimacy taking place.

