

DECISIONS ABOUT GENDER DYSPHORIA: THE POWER OF CHOICE

I experience gender dysphoria and consider myself transgender. When I use the word dysphoria I mean that my external sex does not match with what I feel it should be. I am physically male, but I identify internally as a female and strongly desire a female body. These feelings are often a large source of confusion, stress, and disappointment.

The recommended course of action to resolve these dissonant feelings is often to transition—to become socially or physically the gender you feel you should be. I have decided not to transition because I feel it will not bring me ultimate fulfillment. This decision is heavily influenced by my religious beliefs and my relationship with God. It was not an easy decision to make, and I still experience gender dysphoria. However, I have found an unexpected amount of peace in this choice. I have gained great insight about myself in this journey with God to decide my identity. This is my story.

BEGINNINGS

Early Childhood

When I was young, before the age of 11, I was very naïve about life and especially gender. I did not have a solid identity as being male or female. I knew I was physically male and this did not bother me. I sometimes dreamed about being a girl, and that also didn't bother me. I didn't have a strong enough concept of the differences in gender—physical and cultural—to be confused about who I was. Gender was very fluid to me. I was more concerned about the activities I liked to do and my interactions with friends and family. Thus, while there were some hints of gender identity conflict when I was young, it was not an issue at the time.

Puberty

Gender dysphoria began to become an issue when I reached puberty. At around 11 or 12 I noticed an increase in the frequency I found myself thinking about being a girl. I began to notice the differences more in physicality and culture between the sexes. I began to be concerned when who I was began to clash with what I wanted. I was more inclined to culturally feminine activities and roles. I wanted to do what the girls were doing and be with them. I did not like doing what most boys did nor did I like their future roles. However, I was influenced by what boys are supposed to

do and be. I was physically male so I tried to be more culturally male. I tried to do masculine activities because that's what boys were supposed to do.

The dysphoria became more intense as I grew older. I was mortified when my body started to become more masculine. I did not want to be a boy; I wanted to be a girl. I began to have body image issues because what I saw in the mirror did not match what I thought I looked like. I was becoming masculine in appearance and I wanted to be feminine. In my dreams I was female, and it was disappointing to wake up and be male. I remember praying frequently that I would become a girl and not have to be a boy. I began to not worry so much about developing culturally masculine traits because I did not want to be male; it simply wasn't who I was.

I began to realize my feelings were socially unacceptable after a negative experience with a friend. I was at a sleepover and we were playing video games. He asked why I always chose female avatars and I said it was because I wanted to be a girl in real life. He responded negatively and told me my feelings were very disturbing and not normal. I began to feel that something was wrong with me, and now I was too afraid to tell anyone. I was too afraid to tell even my parents; I was a people pleaser and the oldest child, which meant I needed to be the example. I could not let my family know I had this or I would let them down. Looking back, I'm sure my parents would have responded with love, but I was too scared to say anything for fear of rejection. I needed to be a good example and good examples don't have problems this unnatural.

I began to feel alone. I had never heard anything about transgender or heard of anyone who experienced what I was experiencing. I truly felt I was the only one in the world who experienced gender dysphoria. I determined to keep my feelings to myself and hoped that one day I would find a way to become the woman I wanted to be.

At this point I did not think my desires conflicted with my religion. I felt I could have a good relationship with God whether I was male or female so long as I kept his commandments. I did what I was supposed to in the Church, and I was a good person. My reason for keeping my secret was out of social fear and rejection, not religious backlash or shame of sin.

THE CONFLICT

Exploration

I figured that I just should be a girl, and maybe that was okay. I didn't know about sex reassignment surgery at the time, but I dreamed about changing my sex. One day, on the radio, I heard a story about a man who had a sex change and I realized that I could do that, too. I made it a goal to change when I became an adult. I felt

that becoming a woman would be a betrayal of my family's trust and reality, so I decided not to tell my family. I was mortified of being seen as broken or weird. I decided it was best to live as a boy and then move out when I was 18 and break contact. That way, I would then be free to become a woman, find inner peace, and not disappoint anyone.

A problem arose that threw my confusion and dysphoria into overdrive. With puberty came sexual stimulus and wet dreams. When I was young, my dreams of being a girl were a form of inner peace, so I would fantasize about being one before falling asleep to encourage the dreams. Somehow, this process also became arousing. The first time I experienced sexual release, the sensation was so new and unexpected that I thought my wish had come true and I had changed into a girl. I was disappointed and confused to discover that was not the case. At first, I honestly did not know this sexual arousal was inappropriate because I didn't know these feelings were sexual. I enjoyed the sensations and the feeling of somehow being female in a more intense way. Over time I began to suspect that my feelings at night were sexual and thus inappropriate. I began to feel guilty for this sexual excitement I experienced.

This was an incredibly painful realization because masturbation was not my intent. I just wanted to be a girl and have peace from imagining myself being a girl. When I recognized my experience was sexual it was no longer satisfying. The sexual climax was not only a reminder that I wasn't a girl, but I also felt I was offending God's commandments. My only vent for my emotions was suddenly sinful. I tried my best to never reach full sexual stimulus while fantasizing, because it was an unwanted side effect. One of the things that used to bring me peace was now not a relief.

After this I decided to try cross-dressing to feel more feminine. I was disappointed by the lack of clothes I had access to and I wished I could buy my own. I loved the way I felt wearing women's clothes. It felt natural. But the behavior became too risky, as I feared I would be caught. Cross-dressing occasionally led to unwanted sexual excitement so I tried to limit this behavior.

During this time, I did not confess my sexual misconduct to my bishop. I was very ashamed of my actions and afraid of my gender dysphoria. Growing up, I learned that I should confess masturbation, fornication, and homosexual behavior. I had never heard from anyone what to do for wanting to be a different gender. In any other circumstance I would have confessed, but I was ashamed to tell the bishop why it was happening. It was too weird and I felt like I was the only one who had cross-dressed or felt like I should be a girl.

I also did not want to disappoint my family. I was a priesthood holder and did not want to have those obligations stripped from me. Living alone with my confusion and stress was horrible, and I had a constant feeling of guilt and unworthiness. I

have since confessed those past transgressions and dealt with them with my Savior. If I could do it over again, I would have seen the bishop then and not waited years to confess.

During this time I tried burying and fighting my feelings. I thought my feelings were sinful because of how sex was tied to them. I felt that I should refrain from wearing women's clothes until I was female and then my actions would no longer be a sin. It had not occurred to me at this time that turning into a woman would potentially estrange me from the Church. I was willing to be estranged from family for a while out of shame, but I did not think there would be any shame in starting a new life in the Church as a woman—once I was older, of course.

The Battle

Besides the guilt from inappropriate sexual behavior, I was still set on transitioning at some point in my future. I had no reason to change. Life became more complicated when I was converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Growing up I had faith in God and truly wanted to do good and make him happy. I had good feelings about the Church I was raised in.

Around 14 or 15 I began to ponder my commitment to the Church. The Church asked a lot of me and I knew I would be expected to serve a mission, among other things. I decided to find out for myself if the Church was true because I would not commit so much of myself to something that was not. I started reading the Book of Mormon and praying every night to know if it was true. I felt peace, but I felt that peace was insufficient. I told God I needed something powerful so I could know without doubt that The Church of Jesus Christ was true. I told him I would live as if it were true for a time, but I needed to really know. I received my answer to prayer after about a month of experimenting.

During a testimony meeting at a youth conference I heard a recently baptized and disowned young woman share her testimony. I felt a powerful cleansing feeling I have rarely experienced since. The firm impression came to my mind that the Book of Mormon is the word of God, Jesus Christ is the Savior, and his restored church is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. With that overwhelming feeling came a relief from my gender dysphoria. It was the first time I felt completely normal being male. Not only did I learn a powerful truth about God, but I also felt that being transgender was somehow not good and in conflict with God's will.

I thought I was cured of gender dysphoria with that spiritual experience, but the feelings came back a few days later. I now tried with everything I had to stop obsessing over being a girl. I thought that these feelings were sinful or that I was possessed. I was convinced that I needed to live as a son of God. Therefore the desire to be a daughter of God was incorrect, immoral, and not part of me.

I still did not seek help from anyone because I was ashamed and thought I could fight alone. I was wrong. Not only did I still want to be a girl, but I now had a sexual addiction to resolve. Though masturbation was an unwanted side effect of fantasy, it felt good in the moment and was a relief from stress for a short time. The battles with myself were near impossible at night. I hated sleeping. When I managed to go a while without masturbation my dreams became sexual and transgender in nature and would bring back full dysphoria the next day.

I learned that if I could keep my mind distracted my sexual addiction and gender confusion were no longer be on the forefront and were thus much easier to bear. I started to do everything I could to keep myself busy. I tried to exhaust myself at night so I had no energy to fantasize. I read my scriptures daily and prayed desperately to overcome this dysphoria. I began to overcompensate and seek to develop more masculine traits.

Over time I managed to gain control over the sexual addiction, but the dysphoria did not leave. It became cyclical—I could go weeks without feeling female, but when it returned it felt stronger every time. As I grew older the feelings become more specific. I was jealous of the girls around me and wanted to be able to be around them—as one of them. I wanted to do what they were doing. I wanted to look forward to having children and being a mother.

During the most intense times, I even found my physical attractions changing. Usually I was attracted to women to some extent, but during times of dysphoria I was attracted to men. I did not consider these feelings homosexual because I had no desire to be with a man as a man. I wanted to be a woman and be wanted by a man. During these times I fought the thoughts and feelings as hard as I could and waited out the storms. I found relief by being very angry inside. I bottled up my emotions to the breaking point and then burned them out through exercise.

Over time I felt I had a good handle on my condition. What I really had were various unhealthy ways of dealing with it. As I prepared for a mission I felt that I could live as a man and would one day overcome these desires. But over the years I began to lose hope in myself. When I could not easily free myself from desiring to be a girl I began to think that I was sinful and unworthy of love. I developed an acute sense of self-hatred. I prayed and desired that by serving God he would fully free me from my gender confusion, that one day I might be worthy.

Mission

On the mission I was disappointed when my dysphoria did not leave. As busy as I was, I could go long periods of time without feeling confusion, but the feelings would always return. Sometimes I felt an awful dysphoria for weeks. I learned more about transgender people on my mission from stories and experiences. One hard

realization was when I learned the Church's position on sex reassignment. The outcome of the procedure is Church discipline and likely excommunication. I also knew it was not easy to get re-baptized after transitioning. Though I was trying to be male, I was realizing that these feelings were not going to go away. I was also realizing that I could probably not become a woman and stay in the Church that I had grown to love and fully believe in.

The loneliness in this struggle began to become unbearable. This time I wanted to tell someone. I was so tired of bearing this experience alone and I needed guidance. I loved and trusted my mission president, but I could not bring myself to tell him. The shame and fear was still overwhelming.

COMING TO TERMS

Post-Mission

By the time I left my mission I accepted that I was transgender, and I needed to choose whether to transition or not. I decided being male was the best option until I figured out what to do. I had felt happiness living the gospel so I felt it safe to live by its precepts until I had clear direction.

I finally built up the courage to talk to my bishop. It was during a temple recommend interview and we had finished. I was in a good place with sexual addiction, but I still experienced dysphoria and dreamed and fantasized about being female. I asked the bishop if he would be willing to just talk about something for a bit. I told him about my feelings—that I wanted to be a woman—and how long I had felt this way. I told him about my sexual misconduct in the past and the confusion I still felt. The experience was incredibly relieving. Even better, the bishop responded with love. I was not rejected and I was encouraged to continue to live the Church standards and not transition.

Sharing my experience with my bishop lifted a large amount of weight associated with loneliness. I felt strength from not being rejected and felt a little less self-loathing. This feeling provided greater strength and conviction, and I set out to follow the counsel of my bishop. To do this I buried my feelings deep, stayed busy, and focused on only doing good things. I still felt attraction to women so I knew I could pursue relationships and stay "normal."

Love and Loss

I truly thought I was in a good place in life. I began to have relationships and felt masculine being a boyfriend. When I had gender dysphoric thoughts I buried them and distracted myself with something else to do. I began attending BYU and living like an adult. I told bishops about my experiences and sought support as it came.

Sometimes there were relapses into pornography and sexual misconduct, but burying my feelings and staying busy still seemed to be a good strategy to recover.

Then the internet happened. At a point of weakness I searched online to learn more about my experience and a whole new world of information opened up to me. I learned about gender dysphoria and many transgender people. I learned I was not alone; there were thousands of people like me. I also learned that most people found inner peace in transitioning and that was the recommended course of action. I did not find anything about people who chosen not to transition or who wanted to stay in the Church. Instead, I learned about many failed marriages and people who had left the Church. I maintained my religious lifestyle and tried to hold on to what I thought was true, but doubts were beginning to eat at my façade. I was very worried about my future and current choice to live as a male. Perhaps this was something that could not be fought.

Around this time I met a girl who changed my life. She was in my ward and struck me as an amazingly beautiful person. She had a powerful testimony of Christ, was physically attractive, and seemed very stable in life. We began dating and I felt relief from gender dysphoria in the relationship. I felt like I might finally find relief from gender confusion through a solid relationship.

After a few months of dating I went to the oil fields in North Dakota to work. Things became difficult. I was no longer saturated in an LDS environment with many positive influences. I was in emotional pain from missing my girlfriend and I had dispensable time where I could not keep myself busy. My gender dysphoria returned in an intensity I had not felt since before my mission. I cried because of how much I hated being male, and I could not resolve my pain. I tried burying the feelings like I had done before, but they were becoming harder to ignore. By this point I realized I had fallen in love with my girlfriend and wanted to marry her. I felt like I could not turn back now and I needed to force this part of me away and be a good man for her. I returned from the oil fields and we started talking about marriage.

One day she suggested we talk about our weaknesses to better know one another. Even though I had grown comfortable telling bishops about my dysphoria I had not told her. I had not confided in her because I felt I had it under control and I did not want to concern her. I also did not want to do or say anything to scare her away. Nevertheless, I felt she was right—being honest would be best, so I told her about my dysphoria. She was surprised but responded positively.

I thought things were going well, but something was out of place emotionally and I did not realize it. My life quickly began to spin out of control. I loved this girl, but all of a sudden I felt very afraid for the future. The thought of marriage did not seem right and I did not know why. I prayed to know if I was making the right decision but

did not receive any guidance. I felt lost and confused because I thought marriage was the right decision. I was marrying a woman to start a family like I was supposed to do.

I began to become physically sick at the thought of proposing and decided that something was wrong. I needed to figure it out. I thought the best course of action was to break up. I did not have the maturity to realize I can work out life situations with a significant other. Part of my deeply ingrained shame told me that I needed to be perfect for a relationship, and I was not. I broke up with my love and broke both our hearts. I realized I could not promise her that I would not transition one day. I did not have a solid foundation for anything and could not give the promise of a lasting marriage. I was tired of fighting, and my fighting to maintain a male identity was falling apart.

THE DECISION

Journey from Despair and Anger

The breakup was the single most painful experience I have ever had in my entire life. I was crushed by loss and burning with the guilt of hurting someone I deeply loved. I was so devastated I didn't feel anything but pain and anger. I didn't really even feel dysphoria for a while. I didn't feel like either gender; I was just me and I was broken. I was also very angry at God. All I knew is that I lost someone I loved and I felt it was because of my dysphoria. I didn't ask to be transgender and I felt it had just cost me fulfillment and happiness. Why would God be so cruel to show me love and then take it away? Why would I be given something in life that seemed perfectly contradictory to what was right? All I wanted was to live the gospel, keep the commandments, and find happiness, but who I was by nature seemed inconsistent with the plan of salvation.

I had no hope for the future. All I had ever read about was people who transition. I felt that, try as I might, I could live as long as possible in the gospel but one day I would eventually give in. I was too tired to fight it and I had nothing left to hope for. I wanted to do the right thing and I wanted peace. I did not know what that was or how to do it.

Deciding

I struggled for months with my emotions and pain. I went into complete survival mode. I went to church and school because it was habit. I did not have hope for the future and I did not understand anything about the experience I had been given. Slowly I began to humble myself and truly seek God's help to understand. I asked him to show me why I had been given this experience of finding love and losing it.

What did he want me to learn? Shortly after my change of heart I was given a glimmer of hope.

I was in a New Testament class and the teacher shared a story that gave me new insight and a path to pursue. He shared a story about a group of students in the Holy Land. The group was passing by a shepherd and a flock of sheep. One of the sheep had broken both its front legs and was strapped to the chest of the shepherd. The group guide stopped the shepherd and asked what happened to the lamb with the broken legs. The shepherd responded that he had broken the lamb's legs. Surprised by this response the guide asked why the protector of the flock would do such a thing. The shepherd replied that the lamb would not listen to his voice and was stubborn. If he allowed the lamb to continue in its behavior then it would likely wander into danger and be killed because of its lack of obedience. By breaking the lamb's legs the lamb would be forced to be near the bosom of the shepherd for a month to heal, completely dependent on the shepherd for nutrition. When the legs finally healed, the lamb would have no doubt of the shepherd's voice and would be willing to follow him.

I realized that this breakup experience was the Lord metaphorically breaking my legs. I realized that I had not truly given myself to God. Deep down, I had not firmly decided whether I would follow God or leave his church and transition. I was holding part of myself back from him. I realized that I needed to make a decision—truly resolve one way or the other—and commit.

I spent the next year truly trying to know God. I felt that if I could define my relationship with him then I could start to find out who I should be. I learned that God is love and that he always loves me. He would love me if I transitioned to be a woman, and he would love me if I stayed a man. I learned I was worthy of love and should love myself. I learned to be more forgiving and less obsessed with imperfection in myself and others. I found meaningful relationships with friends who would love me for everything that I was. I confided in more people and found strength with every person I told. I was enough, worthy of love with all of my imperfections, strengths, and struggles.

I eventually reached a point where much of my life was in order and I had more faith in God. I just needed to make a decision about my future. I knew that God loved me no matter what course I chose. I also knew that what I had to gain or lose was his trust in me and opportunities to grow in the gospel. I knew that this life was my choice and I had the power to choose anything I wanted. At this point, I wanted to choose what God wanted me to choose. I wanted to make him happy because I loved him and I trusted him. I wanted to give myself to God and choose an identity that would bring the most happiness to myself and others. However, the decision was still very difficult.

In this process of choosing what to do about my gender identity, I came to realize that this decision was completely my own. I was not receiving much inspiration either way. In my meditation I realized that changing to be a woman would probably bring some amount of inner peace; however, it would not be fully satisfying. What I wanted was to be completely female and have all the experiences and capabilities given to women. That desire is medically impossible. I could physically attain the likeness of a female, but I would never truly be able to bear life and be a mother. Thus, I felt I would always be longing for more, even after transitioning.

This potential lack of fulfillment also came with great spiritual risk. If I transitioned I would most likely lose my covenants with God. I believe these covenants bring great blessings in life, intimacy with God, and potential eternal happiness in the life to come. I could not participate in the temple as a male turned female. On the other hand, if I stayed male and lived a lifestyle of full participation in the Church I would always experience dissonance and stress from being male. I would have greater confidence in my afterlife because I had given everything to God, but I did not have hope for a peaceful and fulfilling earth life. The thought of living 60 or so years with the same overpowering struggle of the past 20 years seemed absolutely overwhelming and very painful.

After several months of this dilemma I finally reached a decision. I determined that the best path to take would be to do whatever I had to do to keep my covenants. God had always been the most stable thing in my life, and if I trusted him I believed I would eventually find ultimate fulfillment. This decision was very scary and I felt I was walking off a cliff without any hope of being caught. Did I really believe that I could be happy after this life if I lived within the commandments? Did I believe God could help me live faithful to his commandments with my dysphoria?

I decided to trust him. I prayed and told God that I was his. Transitioning would put my covenants at risk so I did not want to do it. I had covenanted in the past to consecrate my life to him, but now I was really doing it. I shared with him my fears about the future. I expressed to him my worries about being miserable in this earth life. I also told him that, despite these fears, I trusted in his promises of peace after this life and would choose what I thought was the better potential for happiness.

MOVING FORWARD

What I Have Learned

I expected to experience depression once I made my decision to stay male. I thought I would only feel dysphoria without any hope of resolving it until death. I was very surprised to actually find peace and strength in my decision. For years I tried to make a decision based on feeling what was right, but mostly out of fear of

rejection—either from society or God. This pattern did not lead to any conclusive or sustainable direction in life. There was always a part of me that wanted both to be a woman and to have temple covenants, but it was an impossibility. I needed to choose one, but I was unwilling to do so. I half-heartedly lived in the gospel while entertaining the thought of transitioning.

I learned that choosing out of faith instead of fear is a much more powerful way to live life. I learned I do not have to run from my demons. I can look, consider, and put them in their proper place according to my desires. I have the power to choose who I am. I am not defined by one characteristic of my being. I know that I can still have a relationship with God and be female, but it would not be the relationship I truly want. I want my covenants with God and his promises of eternal happiness and fulfillment more than I want to be female. I trust that if I live this life committed to God then he will bless me with eternal happiness, whatever that looks like.

After I made my own choice and communicated it to God, I began to receive incredible amounts of insight into my experience that I had not been able to receive before. I learned a new perspective to help ease the pain of the dysphoria. I learned that I am more than just someone who is transgender. I am also a cook, a pianist, an engineer, an actor, a friend, a reader, an artist, and much more. I have many qualities that I can focus on and develop. I can define myself by all the things that I am, not just the gender dysphoria.

I also learned I do not have to think in gender binary. Treating all actions, desires, and hobbies as masculine or feminine is a great source of stress. I do not have to think of gender at all for these things. I choose to define myself as Nick. I have many interests and desire to learn a variety of new skills. I do not care if they are considered masculine or feminine. They are what I like and I would do them if I were male or female. The qualities that make up who I am, I own. I do not let narrow social gender constructs determine my pursuits.

I have also found that gratitude is a great balancer of dysphoric distress. Instead of focusing on the body and life I do not have I think on the things I have been given. I have a good, healthy body with which I can serve God and my fellow man. This may not be the body I want, but I treat it with respect and maintain it because I want to be attractive and show gratitude. I am grateful for the family, friends, and opportunities I have been given. I do not need to focus on the things I do not have.

The Future

I have hope in the future for this life and the life after. I believe that I am on a sustainable path that will bring the best of peace, fulfillment, and happiness. I want to have a family, so I look forward to marriage and family. There will be things to work out between my wife and me, but I am not afraid of that future. I still

experience gender dysphoria and always expect to experience it in this life. However, it is not as much of a stressor in my life as it used to be. I have changed my desires and they do not magnify my natural tendencies. I have found that a good network of supportive, authentic friends and family is essential to emotional health. When I struggle, I have a support group. I own who I am and what I experience and I cannot be held socially hostage by shame. This is my life and my choices are between God and myself.

I am moving forward in life with interests and passions within the bounds of the covenants I have made with God. I find peace in life by focusing on positive goals and building meaningful relationships with good-minded people. I own who I am and I choose my identity. I am a child of God and I know that if I follow his commandments I will have a wonderful, fulfilling life *now* and eternal happiness in the afterlife. I do not know what that happiness looks like after this life or what gender I will be. All I know is I am promised happiness if I trust God, and I do trust him.