

## Navigating the Healthcare System: A Young Trans Woman's Perspective

A visit to the doctor's office can be one of the most intimidating things for a transgender (trans) person to go through, whether it's dreading getting a physical, being worried that the doctor will use the wrong pronoun or name or any number of other concerns a person can have about seeing the doctor. I have gone through it myself. I came out at 16 and started to transition when I was 17, 16 days after my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. I am writing this to help other young trans people - specifically young trans women, because that is my experience - know what to expect when going to the doctor's office. I also hope that this will be helpful for other young trans people who are contemplating or planning to transition understand what the process could be like and how to make the experience easier as well.

### Therapy

When I first came out as a trans woman to my friends and family I really wanted to start transitioning right away; sadly, I wasn't able to do it as fast as I liked. There are many ways to start transitioning: no one way is correct. Transitioning is a very personal thing and can be done in a number of different ways. The first thing I wanted to do was start on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which means I wanted to start taking estrogen and testosterone blockers to help my body look more like that of a woman's body.

The process to get there was a long one. In order to do this I had to go through the "Harry Benjamin Standards of Care" (today it is known as WPATH), which required me to go through a year of therapy in order to prove something that I already knew and had known for a long time: that I am a woman. Over all my therapist was supportive, but he still took the stance of "Okay, prove it to me." He wanted me to prove to him that I really was the woman I said I was. He wanted to make sure I wasn't really a male cross-dresser, who is often a man who likes to dress in women's clothes but still thinks of himself as a man.

### The woman I am

Some therapists are a lot worse than mine and want their patients to come to appointments dressed as and acting like stereotypically "masculine" or "feminine" cisgender people. ("Cisgender" refers to people who identify with the gender that they were assigned at birth.) For trans women this means coming to the appointment ultra feminine, wearing a dress or skirt, high heels, makeup, hair in an ultra feminine style, carrying a purse and anything else that is thought of as a stereotypical woman. Some trans women are stereotypically feminine so this may work for them. But for others it doesn't work at all.

I started out being pretty much ultra feminine. I tried wearing makeup every day. I wore skirts and dresses a lot and wore high heels every day, too. I have since stopped wearing makeup, mainly because I like my sleep and don't have time in the morning to put it on. I don't wear skirts much anymore and I don't carry a purse. I do still wear high heels sometimes, but not always. I'm a trans woman but I don't consider myself to be a traditionally "feminine" woman.

Being a trans woman doesn't mean you have to be really "feminine" and girly. If your therapist insists that you have to act or dress ultra feminine to be a woman, I would suggest finding a new therapist if possible. Therapy shouldn't be about proving who anyone is, it should be about working through things that might prevent someone from living a full and healthy life. In fact, therapy was helpful for some other things I was dealing with which had no connection to my being trans. Regardless, transition is about you becoming your real and authentic self - not what someone else thinks or wants you to be.

### **Finding a supportive doctor**

The next step in the process that I took was to find a doctor that could start me on HRT. There aren't many doctors in this country that are willing or able to do it. To help find supportive doctors in the area I recommend visiting online discussion forums. There are a lot of them and they are very helpful. I would also recommend them in general for support and to start building a community if interested. The two websites that I have found most helpful to help with building a community are:

- *Susan's Place*: <http://www.susans.org/forums/index.php>
- *Laura's Playground*: <http://www.lauras-playground.com/>

They are certainly not the only ones, but the ones that have helped me when I have needed it. Also, like everything else in this process going to these sites is not a must, only if you want to.

### **Medical misadventures**

I can't end this story without telling you about a couple more things you might encounter or can expect when going to the doctor's office, especially for visits not related to your transition. My experiences might make you cringe a little bit, or might make you not want to go to the doctor. It's okay to cringe, but your health is important and that includes regular trips to the doctor if possible. Think of this as me preparing you ahead of time for what you might encounter.

Expect to be mis-gendered at the doctor's office. It sucks, but that's the way it is right now at most doctor's offices. For example, my dad and I went to the doctor to get my HRT drugs renewed. Unfortunately, the nurse who worked with my dad and me kept mis-gendering me! The first time she referred to me as "he" I quickly corrected her and said "*she*". She kept talking and immediately said "*he*" with extra emphasis.

I didn't know what to do. Finally my dad, who has been incredibly supportive of me through my transition, said to the nurse as she was leaving the examination room, "Thank you, *sir*!" He said it loud enough so that she would hear it. We both laughed.

This brings up trying to figure out whether or not your doctor or health care provider is familiar with and supportive of transgender issues. If you feel bold you can always ask doctor to use your chosen name and pronoun. If you're not sure how they will react you can also use different strategies to feel them out. When you're having a conversation, bring up LGBT issues. If they respond positively, bring up the fact that you're trans. If you have a supportive parent, bring them along to give you support with name and pronouns.

## Dealing with dysphoria

Like many of you, I dread, dread, DREAD physicals. To be frank, it's the touching "down there" that I dread. It's difficult.

My experience as a trans person is that I have body dysphoria. Dysphoria is different for everyone, for me it means that I am very uncomfortable with what I have between my legs. I hate touching it, I hate looking at it, I hate knowing that it is down there, I just all around HATE it! For some people, dysphoria can be really intense. If that's you, I want you to know that it's legit. It happens and it's okay. If you are trans and have dysphoria, you are not weak. On the other hand, sometimes people say that if a trans person doesn't have dysphoria, then something is wrong with them. This is not true! You are not a bad trans person if you have (or don't have) dysphoria!

Back to my physical. As we were getting started my doctor sensed that I didn't like being touched down there, so she asked me if I had been checking myself (i.e. doing a testicular self-exam). This was really great and such a relief. An ideal physician is someone who asks - who figures out what's comfortable for you and then respects that.

## One last piece of advice

Not that I did this but something that would have helped me at my physical - especially if the doctor hadn't sensed my discomfort - was to have practiced what I wanted to say ahead of time. Or at least had it in my head what I wanted to say. If it helps to write it down, write it down. If it helps to practice in the mirror, practice in the mirror. Help yourself get comfortable with how you want to talk about your body and yourself. Don't worry about what other people say or think: say what you have to say.

So that's my story. I hope you've been able to learn some things from some of the challenges and successes I have faced. I want you to know that you are great just who you are, that you're not the only one going through what you're going through, and that you have the right to good health care and being treated with respect and dignity. If that doesn't happen - it's not your fault, it's theirs!



## Discussion Questions

1. What is one challenge that Lessa faced that you hadn't thought about and/or surprised you?
2. What was one thing her physician did to make Lessa more comfortable?
3. Lessa talked about her dad being very supportive. What else might a family member or friend do to show support for someone's transgender identity?
4. Think about a time you went to the doctor, maybe for a physical. What made you nervous? How was that similar and/or different from Lessa's experience? What, if anything, has your doctor done to make you feel more comfortable?
5. Have you ever been in a situation where you were miscategorized or made to feel uncomfortable about your identity? What was that experience like?
6. Lessa suggested practicing ahead of time what you'd like to tell your physician. If you were Lessa, what might you have said at different points in her story? Thinking about your own concerns or the concerns of friends, how could you express them?