

Transgender and Gender Diverse Clients with Mental Disorders

Treatment Issues and Challenges



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KEYWORDS

• Transgender • Gender diversity • Mental health • Mental disorders • Treatment

KEY POINTS

- Increased rates of suicidality, anxiety, and depression occur among transgender and gender diverse individuals.
- Gender variance can also impact the presentation of eating, psychotic, and autism spectrum disorders.
- Mental health disparities are largely impacted by transphobia and gender-related discrimination and abuse.
- Initial gender dysphoria may contribute to anxiety and distress, although this is often resolved with gender affirmation and gender-responsive care.

INTRODUCTION

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals face risks of mental health problems and suicidality, often as a result of transphobia and minority stress. There are a number of resilience and protective factors that transgender individuals use to cope with mental health challenges and thrive. In this article, a review of the literature on the mental health risks faced by transgender individuals is provided, as well as a discussion of the protective factors that enhance resilience.

It is important to bring to this discussion an awareness of the tendency to pathologize the mental health of transgender individuals. Gender and sexual minority identities have been designated as mental illnesses in past editions of the *Diagnostic and*

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Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), including homosexuality, transvestism, gender identity disorder, and other diagnoses. This history demonstrates the social construction of mental illness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals in diagnoses that reflect dominant social and cultural norms for sexuality and gender.¹ Gender dysphoria and transvestic fetishism remain in the current DSM-5 as diagnoses, but not without some controversy.² In the present article, a discussion of mental health disparities is contextualized within a model of gender minority stress, and counterbalanced with a discussion of the resilience and coping that TGD individuals access to overcome these challenges.

TRANSPHOBIA AND GENDER MINORITY STRESS

Transphobia, or stigma toward transgender identities, plays a key role in mental health disparities among gender diverse groups. Stigma can interfere with recovery from mental health problems and discrimination by reducing one's social status, social network, and self-esteem.³ Transphobia often begins in childhood and adolescence, and includes such experiences as rejection by family and friends, insults from strangers, physical violence, or sexual assault.⁴ Transgender people face both external stigma, which is prejudice and discrimination from others, as well as internalized transphobia, which is stigma that is taken on and directed at oneself. Both types of stigma can interfere with daily functioning and contribute to psychological distress and suicidality.⁴⁻⁶

The Gender Minority Stress Model⁷ is an adaptation of the Minority Stress Model for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals,⁸ and explains the increased rates of mental health problems among transgender individuals. The model delineates that stressful events, anticipatory stigma, and internalized transphobia can pose psychological distress and contribute to the onset of mental health problems.

Violent and nonviolent forms of discrimination can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, distress, and substance use.^{9,10} Not passing may also present risk of discrimination and contribute to more psychological distress, depression, and suicide.^{11,12} Mistreatment can impede the positive effects of coming out, with concealment being necessary for safety.¹³ However, concealment is associated with reduced social support and increased rates of depression.¹³

Although gender nonconformity poses risk for gender minority stress, this identity is also associated with a number of protective factors that enhance the ability to cope with minority stress and increase resiliency and life meaning. These resilience factors are explored further elsewhere in this article.

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL DISORDERS IN GENDER DIVERSE CLIENTS

Several studies suggest that TGD individuals experience increased rates of anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and depressive disorders, with the latter ranging from 2 to 3 times more prevalent than in the general population.^{12,14} Transgender youth in particular have been found to have 2 to 3 times the risk of depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, self-injurious behaviors, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.¹⁵ TGD youth are also at least 2 times as likely to be engaged in mental health treatment.

In addition, transgender individuals tend to have an earlier onset of mental disorders.^{4,16} This increased prevalence of mental disorders among transgender individuals may contribute to maladaptive strategies to cope with distress, including drug and alcohol abuse, sexual risk taking, and self-injurious behaviors.^{6,17-19}

In some cases, the mental health problem may have nothing to do with a person's gender variance, whereas for others, the link may be related to gender dysphoria or

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