

Treatment of Trauma and Nonsuicidal Self-Injury in Transgender Adults

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KEYWORDS

• Transgender • Gender diverse • Trauma • Nonsuicidal self-injury • Rapport

KEY POINTS

- Mental health providers must explore the ways trauma and nonsuicidal self-injury (NSI) have impacted the lives of transgender people.
- Mental health providers must assess for and treat trauma and NSI.
- Neither trauma nor NSI need be a contraindication to a social or medical transition.
- Mental health providers must build a strong working alliance or rapport with their clients.
- Mental health providers are encouraged to ensure that client's mental health concerns are reasonably well-controlled.

Transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) adults experience high rates of trauma and nonsuicidal self-injury (NSI). In a survey of more than 6000 participants, 41% of transgender respondents indicated that they had attempted suicide at least once.¹ The rates of suicide attempts for this participant group increased when there were experiences of employment discrimination and job loss (55%), school bullying (51%), and physical and sexual assault (61% and 64%, respectively). Many researchers have suggested that the high rates of transgender suicide attempts are linked to experiences of minority stress.²⁻⁴ Minority stress has been defined as chronic stress related to discrimination that leads to concealment of transgender identity, internalization of trans-negative beliefs and attitudes, and anticipation of antitransgender discrimination.^{5,6}

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Abbreviations

NSI	Nonsuicidal self-injury
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
TGNC	Transgender and gender nonconforming

This minority stress can also lead to high rates of NSI. Some people who use NSI as a means of coping do so in a manner to address actual or perceived stressors. dickey and Garza⁷ found that gender diverse people use NSI in ways that are different than the general population. Specifically, resilience is seen to be a means of coping; that gender diverse people use ways of coping to rise above the challenges they face on a daily basis. In addition to increased NSI, there are health disparities related to rates of trauma for transgender adults. In 2013, transgender women comprised 72% of hate crime murders and were nearly twice as likely to experience sexual violence than cisgender women. A compounding issue is that transgender people may not seek assistance from institutions to cope with these traumatic events, and when they do seek these services they are likely to experience harm from the very people who are supposed to protect them. For instance, this same survey found that transgender people were 7 times more likely to experience police violence in their interactions with police. In this article, the different forms of trauma that transgender people experience are described and how transgender people can have traumatic experiences when accessing necessary transgender-related health care. Special attention is given to NSI that transgender adults experience. A discussion of how to work with transgender people within a trauma context is also provided.

TRANSGENDER ADULTS AND EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA

Trauma is a term encompassing a variety of experiences that can cause psychological, physical, and sexual harm. Intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and child sexual abuse are some examples of trauma that transgender people may experience. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁸ define traumatic events as those that “are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death” (p. 1). In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is defined as a person having experienced or witnessed a traumatic event and, having done so, the individual is experiencing symptoms that are causing distress.⁹ Mental health practitioners working with transgender people should be especially cognizant of how trauma can influence overall health and well-being owing to the high rates of trauma that transgender adults have.¹⁰ Mental health practitioners should be trained in lifespan approaches, because the types of trauma transgender adults may experience can influence developmental milestones and the overall life course. In addition, mental health practitioners must seek to understand the history of trauma that transgender people have experienced within health care institutions, including counseling and psychology, to most effectively serve transgender clients. Each of these areas is discussed in relation to transgender people and trauma.

Assessing Trauma

Trauma is culturally bound and influenced by society, so a socioecological approach can be helpful when assessing transgender clients.¹¹ Socioecological models bring attention to the various levels that might influence an individual’s life. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention¹² use a 4-level socioecological model to focus intervention and prevention work: individual, relationship, community, and societal

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