

Accessing healthy relationships



Dating and hooking up with men can be fun, affirming and potentially romantic. Many trans women are in long-term fulfilling relationships with men. We all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. However, in our society there can be many challenges for trans women who date men.

We know that sharing information based on real experiences is a great way of building empathy and understanding with our partners, our loved ones, and with ourselves. This resource was created by trans women at the Zoe Belle Gender Collective. It is part of a series based on transfemme.com.au, a website designed to promote healthier relationships that draws on interviews with a broad range of trans women and men about their sexual and romantic relationships.

We encourage you to print and share this resource with trans women who may not currently have access to the internet.

“Trans women” in this resource refers to trans women, trans feminine people, women who may have a trans and gender diverse history or experience but do not identify as transgender and other trans feminine culturally-specific identities such as Sistergirls, Fa’afafine and Kinner. “Men” refers to cisgender men, who exclusively identify with their gender assigned at birth.

The resource contains content that may be considered sensitive including sex, objectification and fetishisation and body dysphoria. Please access our referral section below if any of the content causes distress or if you would like further support.

Accessing romantic relationships

“I was seeing this guy and he was so chill and casual. I could tell he was really proud to be out with me. We went to the beach for a romantic weekend away and stayed in a cute bed and breakfast. We ate in restaurants and walked along the beach. He made me feel great.” Crystal

Looking for love and intimacy can be fun and enjoyable. Romantic relationships can be nurturing, supportive and help you achieve your goals in life. They may also provide greater access to stability in your life such as housing and or even financial security.

Some trans women have very positive experiences with cis men. They may be in long-term relationships, married to their partner, or have started families and are supported by their relatives and their communities.

“There are so many financial benefits to being in a relationship. Our society is really set up for people who are married. Since being in a relationship with my partner, he has supported me financially. It means I’ve even been able to access better health insurance, through his work. It’s something I’ve never had before. It’s even been easier to access the surgeries I’ve wanted for myself. Having a partner who’s there for you legally and financially is as important to me as the emotional support.” Aurora

“I recently got married to my partner. I feel so happy! He makes me feel so beautiful. He’s a very kind and understanding man. I couldn’t legally get married in Malaysia but I can here in Australia. As a transgender woman it was important to me to get married to feel secure and stronger in our relationship. On our wedding we had all our friends and family come along. We celebrated with a full heart.” Sanu

Unfortunately, stigma and discrimination in our society can create barriers for many trans women to access healthy relationships with men. Some trans women may feel depressed or even a deep sense of loss when these barriers inhibit accessing the relationships they are looking for.

Connecting with other trans women so you know you are not alone in that experience may be beneficial.

“I dream of a future where I am able to have open and healthy romantic relationships with men, because love is so fundamental. When you experience barriers to accessing love due to discrimination or stigma it can cause feelings of tremendous pain and loss. The burden of dismantling systems that harm trans women should never solely be placed upon us as individuals or even on the trans community. Our cis allies need to work with us. However, I do draw strength from the knowledge of other trans women. By hearing their stories I have access to a collective pool of wisdom to assist me to feel empowered in navigating my relationships with cis men.” Electra

For those struggling to find healthy relationships with men, it’s good to know they do exist and it’s okay to wait till you find something that’s right for you.

Equally there can be pressure in our society for everyone to form romantic relationships – but being single is valid too. There are other relationships we can build in our lives that bring us joy and love, such as friends, family and community.

“I love “love”, but there have been times where I put seeking romantic relationships ahead of the ones I already had in my life. And so often these romantic relationships were unhealthy and would only make me feel worse about myself. Now if it doesn’t feel good, I’m not interested, I’m not sticking around. I have so many beautiful friendships and my relationship with my family, and that’s what’s important to me. If I find romance in the future, he better understand this.” Crystal

Acceptance & validation

As trans women affirming our identities, we may seek acceptance and validation from the world around us, including from our family, friends and partners.

However, there may sometimes be risk in seeking validation from men – especially if they are aware of the vulnerabilities of trans women's experiences and choose to manipulate this for their own gratification.

“As a woman of transgender experience, our history around rejection and discrimination can sometimes influence us to overlook certain behaviours or attitudes in our partners that are incompatible with our own values. Especially if they're willing to date you and accept you as a transgender woman. I've come to learn that I don't think that's healthy for me.” Hannah

Remember to treat yourself with compassion and work out your own filters for discerning whether men are being authentic with their intentions towards you. It may assist to write these filters down, to help you remember when putting them into practice.

It's important that we don't minimise disrespectful behaviour in order to access relationships.

“I've pretty much had a revolving door with guys. Some of that is around me seeking validation as a trans woman. It's a behaviour I have learnt, that I am now trying to change with counselling. Now I know that when I compromise my own self-worth for five minutes of attention it never ends well and it's not healthy for me. Manipulators are very good at masking their behaviours. They'll tell me that they're looking for a girlfriend, that I'm beautiful or they that love me and want to spend their life with me. However as soon as their desires are met they lose interest in me. These experiences can be quite soul destroying. All I want is a genuine connection with someone who actually respects me.” Katrina



Many of the women talked about other sources of validation outside of dating men, including family and community – or taking a deliberate break from sex and dating to focus on self-acceptance.

“I haven't been dating much lately, my life is too busy. I have an elder trans woman I like to go spend time with nearby. I volunteer at a food co-op in town and spend a lot of time cooking for my friends and the people I live with. I'm respected and loved within my community.” Crystal

Healthy relationships

The most important relationship is the one you have with yourself. As trans women, with all of the discrimination we can experience, taking time to be comfortable with yourself and showing yourself care and love is vital. Coming from a place of self-acceptance can give you strength in developing the kinds of relationships you deserve to have with other people.

“I haven’t always been so kind to myself. I have often felt as though I’m not enough and that I’ll never be enough. Working through these thoughts is hard and sometimes you can have trouble letting people in. But with time, patience and support I’ve come to love my body and mind with all the quirks that come along with it. I now know that I’m worthy and can ground myself when things inevitably get hard again, because I have a community that sees and loves me for me.” Eva

A healthy romantic relationship is one that is balanced with other parts of your life and supports you to grow. Friends and family, including chosen family, or your other interests such as hobbies, art and music are all part of the things that give a holistic sense of self.

Relationships can be very exciting and it’s easy to get swept up in them, but it’s important that you maintain the other things in your life too.

“I’ve learnt we need good support outside our relationships. The relationship cannot be the only thing in our lives. We need our girlfriends, we need other interests. If we start giving up all our interests, lose contact with our friends and put the relationship first, that can leave us vulnerable to power, control and abuse. If that person becomes our whole life, that can make it very difficult to leave that relationship if it’s unhealthy.” Stella

Supportive partners also help you feel positive about yourself and your identity even when you may be struggling.

“My ex-partner was very respectful towards me. He respected me as a woman and never judged me. He supported me to be proud of myself, especially as a trans woman, and always gently challenged me if I had negative thoughts about myself. He was very compassionate and encouraging. He was so open about our relationship, taking me on dates in our community and introducing me to his friends.” Kim

Nobody deserves to be controlled in a relationship. Sometimes talking to your friends, a counsellor or a support service can help you get perspective.

“I meet with my girlfriends for coffee or lunch most days to check in with each other and catch up. We’re always talking about ourselves and our relationships. These friendships give me space to talk about personal issues, but more than that, I know I’m supported and they have my best interests at heart. My girlfriends are my world.” Candy

We are working towards a world where trans women have no need for screening a partner, because all trans women should be able to access the relationships they seek, with safety and respect.

Some men are not meeting trans women with the respect they deserve. So when looking for a new relationship or hook up, developing your own vetting processes to inquire about men’s beliefs, attitudes and values may be useful, so that you stay safe and meet up with the right guy.

“First I’ll try and get a gauge of their character. Obviously I want to know if there’s any sort of bigotry towards the LGBTQ community in general and their attitudes towards women. If I detect any sort of misogyny, homophobia or transphobia, then that’s a red flag. If they get through all that, that’s when I get to know them and maybe find out what they’re looking for in a partner.” Nicole

Screening

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If you are new to dating men, check in with your girlfriends about their vetting processes and how they keep themselves safe.

Educating your partner

Supportive partners take time to learn about your identity, or trans and gender diverse experiences and culture. It’s great to be supportive of your partner(s) learnings, but you don’t have to do all the work yourself.

A respectful relationship is based on reciprocation, support, and growth – and it’s important your partner(s) access supports and resources outside of your relationship.

“I don’t always have the words, energy, or time to do all the emotional labour and educating. Even though I love my partner and know they are trying their best, I am not a trained therapist, nor am I a sex educator and that’s okay. Having my partner read or utilise external resources lifts the burden off me and allows me to learn new things as well. We get to learn and grow together and that creates more time and space for us to do other things, instead of a weird power dynamic of me constantly being the teacher (saving that for a special occasion).” Eva

Further support

Say it out loud

Provides information and guidance relating to sexual, family and intimate partner violence in the Australian LGBTQ+ community.

sayitoutloud.org.au

TransHub

A digital information and resource platform for trans and gender diverse people.

transhub.org.au

Qlife

National anonymous and confidential LGBTIQ+ peer support service.

Telephone and web chat support service.

qlife.org.au | 1800 184 527

Opening hours: 3PM to midnight, every day