

## Relationships, discrimination & mental health



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](https://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.

## Positive impacts of healthy relationships

Everyone deserves to be loved. Healthy intimate relationships can be fantastic for your mental health and wellbeing. Trans women can bring a wealth of knowledge, experiences and strength into any partnership. Our relationships should be celebrated by our partners, our family, friends and the broader community.

*“I had given up on finding a romantic relationship, but then I met my current partner. So many of the men I’d dated had been attracted to me just because I was trans and those relationships were always quite hidden. It meant so much to me to love and to be loved. To be seen and celebrated as a whole person and to be integrated into my partner’s life.” Petra*

## Barriers to finding a healthy relationship

Some trans women report that discrimination and stigma can create additional barriers to accessing healthy and long term relationships. It’s important to recognize that these barriers, and the harmful behaviours of our partner(s) or our extended families can have significant impacts on our mental health and wellbeing.

*“Having a long-term relationship has helped me find stability in my life and given me the space to achieve my goals. I feel like I’ve left the emotional rollercoaster behind. We all need love but I’m so happy I’ve found that with someone who respects me and supports me.” Aurora*

It’s understandable that these challenges, combined with broader transphobia and transmisogyny, can leave us feeling disempowered, depressed or anxious. Some trans women report that they have given up looking for a partner altogether. This is a common experience, with many trans women expressing similar feelings.

*“It’s been a while since I’ve been on any dates. I actually can’t remember how long. The last couple of times were not terrible, but they weren’t great either. I don’t know, maybe I’ve given up. Trans life can be hard enough without adding the pressure of looking for a romantic partner and navigating all this while holding his hand through it too. It’s pretty lonely and I wish I wasn’t so overwhelmed by it all.” Crystal*

There can be a great sense of loss when you cannot access a relationship, or where a relationship breaks down because of societal pressure.

Accessing supports to unpack your experiences, discuss issues within your relationships or explore how to create healthier boundaries in relationships can be really helpful. Check out our referral guide for where you can seek mental health support and relationship advice.

Some trans women have developed strategies and routines to look after their mental health and wellbeing.

*“I just put it all out of my head. I put on some make-up, fix my hair and throw on a frock so I’m looking fabulous. I hit the streets with confidence, attitude and self-respect. Any sideways looks get some sass. I ain’t putting up with no lip cause I know who I am and I’m feeling gorgeous. No man is keeping me down!” Candy*

*“I’ve got my friends and family and they keep me pretty loved up and busy. I’m lucky to have a great psychologist too, she’s awesome. Plus my dog is cute as heck.” Crystal*

## Supporting your partner

In the process of affirming our gender identity many trans women develop incredible strength and resilience. We may develop specific skills in addressing discrimination and overcoming the barriers we face on a daily basis.

In order to be our authentic selves many trans women have been able to move beyond societal pressures and fears that can inhibit growth. These internal resources are invaluable and can be transformative to share with our partners.

*“In terms of accessing healthy relationships I do a lot of work. I’m like a therapist for my partners. I feel I have to do this because I need to help them work through their own fear and shame. I’ve become incredibly skilled at helping men be comfortable with their attraction to trans women, so they can show me the respect I deserve. There is an incredible burden in that work, but equally I acknowledge the power and beauty in the capacity I have to assist people transform their experiences of shame.”*  
*Electra*

However, many of the guys we are romantically or intimately involved with may not have experience or skills in addressing discrimination and stigma around their relationships, especially if they identify as heterosexual.

As men explore their attraction to, or relationships with trans women they may question their sexuality or be concerned about myths, stigma and discrimination from others.

Talking with your partner about how you have developed resilience and about your own coping strategies in dealing with discrimination may be useful to them.

*“Over the years I’ve dated a number of men who have felt insecure about the perception that dating trans women may be labelled as gay. I’ve had to help them work through their insecurities around their sexuality and create some boundaries, because I identify as a heterosexual trans woman not a man.”*  
*Candy*

Men with poor internal resources may inappropriately project or blame trans women for their experiences of shame, stigma and discrimination – or demand that trans women provide all of the emotional support they require to process these experiences.

Trans women often talk about the significant emotional labour involved in supporting their partners. Men’s poor help seeking skills and the limited options for referrals to service providers competent to work with their unique experiences, places further burdens on trans women to provide support.

*“So often in new relationships I find myself in every role in his life; mother, lover, therapist, friend. If I find they’re asking too much of me, I’ll try introducing him to some of my girlfriends’ partners or other men who are trans allies. Let the boys figure it out.”*  
*Crystal*

Setting boundaries around your partner’s behaviours and the support you can provide is essential for a healthy relationship. Encourage them to seek supports outside of your relationship through resources, service providers and their own social networks.



## Lateral violence, internalised transphobia & solidarity

It can be challenging to avoid taking on harmful beliefs and attitudes that are imposed on us.

Internalised transphobia is when we internalise our experiences of stigma, discrimination, outdated myths, and gender stereotypes.

This can be harmful to our mental health, and sometimes leads us to criticize or attack other trans women. This is a form of lateral violence and can harm us both as individuals and as a community, leading many to feel isolated, unworthy and unsupported.

Taking time to unpack our internalised transphobia and showing solidarity with other trans women by challenging harmful gender stereotypes and expectations is important. Healthy communities need everybody. **We're stronger together.**

*“As a non-binary trans feminine person I experience incredible amounts of pressure around beauty myths, beauty standards and expressing my gender identity in a binary way. It’s terrible when it comes from other trans women, like brutal. Comments like ‘she has masculine features’ or ‘oh they don’t pass’ have hurt me at times. But ally-ship is really important. I find it more hurtful when my own community puts me down rather than supports me.” Candy*

You may be experiencing internalised transphobia or have experienced or enacted lateral violence. Seek support, be gentle on yourself and check in on how your beliefs or behaviours may be affecting yourself and others.

*“At times in my life, other trans women have stood beside me when I’ve been struggling or dealing with transphobia. Having their unconditional support and allowing me to express my identity in a way that feels right for me gave me the strength to thrive. I try to surround myself with trans women who celebrate the diversity that exists within our community and who fiercely love one another.” Petra*

### 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](http://sayitoutloud.org.au)

#### TransHub

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

[transhub.org.au](http://transhub.org.au)

#### Qlife

National anonymous and confidential LGBTIQ+ peer support service.

Telephone and web chat support service.

[qlife.org.au](http://qlife.org.au) | 1800 184 527

Opening hours: 3PM to midnight, every day