Dear Alice,

What causes a heterosexual male to cross-dress? Do cross dressers share any characteristics other than the desire to cross-dress and the guilt that usually accompanies such desire? Are there any reliable therapies to help the cross-dresser resist and overcome his cross-dressing urges? Will the urge to cross-dress dissipate with age? Are there any good books or articles that explain the cross-dressing urge in a sympathetic way, such that a wife may come to understand this phenomenon? Any help would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.

— Concerned

Answer

Dear Concerned,

You ask some very interesting questions, many of which don’t have clear-cut answers. First things first, for a variety of reasons, there’s not a great deal of reputable research or statistics about people who cross-dress, nor is there much research about folks who identify as transgender (an umbrella term that applies to a broad range of people who express or experience gender differently than what most people expect – including those who cross-dress). So, where to go from here? You may want to check out My hookup didn’t say she was trans for some background info. Next, let’s break down your questions one-by-one:

What causes a heterosexual male to cross-dress?

People who cross-dress wear the clothing and/or adornments, such as makeup and accessories, of the “opposite sex.” That is, a biological male may dress in what is generally considered to be “female clothing” and a biological female may dress in what is typically considered “male clothing.” Why is this, you ask?

In most parts of the world, gender is traditionally represented as male or female. Many people unconsciously accept this binary and don’t give gender a second thought; however, gender is
much more complex than male or female. As is demonstrated by the rich and unique experiences (such that you are describing) of humans over time, gender is more akin to a broad spectrum that is as unique to an individual as a fingerprint. A heterosexual male may cross-dress because s/he doesn’t feel her/his gender identity matches the gender s/he was assigned at birth. In some cases the individual may just enjoy the fashion and related options available in society, regardless of the typical gender associations of the items.

Do cross-dressers share any characteristics other than the desire to cross-dress and the guilt that usually accompanies such desire?

Again, there’s not much research on the topic of shared characteristics between those who cross-dress. In terms of guilt, this isn’t necessarily a universal feeling shared by everyone who has a desire to cross-dress. In fact, people experience a broad range of emotions and feelings when it comes to realizing, expressing, and disclosing their gender identity — from fear and despair to relief and excitement. Think about a historical example here. In the United States, it was once the case that women wearing pants was a radical and non-conforming idea. Rarely would you see the term guilt tied to the idea of women in pants. While social gender expectations and associated feelings have shifted over time, the acceptance of gender nonconforming clothing choices may not have been as equally accepted in all segments of society. The lack of broad acceptance may influence the feelings of a cross-dressing individual.

Are there any reliable therapies to help the cross-dresser resist and overcome his cross-dressing urges?

Cross-dressing isn’t something that needs to be “overcome” or “resisted.” In fact, many in the therapeutic community discourage people from suppressing their true gender identity. There may be some situations in which a person may need to understand the expectation of gender-based attire, though this will vary greatly in one’s experience.

Will the urge to cross-dress dissipate with age?

Gender identity isn’t fully understood. Because a person has the desire to use non-gender conforming methods of self-expression (including clothing choices), you should not think of this as something to dissipate. For each individual it is a personal choice. Some may choose to experiment with gender non-conforming choices at one life stage and move on, while others may see it as part of a life-long expression of individuality.

Are there any good books or articles that explain the cross-dressing urge in a sympathetic way, such that a wife may come to understand this phenomenon?

Absolutely — there are quite a few resources for those who have transgender family members (including family members who cross-dress) or for those who identify as transgender. Here are a few to check out:

- [Resources for People With Transgender Family Members](#) (Human Rights Watch)
- [Transgender Visibility Guide](#) (Human Rights Watch)
- [The Center: the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center](#) (New York City)
Think about it this way, we all have very personal aspects of ourselves that we share with those closest to us. This may be just one element that an individual will share with a partner. It might be difficult for some to understand, but it also an opportunity to respect the trust placed in the person and a chance to celebrate her/his uniqueness.

Please do also check out the Related Q&As below. While you’ve posed some complex questions, hopefully you’ve found some answers!

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [6]
Miscellaneous [7]
Relationships [8]
Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ+) [9]
Relationship Stuff [10]

Related questions

My boyfriend likes to wear women's underwear [12]
Man trapped in woman's body: Coming out of the transgender closet [13]
Transgender partner — How can I provide support? [14]
Gay male in straight female’s body? [15]

Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [16]
Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP) (Morningside) [17]
Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [18]

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