

TED Talk: "How to Talk (and Listen) to Transgender People By Jackson Bird

Hi, I'm Jack, and I'm transgender. Let me take a guess at some of thoughts that might be running through your head right now. "Transgender? Wait, does that mean that they're actually a man or actually a woman?" "I wonder if he's had the surgery yet ... Oh, now I'm looking at his crotch. Look to the right, that's a safe place to look." "Yes, I knew it! No real man has hips like those." "My friend's daughter is transgender -- I wonder if they know each other." "Oh my gosh, he is so brave. I would totally support his right to use the men's bathroom. Wait, but how does he use the bathroom? How does he have sex?"

OK, OK, let's stop those hypothetical questions before we get too close for my comfort. I mean, don't get me wrong, I did come here today to share my personal experiences being transgender, but I did not wake up this morning wanting to tell an entire audience about my sex life. Of course, that's the problem with being trans, right? People are pretty much always wondering how we have sex and what kind of equipment we're working with below the belt. Being trans is awkward.

And not just because the gender I was assigned at birth mismatches the one I really am. Being trans is awkward because everyone else gets awkward when they're around me. People who support me and all other trans people wholeheartedly are often so scared to say to wrong thing, so embarrassed to not know what they think they should, that they never ask.

Part of what was so nerve-racking about coming out as transgender was knowing that people wouldn't know what I meant. And when someone comes out as gay, people know what that means, but when you come out as trans, you have to face the misconceptions that will color other people's impressions of you even after you've educated them ... And you will have to educate them. When I came out, I wrote a 10-page encyclopedic document with a zip-file attachment of music and videos that I sent to every single person I came out to.

And I kept it in my email signature for months afterwards, because you also don't ever stop coming out. I came out to the accountant helping me with my taxes and the TSA agents who didn't know which one of them should pat me down, the man or the woman. I mean, I just came out to everyone watching this.

When I came out to my dad, to my great relief, he was totally cool with me being trans, but as soon as I started talking about physically transitioning, he freaked. And I quickly realized it was because he, like so many other people, think that physical transition means just one thing: the surgery. Now, listen, if there were one magical surgery that could turn me into a tall, muscular, societally perfect image of a man overnight, I'd sign up in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. There are dozens of different gender-affirming surgeries from chest surgeries to bottom surgeries to facial feminization and man-sculpting. Many trans people will only ever undergo one procedure in their lifetime, if that. Maybe because they don't personally feel the need but

also because they're expensive, and health insurance is only beginning to cover them. Instead, the first step for a trans person seeking physical transition is usually hormone replacement therapy. Hormones are why I have a deeper voice and some sparse whiskers on my neck and a giant pimple on my chin. Basically, they put you through a second puberty ... it's a blast.

Now, because our transitions are slower and steadier than historic misconceptions can lead people to believe, there can be some confusion about when to call someone by their new name and pronouns. There's no distinct point in physical transition at which a trans person becomes their true gender. As soon as they tell you their new name and pronouns, that's when you start using them. It can be difficult to make the change. You might slip up here and there; I've slipped up myself with other trans people. But I always think to myself, if we can change from calling Puff Daddy to P. Diddy, and if we apologize profusely when we've used the wrong gender pronoun for someone's pet cat -- I mean, I think we can make the same effort for the real humans in our lives.

Now, there is no topic that makes other people more awkward about trans people than public bathrooms. Ah, the bathrooms -- the latest political flash point for LGBT opponents. Here's a fun fact about bathrooms: more US congressmen have been convicted of assaulting someone in a public bathroom than trans people have been.

The truth is we trans people are so much more scared of you than you are of us. It's a huge point of discussion in trans communities about which bathroom to start using and when, so we don't attract attention that could lead to violence against us. I personally started using the men's room when I started getting confused and frightened looks in the women's room, even though I was petrified to start going into the men's room. And often we opt to just not go to the bathroom at all. A 2015 national survey of trans people found that eight percent of us had had a urinary tract infection in the past year as a result of avoiding restrooms. These bathroom bills aren't protecting anyone. All they're doing is ensuring that when trans people are assaulted in bathrooms, the law will no longer be on our side when we report it.

Being trans means a daily onslaught of these misconceptions. And I have it pretty easy. I am a white, able-bodied guy sitting nearly at the peak of privilege mountain. For non-binary people, for trans women, for trans people of color, it is so much harder.

So I've given you a starter pack of trans knowledge that I hope will lead to more learning on your own. Talk to trans people. Listen to us. Amplify our voices. Take the heat off of us and educate those around you so we don't have to every time. Maybe someday, when I say, "Hi, I'm Jack, and I'm transgender," the only response I'll get is, "Hi, nice to meet you."

Thank you.