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# Dealing With Gender Dysphoria

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No matter what culture we are born into, no matter the social class, language, racial background or degree of privilege, each of us is introduced into the world as one of two things: male or female. Gender tells us both who we are and how others see us, and from the day we venture out into society there are clear guidelines instructing us how to behave in these roles. Gender identity - the ways we distinguish between men and women - is so entrenched in the culture that the image of a man dressed in women's clothes is perceived as bizarre and unacceptable, except if served up as entertainment and so rendered merely absurd and comical.

But what is not so funny is the pain and confusion that transsexual people experience from the day they realize that for some unexplainable reason, nature has played a trick on them. Even before they reach age five, most transsexuals—men and women who desire to switch gender—know they are different from other people.

"I used to wish I was a girl," says Kimberly Nixon. "It was an overwhelming all-consuming desire. But then I'd look at myself and my body and feel that somehow I'd been given a bad deal."

Born with male genitals Kimberly was raised to be athletic, competitive,

outgoing and masculine. Not wanting to displease her parents, Kimberly complied with the expectations of her biological gender. By the time she was 30 years old, Kimberly was a respected airline pilot, had gone to University where she studied physical education and was a six handicap golfer.

But inside her private world, the real Kimberly continued to be torn with conflict. The feeling that she was trapped inside a male body and social identity grew so intense that Kimberly's only relief was to wear the mask of her masculinity in the outside world, while behaving and dressing as a woman in the privacy of her home.

After 30 years of living what for her was two lives, Kimberly finally chose to seek medical help. She eventually had a full sex change and is now living and working as a woman. Today she says she is more at peace, more comfortable and more herself than she has ever been in her life.

"It takes a great deal of courage to go through that whole process," says Kimberly, who has since changed careers. "But I knew what I had to do and it feels right, believe me, it takes a lot to correct what nature did."

According to Dr. Diane Watson, Acting Head of Psychiatry at Vancouver General Hospital and a specialist in gender disorders, people with a gender disorder (clinically termed Gender Dysphoria) are similar to those born with a physical disability—such as a missing limb. Patients with severe gender confusion feel they have been born with a deformity—for women, it's their breasts, for men it's their penis.

It is difficult for most people who take their gender identity for granted to comprehend feelings of this kind, but the disorder has been present for centuries in virtually all cultures. Dr. Watson explains that gender dysphoria shows up about equally in women and men, but because women are allowed greater latitude in dress and

manner, it seems women feel less pressure than men to act out explicit cross-gender behaviors.

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## Professional Help Is Available

At Vancouver General Hospital there is help for people suffering from gender disorders. Since opening as a specialty service of the Psychiatric Outpatient Department in 1985, the Gender Dysphoria Clinic (GDC) has assessed 300 people with various degrees of gender confusion.

Dr. Watson is Director of the GDC and says the clinic is often the last stop for patients coming off a long trail of frustration and unhappiness from trying to conform to social pressures they can't live with.

Dr. Watson says research suggests people with gender disorders are responding to a biological condition resulting from an imbalance of hormones that occurs prior to birth. It is believed that this imbalance can sometimes cause the brain to program an unborn child for one gender despite the body's anatomical features.

It is a theory which challenges current dogma that socialization is the major determinant of gender differentiation. Whether the hormonal imbalance theory is the conclusive answer or not, gender disorder remains a serious problem for people afflicted with it.

Dr. Watson explains that, contrary to what some believe, people with gender disorders cannot be cured through punishment, psychotherapy or sheer willpower. They, like any other patient in emotional turmoil, need support and understanding, and that is why a primary function of the Gender Dysphoria Clinic is to be something of a safe haven where patients can find professional care in a sympathetic environment.



*Kimberly Nixon feels at peace with herself.*