

Knowledge is Power: Learning about Cross Dressing and Support

More and more people are contacting the LGBT Helpline looking for support and information about cross-dressing. So what can we do, in the LGBT Helpline, and in the wider community, to support people who cross dress? This short article takes a look at cross dressing and transvestitism, including the terms themselves, where people who cross dress fit into the LGBT community, and what supports are available.

Terminology

The Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) defines transvestite as “a person who wears clothing, accessories, jewellery or make-up not traditionally or stereotypically associated with their assigned sex”. The term transvestite is generally more preferred in Europe and the UK, whereas the term crossdresser is used more frequently in the United States. Both terms typically refer to a male to female transgender person who chooses to live “dual role,” presenting completely female at some times or completely male at others.

Discussing the Issues

Crossdressers and Transvestites are a marginalised group within the LGBT community, but it is important to acknowledge that they are indeed part of this community. While people who cross-dress do not necessarily identify as Transgender or wish to transition, they express their gender identity in a way that contradicts societal norms. Therefore, they rely on the inclusiveness and solidarity of the LGBT community as a source of support and recognition.

According to Sí, a website created by and for Irish transvestites, “[Transvestites] acknowledge that we are males who need to express a feminine side and we acknowledge that this is contrary to society’s traditional expectations of gender behaviour, but we believe it is a mark of a civilised society to tolerate, embrace and even celebrate such difference”. This website focuses on providing information and reassurance to anyone wondering about cross dressing or transvestitism.

As a result of society’s rigid concept of masculinity, many people who identify as transvestite can feel ashamed about their desire to express their femininity and feel the need to remain secretive about this aspect of their identities. We find this is often the case with people who contact our support services about this issue. Still, there are various avenues for people who cross dress to find support and to socialise in accepting environments.

Avenues for Support

Transgender support groups can be an important means of support, although sources note that these groups typically focus more heavily on the issues experienced by those who are transitioning or have transitioned. There are also various online communities to share concerns or advice and to meet other people with similar experiences.

Social clubs can also be a source of support and enjoyment for people who cross dress, providing an opportunity to express themselves freely in the company of like-minded people. The two notable clubs in Dublin are The Gemini Club and the TH, also known as TrannieHaven. For help with make-

up, clothing, and shopping, dressing services provide an important resource, especially for those who are only beginning to cross dress.

Crossdressing continues to be stigmatised in our society, but everyone can do their part to deconstruct the concepts of masculine and feminine. As Raewyn Connell writes in her book *Masculinities*, “We are all engaged in constructing a world of gender relations. How it is made, what strategies different groups pursue, and with what effects, are political questions”. Society must change its belief that there is one ideal way to be a man and acknowledge that expressing femininity does not retract from a person’s masculinity.

Transvestite/Crossdressing support and resources

TENI <http://www.teni.ie/page.aspx?contentid=584>

Sí <http://www.thehiddenpeople.ie/irish-resources.html>

LGBT Helpline <http://www.lgbt.ie/our-services/lgbt-helpline>

Written 07 March 2016 by RK for the LGBT Helpline