

Navigating sex & consent



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, 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. Whilst “men” refers to cisgender men, 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.

Navigating consent & pleasure

“Before we had sex for the first time, he asked me so much about my life and what I liked sexually, he made me feel comfortable and safe. He’s always respectful in terms of consent, checking in to ensure I’m also enjoying myself.”
Aurora

When your partner(s) are respectful, sex can be a fun, affirming and empowering experience and even fantastic for our mental health and wellbeing. For trans women who are beginning to affirm their gender identity, it can also be a way to explore and expand our new relationships with our bodies.

For others, navigating sexual experiences whilst also navigating gender, bodies, stigma and transphobia can make sex nerve-wracking or even scary.

“I always felt uncomfortable with that bottom region, but for the first couple of years of my transition I was sleeping with people and using that area, despite it making me feel uncomfortable. It took a date asking me if I liked having sex and if there was anything that made me feel uncomfortable to realise that I actually didn’t like having sex.” Nicole

How an intimate partner interacts with our body can be a wonderful experience. No matter who you are or what you enjoy, it’s important to consider your personal boundaries. Making time to reflect on how you like to be treated and what works for you can be helpful for navigating sex and intimacy. What gives you pleasure? What sexual acts do you like and not like? What would you like to try? Where do you like and not like to be touched?

“Can we start with, ‘How are you going? How are you feeling? Are there parts of your body you’re more or less comfortable with? Are there ways I can make you feel more comfortable with those parts of your body?’” Crystal

Once we know our bodies and what we like, we can clearly communicate our boundaries and desires. This will help achieve a safer and more pleasurable experience.

This can look like:

- What sexual acts you enjoy or do not enjoy
- What you need to feel safe
- Your sexual health boundaries and practices
- How you will know the other person is still enjoying themselves and consenting to what is happening
- How you will know when to check in, change or stop what you are doing.

“My partner has been really open to having discussions about sex, and what sex can look like for us, because of various genital surgeries including recovery. We negotiated what worked for both our bodies. He listened to me, took my concerns seriously and demonstrated care for me and my body.” Petra

Some of the men you are meeting may have low levels of understanding about trans women’s lives, bodies and sexuality.

- They may be unaware or unfamiliar with the language you use to describe your body
- They may have limited knowledge of body dysphoria
- They may make assumptions about your body that are wrong or ill informed.

Sharing resources from transfemme.com.au may assist in helping men navigate consent and be respectful.

“Consent is really important to me. We all have different things we may or may not be comfortable with. As a trans woman who does not want to have genital reconfiguration surgery, I’ve had sex with partners who may not be totally comfortable with my junk. With guys who’ve shown me respect, we’ve had open conversations and come up with creative solutions that work for both of us.” Electra

Whether it is a hook-up, a first date or a long-term relationship, respectful men will inquire about your whole life, ask about your boundaries, listen to feedback, and be willing to learn and address their own biases.

“My previous partner was really respectful of both my trans identity and my culture. He had an open and inquisitive nature and was willing to learn about Fa’afafine experiences. I think my culture actually helped him address his transphobia and the assumptions he held of trans women, because he saw that Fa’afafine are respected and have a place within our society.” Shirley

Fetishisation & objectification

When trans women are respected, we are seen and celebrated for who we are as a whole person. We have the right to explore our own needs and desires when navigating intimacy and sex. Our partners should inquire about our boundaries and what makes us feel good and safe.

“I haven’t had lower surgery and I was really nervous about my partner seeing my body when we first got together. I felt that I needed to dress up and look perfect all the time, with make-up or my wig. However he made me feel really comfortable with my body and accepted me however I looked, whether or not I was glam.” Aurora

Sex is complicated and can be difficult to talk about, especially when transphobia and homophobia are influencing men’s ideas of you. Many trans women have had disrespectful or harmful experiences when hooking up with, or dating men. Many men centre their own desires and fantasies without considering the impact these behaviours have on their partner(s).

“Trans women who are dating cis men are at a disadvantage as we’re often perceived to be at the bottom of society’s power structures. What that can mean is sometimes trans women, especially if we’ve gone a long time without a relationship, may accept men’s inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour or their unwillingness to learn and change, because we feel that it’s hard to find a relationship or that no-one else will love us.” Stella

Regardless of your body or whether you’ve had any form of lower surgery, sex with men can be complicated by them fetishising or feeling uncomfortable with our genitals. Having men obsess over your genitals without active consent can feel awkward or can be distressing. Equally, having men refuse to look at or touch your genitals when that might be something you desire can be hard to negotiate.

“I definitely had dysphoria around my genitals when I was a teenager, and at various times in adulthood. When I’ve been in sexual relationships with men in the past, having that part of my body obsessed over or masculinised made me really uncomfortable.” Stella

“You have to wade through a lot of people if you’re looking for a romantic or even intimate connection with a cis male. Most of the time they are only after you for some quick greasy desire that’s very unsatisfying, as opposed to something that is genuine and respectful.” Eva

Trans women often report experiencing objectification, including racial objectification, where men treat them as an object of desire for sexual gratification, rather than seeing them as a whole person or a potential long term partner. Some trans women talk about their experiences of feeling obliged to meet their partner’s sexual desires in order to be loved, or because of feelings of guilt, or fear of being alone.

“In the bedroom when they’re having all those fantasies, they’re saying ‘Oh my God I love you, I’m going to be with you forever.’ They make endless promises. But after they orgasm they want to leave straight away. No conversation, no talking about if they had fun or if they want to see me again, nothing. They just get up and leave. Then after a few weeks they call you and that behaviour starts again. They say ‘I love you, I miss you.’ Not because they like you or even see you as a person, just because they want to use you for sex.” Roxanne

“I’d often go out of my way to fulfil other people’s expectations even if it wasn’t what I felt comfortable with. I felt like I owed them something because of my trans-ness, because they accepted me despite my trans-ness. I felt some kind of obligation to them.” Q

Inequality and prejudice can create barriers for trans women trying to negotiate consent and respect in their relationships. Understanding this may make it easier to communicate your desires and boundaries.

Trans women often feel they are fetishised by men: where they are sexually desired only because of their trans identity, particular aspects of their bodies, skin colour, race or ethnicity and are treated in a very one-dimensional way.

“I’ve had men message me saying ‘I like Asian trans women’. For me it’s a red flag and a huge turn off. It demonstrates that he’s fetishising all South/East Asian women without understanding the assumptions and stereotypes he’s making. I feel reduced to my skin tones and features, as if everything I have fought for and built for myself means nothing.” Arl

How can you tell if you’re being objectified or fetishised?

There are a number of behaviours associated with objectification and fetishisation of trans women including:

- Hypersexual conversations
- No interest in any other aspect of your life, only talks about sex
- Demanding you dress up for them, wear particular or hyper-sexualised clothing
- Fixation on specific body parts, including the genitals of trans women who have not had genital surgery
- Continued requests to provide explicit images or videos even after you have said no
- Pressuring to re-enact porn scenes or engage in particular sexual acts
- Use of degrading or humiliating language or behaviours
- Demanding sex before even getting to know you
- Only interested in hooking up rather than a date or a relationship
- Leaves immediately after having sex.

Trans women of colour may also be impacted by racial objectification, stereotypes and racism.

Examples include:

- Assumptions and expectations about culture, ethnicity, and associated experiences
- Fixation on skin colour, race or ethnicity
- Only dating people of a particular race or ethnicity.
- Sexual racism eg. only dating white trans women
- Expectations to meet western beauty standards
- Expectations to adhere to western trans cultural narratives and standards.

Often men who engage in these behaviours use coercive tactics to have their fantasies and desires met.

Many trans women develop their own screening processes to protect themselves from these harmful behaviours.

“I think anyone specifically stating what I need to wear before they meet me is a big warning sign.” Katrina

“Now I try to start a conversation first, to see how they respond. I’ve found the less willing they are to engage with me as a person, the more likely they will fail to see me as one.” Stella

Self-care & getting support

When navigating intimacy, romance, dating and/or relationship life, your safety and wellbeing is paramount. Sometimes it can be difficult to maintain your boundaries. Sometimes people might actively violate your boundaries or consent.

Some trans women discussed their experiences of dissociating. This could look like zoning out or staring during sex. This might be because they were unable to recognise their feelings of dysphoria or they weren’t comfortable with the sex they were having or couldn’t assert their boundaries. Dissociating is a coping strategy.

Dissociation during sex is not unusual and can be a result of a range of things. For example; stress, body discomfort, fear of intimacy or rejection, insecurity or past experiences of trauma.

If you are dissociating during sex, this is your body telling you that this experience isn’t what you want. Having a break during sex, taking a few slow deep breaths and communicating with your sexual partner(s) can be helpful.

Learning to safety plan, evaluate risks and develop techniques to keep safe is a very real part of many trans women’s experience of navigating dating and hook ups. It is important to note that you are never responsible for other people’s actions or behaviours – and that sexual assault is a crime.

Tips and safety strategies from the trans women we interviewed include:

“I’ve always made sure my first dates are at a public venue so if I had to ask for help, to get away or anything like that I felt safe enough to do that.” Olivia

“I always let a girlfriend know when I’m going on a date. I won’t ever go to anyone’s house without their name or a photograph of them, their phone number and address. I’ll send her that information so she knows where I’m going, who it’s with and whether I’m planning on coming home or not. I let her know, if I’m not coming home I will message you. If you haven’t heard from me by midnight, something’s wrong, you need to call this person, here’s the address, all that stuff.” Stella

“I’ve changed my dating profile to talk about consent, respect and my boundaries. Perhaps I got a few less messages, but it filtered out a lot of the guys who were objectifying me. The rest I managed to weed out or even change their behaviour by stating in our chats that I wasn’t into being fetishised or disrespected. I feel like I took back my power from men.” Electra

Remember, if you feel worn down by transphobia or inappropriate behaviour from men, it’s ok to take a break from dating or hooking up.

“I wanted to feel love. I really needed that and craved that. I was forcing myself into intimate situations I wasn’t comfortable with, because I felt that was what I had to do to feel loved.” Nicole

In the process of reflecting on your own experiences, if you recognise that some behaviours of men in your life have been abusive or harmful, or you may have experienced sexual assault – please know you are not on your own. You have a right to safety and respect and there are services and supports you can access.

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

TransHub

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

transhub.org.au

Qlife

National anonymous and confidential LGBTIQ+ peer support service.

Telephone and web chat support service.

qlife.org.au | 1800 184 527

Opening hours: 3PM to midnight, every day