

## Respectful dating & gender autonomy



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](https://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.

## Public dating

As trans women we deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect as anyone else in our society, including when dating publicly. Our rights should not be determined by whether we pass or not, by our gender identities, our presentation and expression, or our bodies.

*“Some of the nicest dates/intimate moments I have had with partners are when we wake up in the morning and go to our local cafe for breakfast in our comfy clothes.” Eva*

Sometimes men who haven't dealt with their shame of being attracted to trans women are nervous about public dating. This experience can be hurtful, but know you are not alone.

*“There's been many times in my life where the men I've been dating haven't wanted to be seen with me in public especially because I don't pass. It's obvious I'm a trans woman. But I try not to take on their projections. It's their own insecurities not mine, because I know I'm naturally beautiful in my own way.” Candy*

It is important to make decisions around your own boundaries when dating men. For some trans women it can be as simple as only dating men who will date publicly, but other trans women may not feel that is a viable option. We all have different intersecting experiences that impact our lives such as the region we live in, whether we pass or not, our age, religion, culture, socio-economic status, etc.

Consider your own boundaries and actively communicate what you expect in a relationship.

What's important to know is that this shame is not yours, it's theirs – and is a result of stigma in our society. Knowing this doesn't necessarily make it any easier to experience. It can be difficult creating boundaries so you don't internalise their shame and blame yourself. Know you are beautiful and that you deserve more.

*“Early in my transition I remember being really affected by men who were too ashamed to date me publicly. My girlfriends got me through those times with humour and fierceness. They reminded me that I was literally a goddess and those men had a lot of work to do themselves.” Crystal*

It's always good to show compassion to people who may feel ashamed about some aspect of themselves, but that doesn't mean you have to put up with disrespectful behaviour.

Some men may have cultural and religious contexts, or family and community violence concerns about being “outed” as attracted to trans women. For others it may be more around their own insecurities.

*“Some men I've dated come from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds or come from a family or communities with strict religious or cultural beliefs. When I identify that their concerns about publicly dating are based around real risks for them in their community or families, I tend to be a bit more forgiving. Then I evaluate whether they're treating me with respect in other ways. I just don't tolerate any man projecting their internalised experiences of shame onto me.” Electra*

Sometimes we as trans women can get nervous about public dating too, and concerned about other people's perception even if our partners are relaxed. Be gentle on yourself. It may take time, and a supportive partner will be understanding.

*“I remember the very first guy I dated. I was super self-conscious the whole time at the restaurant. I was really concerned he was freaking out about being with a trans woman, but he was relaxed the whole time. So it was very affirming for me.” Olivia*

We understand that for many trans women, public dating may feel dangerous or out of reach. We also acknowledge that for some trans women private dating can be fulfilling, nurturing and respectful.

*“I would love to get taken out to dinner, wined and dined, have four dates before it gets to sex. I am not afforded that luxury. If I was cis passing, perhaps I could get that – or if I was a cis woman I could definitely get that. I do however have some long-term private relationships I have carved out for myself. They may look different to other people's relationships, but they are still valid and make them feel good.” Electra*

## Pressure to be hyper feminine

Trans women are beautiful however they choose to express their gender identity. There is not one way to be feminine or to be a woman. Society's beauty standards affect all women, and this is further amplified for trans women. There can be so much pressure for trans women to present as hyper-feminine. An example of this can be the expectation that all trans women should pass, or want to pass.

*“Earlier on in transition I was avoiding men and I think a lot of that came from feeling like I was not meeting their standards. I didn't feel desirable. It's not just men, there is broad pressure from society to meet these beauty standards. Men tend to be the ones who reinforce them more than anyone else but they're coming from everything we're exposed to.” Moss*

People often openly critique trans women's expressions, mannerisms, voices and our bodies –comparing them to society's expectations of cis women. Sadly, this may be common amongst men who date trans women. Some may do this because of their own insecurities, whilst others may use this as a tactic to gain power or control.

*“I always found it offensive when men would make derogatory remarks on other trans women's appearance by saying, ‘she looks more masculine or she still looks like a bloke’. I think it said more about their own insecurities. Personally I don't really care about whether I pass (as a woman) or not.” Candy*

Supportive partners give you the space for your own autonomy, in regards to your self-expression. They affirm you in the way you choose to present.

*“I wouldn't want anyone to feel pressure to live up to any kind of beauty standard, because that's not what matters to me.” James*

Give yourself the permission to explore and express your gender in ways that are authentic to you and make you feel empowered.



## Passing

Passing refers to when people cannot tell or do not know a person has a transgender or gender diverse experience based on external appearance. It's a complex idea that affects every trans woman in some way. Ultimately the idea that trans women should or must pass, re-enforces outdated gender stereotypes and beauty myths, and is harmful. The diversity of trans experiences should be celebrated whether we pass or not. We are all beautiful in our own unique way, and passing does not determine womanhood or femininity.

Some trans women seek to pass for different reasons, including an authentic expression of our gender, increased safety (ie. to minimise risk of transphobic street harassment or discrimination), greater access to relationships and public dating with men, and social acceptance. However, passing can also mean that you have to navigate disclosure to people unaware of your trans history or experience, which can impact your safety and wellbeing.

*“The one benefit of not passing is that moment of disclosure often isn't something you need to be as concerned about, because you read as a trans person.”*  
Stella

Whilst passing may be important to some, it's not something that everyone can or even may want to achieve. Unfortunately, men often prioritise passing and cis beauty standards because of societal attitudes – and their own worries that other people might know they are attracted to trans women. This can really impact trans women who may not pass.

*“I love looking visibly trans. I don't pass and nor do I want to. I feel that trans women who don't pass can get a very raw deal with men. Passing does not equate to beauty or attractiveness. I know many of the men I've dated have been romantically interested in me, but stigma creates these tremendous barriers to more serious relationships and public dating. The problem is not that I don't pass, the problem is cisnormativity. It's societal attitudes and it's also men's shame.”* Electra



The issue isn't about whether you pass or not, it's about men's behaviour, community attitudes and rigid gender norms.

*“If men are worried that a woman looks masculine or she doesn't meet certain beauty standards – well we just can't all look like Laverne Cox, that's not going to work. I hope men are a bit more willing to see past that. It's a big part of the struggle, that men are programmed to find certain things attractive. No woman should be held to those beauty standards.”* Stella

Celebrate the diversity that exists within our community. Show yourself love and compassion regardless of your choices and what is achievable, accessible and authentic to you.

## Gender affirmation and gender autonomy

There are many different ways that trans women affirm their gender. Your identity is valid regardless of your social, legal, medical or cultural affirmation status.

Trans women are in the best position to know what is right for their own bodies.

The diversity of trans experiences should be celebrated. We are all beautiful in our own unique ways.

*“Any comments from men about whether any part of my body looks more feminine versus masculine are 100% unacceptable.” Electra*

Men and broader society can put significant pressure on trans women to look and present in certain ways, in particular to meet beauty standards imposed upon women.

Many trans women talk about the pressure they receive from men in regard to medical affirmation procedures, where men centre their own desires and preferences.

*“One guy I was dating recently started commenting on my appearance saying that everything about me is very feminine except my bum. He kept saying I needed bum implants so it would look more like a woman’s. But I am a woman. It’s my body and I make my own choices. So no thank you, next!” Roxanne*

At times this may even be coercive, with one-sided discussions that can leave trans women feeling a loss of autonomy, or undesirable – which can contribute to a poor sense of body positivity.

*“Throughout my life I’ve had men try to pressure me to either have or not have gender reassignment surgery. They have also put significant pressure on me to have other feminising surgeries so I’ll look as cis passing as possible. But it’s my body, my choice. They can just back off.” Candy*

Some men may put pressure on trans women to have genital surgeries. Others, particularly men who fetishise trans women, may put pressure on them not to.

It’s your body. It’s important to consider what’s right for you, free from the influence of others.

*“Early in transition I felt a lot of pressure from men not to have lower surgery. During sexual experiences some men would obsess over my genitals which was deeply upsetting and often traumatic as I had significant body dysphoria. Now that I’ve had lower surgery, I find that many men who would have fetishised me aren’t interested. In all honesty it’s a huge relief I don’t have to deal with them anymore.” Crystal*



## Right to privacy

You have the right to privacy and to have your body respected. That includes the right to choose when, where and how to disclose to men about your physical body and anatomy.

Some trans women might choose to disclose this information upfront, like on their dating profiles. Other trans women might feel the information is private and choose to disclose at a later date.

If you don't want to disclose this information at any point, consider ways to deflect these questions or get men to disclose what they are looking for.

*“For so long I felt uncomfortable when men on dating apps asked me explicit questions about my body as soon as we started chatting. If I didn't have the body they were looking for, they often weren't respectful or kind, just crude rejections. I now ask men if they are looking for a particular type of trans woman, rather than let them ask invasive questions about my body. I can now choose whether they are the right guy for me.” Electra*

## 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](http://sayitoutloud.org.au)

### TransHub

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

[transhub.org.au](http://transhub.org.au)

### Qlife

National anonymous and confidential LGBTIQ+ peer support service.

Telephone and web chat support service.

[qlife.org.au](http://qlife.org.au) | 1800 184 527

Opening hours: 3PM to midnight, every day