

# Quick Tips for Caregivers

## Of Transgender Clients

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### Be Respectful<sup>1</sup>

Everyone deserves respect. For transgender individuals, respect must be shown for their identity and history, for their personal style (clothes, accessories), for their bodily configuration, and for their name and pronoun. Respect extends beyond direct interactions to include what you say and how you behave even outside of their presence. If you accompany the transgender person on visits to (other) professionals, be aware that you may need to insist the person you care for is treated respectfully.

### Don't be (or act) surprised.

Try to not show surprise, shock, dismay or concern when you are either told or inadvertently discover that a person is transgender. Be especially careful about your body language – gasping, sighing, a sharp intake of breath, or widening eyes can all be very upsetting to someone who may worry you are making a judgment or assessment of their body. There are multiple reasons why a person may not disclose their transgender status. Disclosed transgender information should not distract a caregiver from addressing the person's caregiving needs.

### Ensure privacy.

Every "patient" in any setting has a right to privacy about their body and their personal information. You may need to remind some professionals about these rights. Also note that many transgender people do not reveal their transgender status or history to others, including family members. Do not share personal information unless you have explicit permission.

### Know and tell why.

Transgender people generally have many experiences of being asked inappropriate or rude questions and having their bodies viewed as objects of curiosity. When you have to ask a personal or sensitive question, tell the transgender person why you need the information before you ask. Similarly, before you touch or help disrobe the transgender person, tell them what you need to do and why, and (to the greatest degree possible) ask for their permission to do so.

### Facilitate friendships.

It's easy to get isolated. Study after study has shown that isolation increases both physical and mental health problems. Help the transgender person you care for remain connected with their friends and support groups, and try to establish such ties if they do not exist.

### Know about discrimination.

Transgender people report very high rates of being discriminated against (and frequently abused) by professionals and, sometimes, family members. If the transgender person you care for refuses care or visits, consider offering to accompany them, if that would make them feel safer. Recognize that their hesitation to accept help may be related to prior discrimination, not what they think about you.

<sup>1</sup> Most older transgender people go by "she" or "he," although some (particularly if they're younger) use alternative pronouns. To cover everyone in this document, we use "they" as a personal pronoun.

Be trauma-informed.

Over 50 percent of transgender people are survivors of sexual assault, and many more are survivors of physical, emotional, or financial abuse. Particularly if you are providing intimate personal care, be aware of approaches that will help minimize re-victimizing trauma survivors. Approaches like “know and tell why” help the transgender person maintain control, which was taken from them as part of the original trauma(s).

Cultivate allies.

Some systems have designated patients’ rights advocates, such as nursing home ombudsmen. While these people may not be familiar with transgender issues, they often have mandates to help patients receive the privacy, respect, and nondiscriminatory care they deserve. Investigate what systems may be available to help you and the person you care for. Use them.

Be resourceful.

The National Resource Center on LGBT Aging’s partner, the FORGE Transgender Aging Network, has many publications about transgender older adults and providing care to them: their website is [www.forge-forward.org/aging](http://www.forge-forward.org/aging). Local transgender support groups (or the local LGBT community center) may also be able to provide resources and/or training.

Follow the leader.

Many transgender individuals use nontraditional names for parts of their bodies (particularly genitals and other body features that are seen as sex-linked). These may be unique words (not found in any dictionary) or names usually used by “the other gender.” Show respect for the transgender person’s right to self-determination by also using the terms they use to refer to their body, life, relationships, or identity.

Be an advocate.

Although anti-transgender prejudice is still legal in many places, there are often basic rights that everyone is entitled to – the right to privacy, the right to access services, etc. – that you can refer to if the transgender person you’re caring for is being mistreated. Don’t let someone’s gender identity be an excuse for poor or unprofessional treatment.

Be creative.

Transgender people may not fit into existing systems or forms. Respect the transgender person you are caring for by trying to get the form or system to adapt to their needs, rather than forcing them into a pre-determined and ill-fitting box.