

Preventing Suicide

Resources For Trans People to Prevent Suicide and Promote Well-Being



Preventing Suicide and Promoting Trans Wellness: Resources for Trans People

While the burden and blame for higher rates of suicidality and poor mental health in trans communities' rests on external factors, including transphobia, stigma, employment discrimination and other systemic factors, trans people can promote and protect their own mental health, and take measures to ensure their safety, comfort and health. Ranging from connection to community spaces to creating a safety or self-care plan, there are many steps trans people can take to support themselves and their trans peers. The below resources include key recommendations, activities and planning documents that trans and gender diverse people can utilize to support their mental health and well-being.

Breaking From Negative Narratives & Embracing Our Strength

Trans communities are vibrant, resilient, powerful and diverse. While there is a lot of violence in the world around us, and a lot of harm directed at trans people, the narrative that *being trans is simply suffering and pain* is harmful in and of itself. Systemic oppression is debilitating, and the impact of transphobia is felt by all trans people but focusing on the pain and trauma experienced by trans people can often result in us feeling stuck and helpless.

Celebrating Our Trans Identities, Histories and Communities

Trans people are exceptionally resilient.

Across decades and centuries, trans people have found ways to live as their authentic selves, to survive and thrive, in different places and cultures around the world. Our communities have a rich and vibrant history, and this history is not limited to, and should not be reduced to, histories of harm and suffering.

It is important to find ways to celebrate our trans identity, and to connect with the positive aspects of our communities' histories and stories.

We can ask ourselves:

- What do I like or love about being trans?
- What unique perspectives do I have to contribute because of my trans experience?
- What am I proud of about my trans identity? What gives me joy about being trans and part of the trans community?
- What has my experience as a trans person taught me about my own resilience and strength?

Connecting with Our Communities

Connecting with other trans people is often an effective way to find strength, community and resilience. Many trans people are consistently pushing back against negative stereotypes about trans people. By meeting other trans people, we can recognize that our experiences are not isolated, and that the harmful stereotypes perpetuated about trans people are not an accurate reflection of our communities.

Connecting with our community also affords us the opportunity to see and meet trans people of varying ages. Opportunities to con-

nect with and learn from trans elders, for example, is an incredible way of learning for ourselves that trans people **can and do** live long, happy lives. Those lives may not always be easy, but there is hope and power in the capacity of trans people to survive and find joy.

We Are Stronger Than We Recognize

The resilience, power and strength of **every** trans person is often unrecognized. As trans people, many of us have had to overcome massive barriers - coming out, changing our name and pronouns, changing how we express our gender, accessing medical interventions to change our bodies, these are all examples of our power. As trans people, we have ventured into the absolute unknown, and often drastically changed who we are, in order to be the most authentic and honest version of ourselves possible. Regardless of where you are at, all trans people are incredibly resilient, powerful and inspiring. Our communities are powerful - we are powerful.

Harm Reduction Strategies for Surviving in a Transphobic World

Many trans people struggle with suicidality. Many trans people struggle with thoughts of suicide. There are many barriers to trans peoples' overall mental health and well-being, and simply surviving as a trans person can be difficult at times. There is no single way to support ourselves if we are struggling with suicide, because each of our needs and experiences are different. Recognizing that there is no one size fits all approach, a harm reduction model is one of the most effective ways to keep ourselves going in a painful world.

What is Harm Reduction?

At the end of the day, harm reduction is exactly as it sounds: reducing harm to ourselves and others. Harm reduction is an approach rather than a specific practice - which means it can be applied to a wide variety of practices.

Reducing Harm Through Boundaries

Boundaries can be difficult to establish, but we have every right to them. If particular people or experiences are causing us harm, we can establish boundaries to reduce the extent to which they can hurt us. Sometimes, our boundaries can be flexible, but other times, we need them to be firm and rigid in order to protect ourselves.

Some examples of harm reduction and boundaries include:

- Visiting our family less frequently if they are unable to gender us correctly, and if we are noticing that their failure to do so is causing us emotional distress.
- Creating boundaries around if and when we are able to provide emotional support to our friends. If we ourselves are struggling, it can be emotionally exhausting to be providing ongoing support to our friends or peers who are struggling too. While everyone deserves to be heard and supported, we may not always be in a position to do so.
- If we are using substances (alcohol or other drugs for example) to cope with our mental health, we can work towards boundaries about how much we will use, in what situations, and with what frequency. While our boundaries can evolve (and sometimes they have to in order for us to keep ourselves alive), by setting such boundaries, we can seek to better control substance use that we may be utilizing to cope with our mental health as best we can.

Keeping Ourselves Alive

At the end of the day, harm reduction is about keeping ourselves alive, while reducing the impact of things that may cause us harm - including activities or coping mechanisms that we may utilize to survive. While we should strive to use healthy and effective strategies to maintain our mental health, many people use a variety of tools to survive, some of which may cause, or may have the capacity to cause, us harm as well. As we work to maintain our well-being, we should prioritize our survival, while striving towards coping mechanisms that are as healthy as possible.

Self-Care Strategies for Trans People

Self-care practices are activities we can undertake to support our own mental health and wellness and care for ourselves. Self-care is not a solution to systemic issues but can be an effective approach to maintaining and monitoring our own mental health and well-being. By making time for ourselves, and intentionally engaging in activities that we know have a positive impact on our sense of well-being and self-worth, we can better care for ourselves.

Self-care is often misunderstood or misrepresented as a short set of superfluous activities such as yoga, going for walks, or taking a bath. While these are examples of self-care, self-care activities are fundamentally individual, and may vary significantly from one individual to the next.

How to Plan Your Self-Care

Self-care activities can be built into your regular daily schedule, or utilized during times of particular stress. Consider setting aside designated time every day or every week to engage in self-care practices, even if for a limited time, as a means of maintaining your mental health and well-being.

What Self-Care Isn't:

Self-care isn't an effective substitute for other interventions such as counselling programs or therapeutic supports. While self-care can help us maintain our mental health, it should not be confused for or used to substitute more rigorous or intensive services if and when we need them. If we are in a state of crisis, our self-care strategies may not be sufficient, and we should reach out for additional supports.

Self-care isn't always accessible or affordable. At best, self-care is a band aid solution, a harm-reduction practice intended to help us manage and mitigate the impact of systemic transphobia and other forms of oppression. Nonetheless, self-care can be an effective band aid – and is therefore a useful tool for our personal 'mental health toolbox'.

Common Examples of Self-Care Practices:

- Going for a walk every day
- Taking a long bath after a busy day
- Practicing yoga or mindfulness exercises
- Playing with our pets
- Watching a movie or TV show
- Reading a book

Self-care isn't limited to activities that allow us to take breaks or relax. At the end of the day, self-care is about doing things that help us feel good about ourselves and maintain

our mental health. Sometimes, self-care is doing the dishes – because a clean kitchen feels like a worthwhile reward – or doing the laundry. At the end of the day, self-care is about finding the moments of joy, peace and reward that enable us to feel good about ourselves and decompress.

The exercises identified below can help you manage stress and anxiety through self-care, breathing exercises, muscle relaxation strategies and thought-changing efforts. These are all practices that can help us better manage and maintain our mental health, particularly during periods of stress or uncertainty.

Breathing Exercises:

When we feel stressed or anxious, we don't always breathe as deeply as we should. Taking short breaths can make our bodies feel more tense and anxious. By practicing deep breathing, we can take steps to still our mind and calm our body.

Simple Breathing Exercise:

- Take a deep breath in and count to four in your head.
- Hold your breath in and count to four.
- Slowly breathe out while counting to four.
- Repeat this exercise as often as needed.

Hand Tracing Exercise:

- Starting at your wrist, trace the left side of your hand up to your middle finger while taking a deep breath for four seconds.
- Pause at the tip of your middle finger and hold your breath in for four seconds.
- Breathe out while tracing down the right side of your hand for four seconds.
- Repeat four times.

Belly Breathing Exercise:

- In a sitting position, put one hand on your chest and the other on your belly.
- Take a deep breath through your nose. Notice the air moving through your lungs. Slowly exhale through your mouth.
- Take a second breath. Imagine bringing the air into your belly. See if you can make your belly move more than your chest.
- Breathe in for four seconds. Hold the air in for four seconds. Feel the movement of the air in your belly.
- Slowly breath out over four seconds.

Muscle Relaxation Exercises:

Feeling stressed or anxious can affect our minds and bodies – including our muscles. We often don't realize the amount of tension we're holding in our bodies, which in turn affects our minds and our mental health. Muscle relaxation exercises can help us reduce tension and stress in our bodies. All our bodies work in different ways, so these exercises can be adapted to make them work for you

and your body.

Stretching Exercise:

- Sit cross-legged or with your legs straight out in front of you on a comfortable surface.
- Slowly turn your shoulders and torso to the left and hold for ten seconds.
- Slowly turn your shoulders to the right and hold for ten seconds.
- Reach your arms out in front of you as far as you can and hold for ten seconds
- Reach your arms out to the sky and hold for ten seconds.
- Repeat this exercise two times.

Chair Exercise:

- While sitting in a chair, put your hands behind your back and touch your elbows with your hands. Count to five.
- Hold your hands up in front of you and hold them there for five seconds.
- With your hands in front of you, make fists, and hold them there for five seconds. Repeat five times.
- With your feet flat on the floor, raise your heels for 10 seconds before letting them drop back down to the floor. Repeat three times.

- Put your hands flat on the back of your head and bend your elbows. Turn your head left (and hold for five seconds). Turn your head to the right (and hold for five seconds)
- Extend your left leg out in front of you for five seconds. Extend your right leg in front of you for five seconds.

Gratitude Exercises:

When we're having a hard time finding the positive side of life, or to recognize our own worth, gratitude exercises can help. They can help us notice the good things, both about ourselves and others around us. Taking time to notice the good in our lives can help us feel happier, and maintain a hopeful attitude.

Personal Gratitude Exercise:

- On a blank piece of paper, answer the following questions:
 - One of my strengths that I am grateful for is:
 - One thing I can do to express gratitude to myself is:
 - One person in my life I am grateful for is:
 - One challenge in my life I am grateful for is:
 - One beautiful thing in my life that I am grateful for is:

Gratitude Notes:

- Using a journal or blank sheets of paper, write out one thing you are thankful for every morning.
- Every evening, or when you are feeling stressed and anxious, re-read your gratitude note from that morning, and re-read others that you've written over the past few days.
- When life is hard, we miss the many things we can be grateful for. Noticing these things can help us recognize the good things in our lives, when we tend to focus on the bad.

Thought Changing Exercises:

We can all find ourselves trapped in our own thoughts sometimes. Whether we're fixated on something stressful, worrying about the future, or just having a hard time finding the good in life at the moment, we can use thought changing exercises to help get out of a bad headspace.

Unhelpful Thoughts	Helpful Thoughts
I made a mistake and that makes me a bad person.	I am a good person, no one is perfect, and everyone makes mistakes.
I haven't gotten anything done this whole week – I am the worst.	It's normal to feel less productive sometimes, especially if I've had a hard time. I deserve to be patient with myself.
I ignored my friend's message – she probably doesn't think we're close anymore.	She probably knows I care about her, and that I'll get back to her when I'm feeling up for it.

Unhelpful to Helpful Thoughts

- When we're struggling, we often get stuck on unhelpful thoughts. By noticing and addressing those thoughts, we can get ourselves out of a thinking trap.
- On a piece of paper, create two columns. In the left column, write out a list of unhelpful thoughts that are stuck in your head.

In the right column, reframe your negative thought with a more helpful one.

Planning Your Coming Out as a Trans Person

There is no one way to come out – and not all people need, are safe to, or want, to come out. We each experience coming out in a different way. For some of us, it's a source of pure excitement and joy. For others, it's a source of uncertainty and anxiety. While there is no one way to come out, or be out, this resource is intended to help you plan and prepare. Recognizing that trans people are immensely diverse, that some people might come out at 12, and others at 60, there is no single coming out experience – it looks and means different things to each of us. This resource is intended as a short guide of key considerations in your coming out process:

Planning for your safety: If you are coming out to your family, or to those you live with, it is important to think about your safety. While this may not be a concern in your particular situation, it is a concern for some trans people, and planning for your safety is never a bad idea.

If you are coming out in an environment that might be complicated, or if you are not sure how your friends and family will react, it is recommended that you identify a safe person – a close friend or family member who you know you can stay with or reach out to for support.

Consider creating a safety plan (see Appendix A: A Plan for Crisis) to support you in coming out. While this might not be necessary, it is a useful exercise to help us plan for the worst and hope for the best. Important questions to ask yourself include:

- If this doesn't go perfectly, where can I stay tonight? Is there a friend or family member I can stay with?

- What can I do to care for myself once this is done? How can I help myself decompress and process any emotions that may arise during the coming out experience?
- What resources, services, or supports could I reach out to, if I need help after I come out?
- Will you say it or write it?

There is no one way to come out. Some people come out through in person, one on one conversations with their partner, family or friends. Other people come out through posts on social media, and still other people write letters to their loved ones. You have many options. There is no right option – the right option is whichever works best for you.

Handling Ignorance and Confusion: Many people don't know much about trans identity or community. Often, when people come out, it is the first time their partner, family or friends have to think about the existence of trans and gender diverse people. They may not fully understand what your coming out means, or even what the word trans means. While it is not fair to expect individual trans people to educate their partner, family or friends, you may have to do so in the early days of coming out. You can also recommend resources where they can learn more.

Identify Your Needs and Requests: Before coming out, reflect on your needs and requests. Coming out is a big moment, and often includes a lot of changes in your life. For example, you may request that your partner, family or friends use a new name and pronouns. You may also request help from your partner, family or friends to come out to others, to help take the burden off of you. Identifying your needs and requests is a good way to help you, and those around you, understand what you need from them after you come out.

Managing the Adjustment Period: Even in the best-case scenarios, it may take your partner, family or friends time to adjust to a new name, new pronouns, and a new side of you they haven't met before. In those early days, it can be hard. Coming out is a big moment for us – people often feel vulnerable and delicate in the days after. In the early days, it is likely our partner, family or friends will make a lot of mistakes. They may say the wrong thing and inadvertently cause harm, even if they have the best of intentions. In most cases, people will learn and adjust, but that doesn't make it any easier in the moment.

Finding Your Confidant: Given that coming out can be stressful and anxiety inducing, it is important to find the person or people who you can talk through your experiences with. This may be a close friend, another trans person, or a local service provider. It is important to talk about your experiences, and to have someone you know will listen and support you.

