

Excerpt from: *Gender Dysphoria is Not One Thing*

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Autogynephilic Gender Dysphoria (Adolescent Boys and Men)

From a parent's perspective, autogynephilic gender dysphoria (which occurs only in natal males) often seems to come out of the blue. This is likely to be true whether the onset is during adolescence or adulthood. A teenage boy may suddenly announce that he is actually a woman trapped in a man's body, or that he is transgender, or that he wants gender transition. Typically, this revelation follows his intensive internet research and participation in internet transgender forums. Importantly, the adolescent showed no clear, consistent signs of either gender nonconformity or gender dysphoria during childhood (that is, before puberty).

There is an important distinction between rapid-onset gender dysphoria and autogynephilic gender dysphoria that happens to have an adolescent onset. Rapid-onset gender dysphoria is suddenly *acquired*, whereas autogynephilic gender dysphoria may be suddenly *revealed*, after having grown in secret for a number of years. We will talk more about this later.

Where does autogynephilic gender dysphoria come from? We know a lot about the motivation of this kind of gender dysphoria. Most of our knowledge comes from studies of adults born male who transitioned during adulthood. Some of these adults had gender dysphoria during adolescence, but all of them had the root cause of their condition: *autogynephilia*.

(Warning: Autogynephilia is about sex. We understand that it is awkward and uncomfortable for any parent to consider their children's sexual fantasies. But you can't understand your son with this kind of gender dysphoria without doing so.)

Autogynephilia is a male's sexual arousal by the fantasy of being a woman. That is, autogynephilic males are turned on by thinking about themselves as women, or behaving like women. The typical heterosexual adolescent boy has sexual fantasies about attractive girls or women. The autogynephilic adolescent boy's may also have such fantasies, but in addition he fantasizes that he is an attractive, sexy woman. The most common behavior associated with autogynephilia during adolescence is fetishistic cross dressing. In this behavior, the adolescent male wears female clothing (typically, lingerie) in private, looks at himself in the mirror, and masturbates. Some autogynephilic males are not only sexually

aroused by cross dressing, but also by the idea of having female body parts. These body-related fantasies are especially likely to be associated with gender dysphoria.

It is important to distinguish between autogynephilia and autogynephilic gender dysphoria. Autogynephilia is basically a sexual orientation, and once present does not go away, although its intensity may wax and wane. Autogynephilic gender dysphoria sometimes follows autogynephilia, and is the strong wish to transition from male to female. A male must have autogynephilia to have autogynephilic gender dysphoria, but just because he is autogynephilic doesn't mean he will be gender dysphoric. Many autogynephilic males live their lives contented to remain male. Furthermore, sometimes autogynephilic gender dysphoria remits so that a male who wanted to change sex no longer does so.

In general, adolescent boys are unlikely to divulge their sexual fantasies to their parents. This is likely especially true of boys with autogynephilia. Furthermore, many boys who engage in cross dressing feel ashamed for doing so. The fact that autogynephilic fantasies and behaviors are largely private is one reason why autogynephilic gender dysphoria usually seems to emerge from nowhere. Another reason is that autogynephilic males are not naturally very feminine. An adolescent boy with autogynephilia does not give off obvious signals of gender nonconformity or gender dysphoria.

It is likely that most autogynephilic males do not pursue gender reassignment, but this is difficult to know. (We would need to conduct a representative survey of all persons born male, asking about both autogynephilia and gender transition. This has not been done and won't be done anytime soon.) Many males with autogynephilia are content to cross dress occasionally. Some get married to women and many also have children. Family formation is no guarantee against later transition, although that may slow it up somewhat. In past decades, when autogynephilic males have transitioned, they have most often done so during the ages 30-50, after having married women and fathered children. It is possible that autogynephilic males have recently been attempting transition at younger ages, including adolescence.

The relationship between autogynephilia and (autogynephilic-type) gender dysphoria is uncertain. One view is that gender dysphoria may arise as a complication of autogynephilia, depending perhaps on chance events or environmental factors. Another view is that autogynephiles who become progressively gender dysphoric were somewhat different from simple autogynephiles from the beginning (for example, more obsessional). Because we do not actually know the causes of autogynephilia, it is quite difficult to sort out these various interpretations at present.

Autogynephilia—the central motivation of autogynephilic gender dysphoria—can be considered an unusual sexual orientation. As with other kinds of male sexual orientation, we do not know how to change it, and we shouldn't try. The dilemma is how to live with autogynephilia in a way that allows the most happiness. For some with autogynephilia, this will mean staying male. For others, it will mean transitioning to female.

What do we know about autogynephilic gender dysphoria?

Much of what we know about autogynephilic gender dysphoria comes from research conducted on adults. Most of the early research was conducted by the scientist who developed the theory of autogynephilia, Ray Blanchard. This work was subsequently confirmed and extended by other researchers, especially Anne Lawrence, Michael Bailey, and Bailey's students.

Blanchard's research identified two distinct subtypes of gender dysphoria among adult male gender patients. One type, which he called "homosexual gender dysphoria" is identical to childhood onset male gender dysphoria. Males with this condition are homosexual, in the sense that they are attracted to other biological males. Blanchard provided persuasive evidence that the other male gender patients were autogynephilic. We currently favor the theory that there are only two well established kinds of gender dysphoria among males, because no convincing evidence for any other types has been offered. This could change—we are committed to a scientific open-mindedness. In particular, it is possible that some cases of adolescent-onset gender dysphoria among males are essentially the same as Rapid-onset Gender Dysphoria that occurs among natal females. This will require more research to establish, however.

Autogynephilia is a probably rare, although it is difficult to know for certain. Among males who seek gender transition, however, it is common. In fact, in Western countries in recent years, including the United States, autogynephilia has accounted for at least 75% of cases of male-to-female transsexualism.

Given how important autogynephilia is for understanding gender dysphoria, it may surprise you that you had never heard of it. Autogynephilia remains a largely hidden idea because most people—including journalists, families, and many males with autogynephilia—strongly prefer the standard, though false, narrative: "Transsexualism is about having the mind of one sex in the body of the other sex." Many people find this narrative both easier to understand and less disturbing than the idea that some males want a sex change because they find that idea strongly erotic.

Although many autogynephilic males find discovery of the idea of autogynephilia to be a positive revelation—autogynephilia has been as puzzling to them as it is to you—some others are enraged at the idea. There are two main reasons why some autogynephilic males are in denial. First, they correctly believe that many people find a sexual explanation of gender dysphoria unappealing—discomfort with sexuality is rampant. Second, they find this explanation of their own feelings less satisfying than the standard “woman trapped in man’s body” explanation. This is because autogynephilia is a male trait, and autogynephilia is about wanting to be female.

It is good to be aware of autogynephilia’s controversial status, because transgender activists are often hostile to the idea. You will not learn more about it from the activists. And if your son has frequented internet discussions, he may also resent the idea. We emphasize that autogynephilia is controversial for social reasons, not for scientific ones. No scientific data have seriously challenged it.

Sexuality

Males with autogynephilia can have a variety of autogynephilic fantasies and interests, from cross dressing to fantasizing about having female bodies to enjoying (for erotic reasons) stereotypical female activities such as knitting to fantasizing about being pregnant or menstruating. [One study](#) found that autogynephilic males who fantasize about having female genitalia also tended to be those with the greatest gender dysphoria.

Autogynephilic males sometimes identify as heterosexual (i.e., attracted exclusively to women); sometimes as bisexual (attracted to both men and women), and sometimes as asexual (i.e., attracted to no individuals). Blanchard’s work has shown that autogynephilia can be thought of as a type of male heterosexuality, one that is inwardly directed. Autogynephilia often coexists with outward-directed heterosexuality, and so autogynephilic males usually say they are also attracted to women. Some autogynephilic males enjoy the idea that they are attractive, as women, to other men. They may have sexual fantasies about having sex with men (in the female role); some may even act on these fantasies. This accounts for the bisexual identification among some autogynephilic males. In some others, the intensity of the autogynephilia—which is attraction to an imagined “inner woman”—is so great that there are no erotic feelings left for other people. This accounts for asexual identification. (Asexual autogynephilic males have plenty of sexual fantasies, but these fantasies tend not to involve other people.)

When autogynephilic males receive female hormones as part of their gender transition, they typically experience a noticeable decrease in their sex drive. Some have reported that this has diminished their desire for gender transition as well. Others, however, have reported no

change in their desire for transition. (In any case, hormonal therapy is a medical intervention with serious potential side effects, and we do not recommend it as a way to treat gender dysphoria, except in cases in which after very careful consideration, gender transition is pursued.)

Autogynephilia is a *paraphilia*, meaning an unusual sexual interest nearly exclusively found in males.

We repeat: Autogynephilia is a sexual orientation—to be sure, an unusual orientation that is difficult to understand. There is no evidence that parents can change their children’s sexual orientations. And we don’t think they should try.

What should you do?

Consistent with our values, knowledge, and common sense, we believe that males with autogynephilic gender dysphoria should not pursue gender transition right away, as soon as they first have the idea. Transition ultimately requires serious medical procedures with irreversible consequences. But we are unsure what the right approach to autogynephilic gender dysphoria is. In part, this is because there has been too little outcome research conducted by scientists knowledgeable and open about autogynephilia.

First, we recommend that your son be informed about autogynephilia. The best way to do this is up to you. There is probably no non-awkward way. Consider showing them this blog. People should make important life decisions based upon facts, and for males autogynephilic gender dysphoria, autogynephilia is a fact. The standard “female mind/brain in male body” is a fiction.

Some males become less motivated to pursue gender change when they understand their autogynephilia. However, some do not become less motivated. We know far less about patterns of persistence and desistance of autogynephilic gender dysphoria than we do about childhood onset gender dysphoria.

If an autogynephilic male has become familiar with the scientific evidence, has patiently considered the potential consequences of gender transition over a non-trivial time period, and still wishes to transition, we do not oppose this decision. It is possible that many autogynephilic males are happier after gender transition. But there is no rush for any adolescent to decide.