

Transgender Sensitive Spiritual Care:

Some Best Practices for Providing Spiritual Care to Transgender Individuals Through Illness, Grieving, Death and Life Transitions

Rabbi Elliot Kukla, March 25, 2012

How is he [the androgynos] like both men and women? Guilt is incurred for killing him or for cursing him, as in the case of men and women; one who accidentally slays him must go into exile [like other man slaughterers], and one who intentionally slays him receives the death penalty...

—*Mishna Bikkurim 4:4*

- 1. Do** educate yourself about transgender experience and be prepared to discuss gender issues if and when they are relevant to the pastoral needs as expressed by the person you are serving. **Don't** assume that gender is the most salient issue in a transgender person's life or that it has direct bearing on other issues they may have come to discuss with you.
- 2. Do** be curious and interested about issues that are relevant to the person you are with and their pastoral needs. And acknowledge your own natural curiosity about sexuality and gender. **Don't** expect those you serve to help you understand their life choices or explain their medical history to you. You don't need to know or understand everything about someone to connect to them and to care for them.
- 3. Do** welcome and own your own attitudes, values and assumptions around gender, and get support from a therapist, supervisor or spiritual advisor for issues that raise discomfort, confusion, growth or learning for you. The more you understand yourself the more you are able to serve others. Be honest about your limitations and strengths. **Don't** expect the transgender person you are serving to comfort you, educate you or help you with your anxiety.
- 4. Do** know that transgender people express their gender in unique and extremely varied ways. **Don't** assume that all transgender people see themselves as either male or female; though some may see themselves wholly as their chosen gender and not "trans" at all.

5. **Do** know you have the human capacity to connect to anyone on the planet.
Don't walk on egg shells or overly apologize if you make mistakes.

6. **Do** understand the ways systemic injustice impact transgender lives especially in health care contexts.
Don't assume that it is safe for transgender people to be “out” in all settings or use their chosen name/pronoun in health care or family settings.

7. **Do** use blessing and prayer and know that your presence represents a connection to spirituality and the divine.
Don't be afraid to ask about the spiritual relevance of gender and/or transition.

8. **Do** know the most important part of spiritual care is using your unique personality to offer whole hearted kindness to someone who is suffering.
Don't think that connecting to and caring for multifaceted human beings can be broken down into an easy check list (like this one!)

Rabbi Yose says: “The androgynos is a created being of its own.”
—*Mishna Bikkurim 4:5*

“Who would you be, if you had never been punished for gender inappropriate behavior? What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What if we all helped each other to manifest our most beautiful, sexy, intelligent, creative, and adventurous inner selves, instead of cooperating to suppress them?”
—*Patrick Califa*

For more information: www.jewishhealingcenter.org and www.transtorah.org