

## Communication Matters: Strengthening and protecting your relationship with your trans youth when emotions run high

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### **Coming out: An important period in your relationship**

It is developmentally normal during adolescence and young adulthood for a young person to step away from you, their parent, to “individuate” and explore their identities, other relationships, unique likes, dislikes and interests. Ideally, during major life challenges, situations that feel scary or overwhelming, or when they are in need of comfort, they are able to turn back to you, knowing you will offer them support, understanding and acceptance. In psychological terms, this is known as “secure attachment” - that your child trusts you to be a predictable and safe “landing spot” when things get rough.

Many youth are reluctant or scared to tell their parents about their gender identity – often fearing that their parents will not believe, support or assist them to pursue social and physical transition<sup>1</sup>. This reluctance may be due to the impact of transphobia and transmisogyny in our society, which can lead youth to internalize harmful messages about themselves (“I’m not normal”, “This is going to be too complicated and I will lose everyone I love”) and/or to fear your reactions. This can also be due to previously established relationship and communication patterns in your family, which can lead your adolescent/young adult to believe such a disclosure would not go well. The fact is, even if your child does not acknowledge it or show it overtly (and may in fact be withdrawn, critical of you, pushing you away, or acting out behaviorally), coming out and the early days of social transition are crucial moments – not just for your child, but also in your relationship. In addition to all the other pressures of adolescence and young adulthood, trans and gender questioning youth are navigating one of the most significant life stressors possible – often without the support of the most important adult in their life - and they need you more than ever.

Early conversations about gender identity can feel very high-stakes for both youth and parents. Your child may have practiced this conversation in their head for months or years, only to find it unfolding poorly - in the context of a heated argument or through a text exchange. Parents hearing about this for the first time may feel caught off guard and thrown into unknown territory without a compass. In this context of overwhelming emotions a parent may say things out of fear or worry - often things that reflect a lifetime of societal conditioning about gender - which can register as rejecting and hurtful to their youth. Hearing a loved one say things that you most fear, or that you yourself have been battling internally with (i.e.: “You’ll never look

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<sup>1</sup> Social transition often involves trans people exploring different grooming or clothing options, coming out to people in their life, and asking family, friends or school to use a different pronoun or name. Physical or medical transition may involve hormone blockers, hormone treatment and/or surgeries.

like a “real” woman/man”, “You’re making life so much harder for yourself and family” or “This is just another one of your phases”) can feel devastating to a trans youth. On the other end of the spectrum, a parent may feel so overwhelmed that they say very little or nothing at all when their youth comes out to them, which can also register as rejecting, hurtful or unsupportive for a young person taking a risk and sharing their deepest truth.

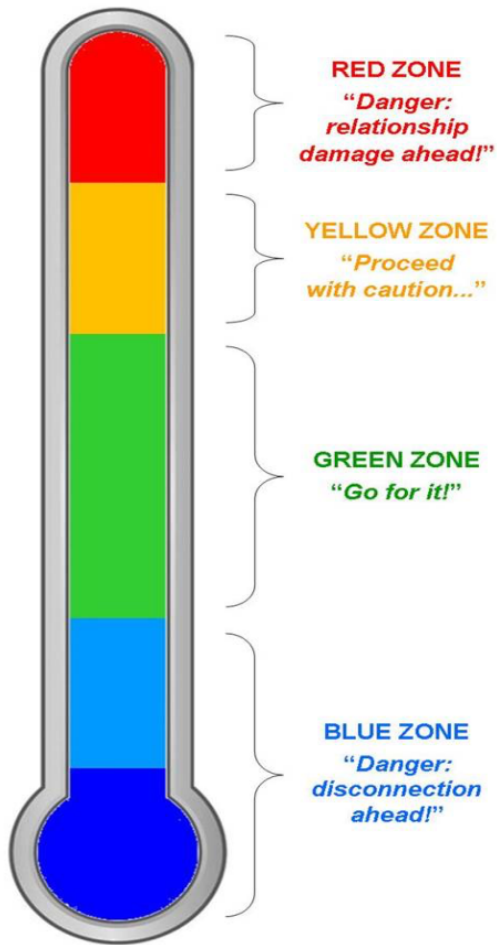
Both types of reactions – saying something hurtful and saying very little - can have negative impacts on your relationship and, relatedly, on the longer term mental health of your youth. It has been well-documented that feeling a sense of rejection by one’s attachment figures - the people to whom you are supposed to be able to turn to for comfort and security, can have long term effects on self-esteem, mental health, emotional regulation and interpersonal skills.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, parental acceptance of LGBTQ youth has been found to predict greater self-esteem, social support, and general health status; it also protects against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviors (Ryan et al., 2010). In the Ontario TransPULSE study, when trans youth felt they had strong parental support for their gender identity, their likelihood of attempting suicide dropped by 93% (Travers et al., 2012).

### **When is a good time to talk with my youth?**

It can be easier said than done, however, to discuss your child’s gender identity in a balanced manner, as you may be overwhelmed with strong emotions such as fear for your child’s future, disbelief, worry, anger, loss, sadness or shame. Some youth, who may have spent many months or years figuring out their identity and learning about trans communities apart from their parents, can push parents away and be critical of their lack of understanding about trans issues, which can leave parents feeling hurt and on the defensive. Strong emotions can overwhelm your capacity to stay grounded and curious, and compromise your ability to listen and engage helpfully when youth need you most. Mindfulness, or present moment awareness, can help you cultivate the capacity to tune into your body, observe your mind, and notice your emotional state. This mindful awareness can assist you to regulate emotions, step out of auto-pilot, improve your capacity to “respond” rather than “react”, and steady yourself before or during an important conversation with your youth. It is a valuable tool that can help safeguard your relationship.

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<sup>2</sup> For a deeper discussion of adolescent attachment, see Diamond, G. S., Diamond, G. M., & Levy, S. A. (2014). *Attachment-based family therapy for depressed adolescents*. American Psychological Association.



**Green Zone: "Go for it!"**

When you are feeling emotionally steady and grounded, you are said to be in your "window of tolerance" – within this window your nervous system is functioning optimally and you can cope easily with the ups and downs of life. This is the "green zone" to proceed with discussions with your youth about gender identity. You may notice feeling "present", your mind may feel open and receptive, and your body may feel relaxed and at ease. In the "green zone" your thinking is flexible, clear and present-oriented, you are able to be curious and reflective about the views and experiences of others, and are able to listen and see things from someone else's perspective. In the "green zone" you are able to be adaptable and respond to the twists and turns life throws at you without too much stress, and you do not have an agenda for conversations you take part in.

To strengthen your relationship when you are in the "green zone", you might ask open-ended questions to learn more about your youth's experience of being trans: "What is it like for you when...?" or "Can you tell me more about...?"

Note that it is possible to feel negative emotions (such as worry, fear or sadness) and still remain in the "green zone". Be sure to take care of yourself, so that you stay balanced and can keep what's going on with your youth in perspective:

- Do things you enjoy that nourish your body, mind, heart and relationships
- Spend time with supportive people
- See a trans positive therapist, talk to a trans-affirming friend, and/or keep a journal – process your difficult feelings and worries apart from your youth

**Yellow Zone: "Proceed with caution..."**

When emotions start to run higher, many people enter the "yellow zone". Some early warning signs that may indicate you are heading in this direction include: anxious or worried feelings, a tightening in your stomach, chest or throat, or racing thoughts. In this zone, your thinking

becomes more rigid and polarized, it is hard to remain open and curious about the view of others, and it often feels urgent to get your point across and be heard. You may notice having future-oriented, fear-based, “worst case scenario” thoughts about your child’s gender identity and find yourself arguing facts or using “logic” to make your points. It is here that you are prone to quick judgments and strong reactions.

To protect your relationship with your child and avoid escalations, you might say: *“I see how important this is to you - I need some time to process what you’ve just told me.”* Or *“I’m needing to step back and gather my thoughts; let’s return to this later tonight.”*

### **Red Zone: “Danger! Relationship damage ahead!”**

In the “red zone” your nervous system is highly activated, your emotional reactions are very strong, your heart may beat quickly, and you may feel panic, overwhelmed, hypervigilant, and/or angry. Your nervous system may have moved into a “fight”, “flight” or “freeze” mode. Strong anger, defensiveness or feeling critical of others, particularly when accompanied by a feeling of urgency to resolve the feelings, may indicate a *fight* response. Leaving (or the desire to leave) physically or emotionally (through internet, TV, overwork, drugs, alcohol, sex) from the conversation may indicate a *flight* response. Having a sense of being immobilized and overwhelmed with anxiety or anger, sometimes accompanied by not being able to find the right words to say, may indicate a *freeze* response. The “red zone” is the danger zone for communication, as conversations cannot be productive when one or more person is here. Particularly in *fight* mode, you are prone to blurting things out that you would not otherwise say, and/or doing things you later regret.

In the “yellow zone” and “red zone” there is a high risk of relationship damage that may persist into the future. To protect your relationship with your child you might say: *“This conversation is too important to fight about - I need time to cool off”* or *“Let’s stop now, and talk again in a few days when I feel more calm.”*

When you notice you are in the “yellow zone” or “red zone”, it is important to take a break from the conversation, and find ways to rebalance your nervous system and clear your head. Here are some strategies you could try:

- Take 5 “belly” breathes
  - Breathe deeply enough to allow your stomach to expand on the inhale, and deflate on the exhale
  - Make sure your exhales are longer than your inhales
  - You can try to exhale through pursed lips, as if through a straw

- Try one or more physical grounding techniques<sup>3</sup>
  - Bring your complete focus to your feet against the floor; push them firmly against the floor for 5 seconds; notice any changing sensations in your legs and feet (tingling, “aliveness”, blood moving); repeat a number of times to maintain or heighten that sensation; or
  - Rub and massage your hands under water in the kitchen or bathroom, paying very close attention to the temperature and feeling of the water pressure against your hands, the sensations of your hands and fingers while they massage each other, the sound of the water against the sink
- Connect with nature, spirituality/religion, a trusted, trans-affirming friend or a trans-competent therapist

### **Blue Zone: “Danger: Disconnection ahead!”**

On the other end of the spectrum, you may notice that it is hard for you to remain engaged with what is going on in the family when emotionally charged issues are being discussed. This is not because do not care; rather, it is the way your nervous system deals with feeling overwhelmed. Early warning signs of heading into the "blue zone" might include: yawning, feeling tired, numb, distracted by other thoughts, a desire to avoid or disconnect from the conversation (and go online, watch TV etc.), and/or not being able to think or communicate clearly. In this zone your thinking becomes more rigid and it is hard to take in the experience of others. You may notice thoughts like “I’m not good at these types of conversations”, or feeling withdrawn or distant from the issue being discussed. In the “dark blue zone” your nervous system may move into a “collapse/submit” mode, where you may notice thinking “I can’t handle this,” “there’s nothing I can do about this”, or feeling shame, defeated, shut-down or checked-out.

When you are in the “blue zones” you will not be able to actively participate in family discussions or help your youth deal with and make decisions. This may register to your child as if you do not care about them or about assisting them during this important and challenging time in their life. *To protect your relationship you might say: “I care about what’s happening in your life but I don’t know what to say right now” or “This is a lot for me to take in - let’s talk later when I’m feeling more clear-headed”.*

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<sup>3</sup> Try to practice breathing and grounding techniques a few times when you are not feeling overwhelmed, in order to familiarize yourself with them before you need them. They may feel silly at first, but neuroscience tells us that the most effective way to address nervous system activation is through the body (rather than through the mind).

When you notice you are in the “blue zones”, some ways to connect to yourself might be:

- Taking 5 strong breaths with exaggerated, powerful inhales;
- Changing your posture – standing up, and doing something physical like tossing a ball (or rolled-up socks) that requires you to be alert and focused and use hand-eye coordination;
- Doing something active and engaging your senses: going for a walk and actively/intentionally noticing different sounds, smells, colours and sights in your neighborhood;
- Engaging in hobby or doing an activity with a trusted friend

### **Caring for yourself, caring for your child**

By taking a few moments to tune into your body and emotions prior to and during emotionally charged or uncomfortable conversations, you are not only modelling emotional regulation and self-care, but you are also paying tribute to the importance of your relationship with your teenager or young adult. The safeguarding and strengthening of your attachment relationship, particularly in this period of turbulence and change, is a powerful gift to your child that can have a lifetime of positive returns for them – resiliency, good mental health, strong self-esteem and healthy relationships.

### **References**

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