



Trans and Gender Diverse Youth and Online Transphobia

Some reflections on practice and research



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Content Warnings



- Discussions of suicidal ideation
 - Mentions of self-harm and digital self-harm
 - Accounts of transphobic bullying (no slurs or demeaning language used)
 - Discussions of gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia
 - Discussions of inappropriate sexualisation of minors, sexual harassment and fetishization of trans people
 - Mentions of trans exclusionary rhetoric
 - Mentions of murder and rape threats
-

Overview of the workshop

01

About Me/Intro

Who I am and how this issue came to my attention

02

Research

What does research tell us about this issue?

03

Mapping Trends

Drawing out and explaining some trends I've observed

04

Case examples

Using some case examples to explore lived experiences

05

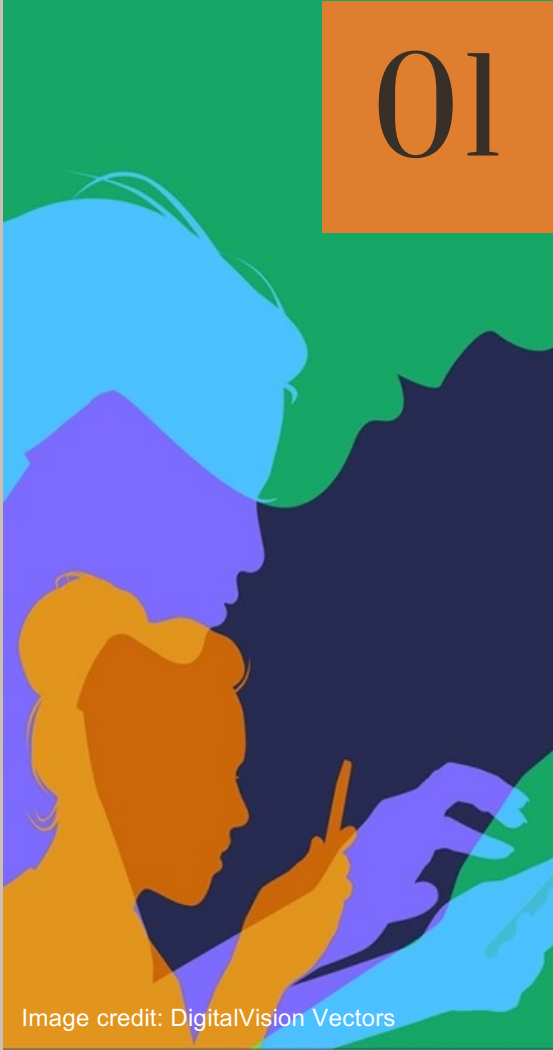
Conclusions

Together we will talk about what practitioners can do

06

Discussion

Your experiences, questions and thoughts



01

Who am I? Why this issue?

I am a trans psychotherapist in private practice in Melbourne, working mainly with LGBTQIA+ clients and their families.

My interest in this issue came from hearing young people describing their relationships with the internet and social media in sessions, and realising that:

- There are many **common themes** in their accounts
- Many of their online experiences are **particular to TGD people**, or exacerbated by transphobia
- They **don't talk to their parents** or anyone IRL about these experiences
- Young TGD people **rely heavily on online communities** for connection, information and belonging
- There is no obvious way of **separating the positive outcomes from the negative ones**
- These experiences (positive and negative) have **profound mental health impacts**

Image credit: DigitalVision Vectors

02 Research



What is the scope of this issue?

A 2019 report analysing 10 million social media and online posts in the U.S. and U.K. over three and a half years found 1.5 million transphobic posts and comments, highlighting the level of cyber-abuse targeting transgender people.

<https://www.brandwatch.com/reports/transphobia/>

A 2018 systematic review of studies on cyberbullying and LGBTQ youth found that cyberbullying was both significantly more prevalent for LGBTQ youth, and correlated to worse mental health, behavioural and academic outcomes than for their non-LGBTQ peers.

Abreu, R.L., Kenny, M.C. Cyberbullying and LGBTQ Youth: A Systematic Literature Review and Recommendations for Prevention and Intervention. *Journ Child Adol Trauma* **11**, 81–97 (2018).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0175-7>

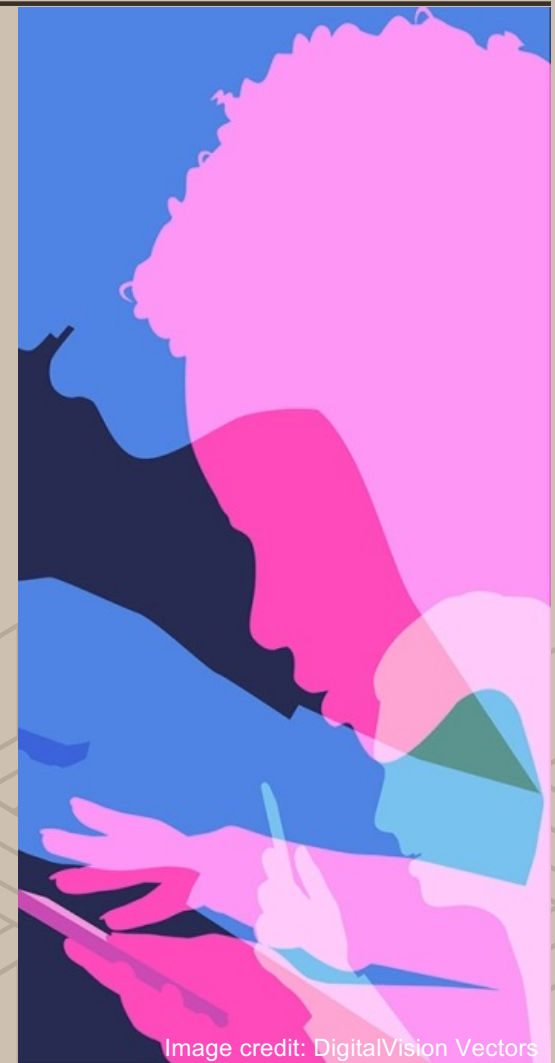


Image credit: DigitalVision Vectors

02 Research, cont'd.

Results of a 2018 study on digital harassment suggest that transgender individuals experience higher rates of digital harassment and abuse overall, and higher rates of sexual, sexuality and gender-based harassment and abuse, as compared with heterosexual cisgender individuals.

Powell A, Scott AJ, Henry N. Digital harassment and abuse: Experiences of sexuality and gender minority adults. *European Journal of Criminology*. 2020;17(2):199-223. doi:10.1177/1477370818788006



Exposure to news and media

A 2020 study conducted at Seattle Children's Gender Clinic found that "exposure to negative news about GSM [gender and sexuality minority] people may contribute to increased levels of stress among TGNC youth", including increased concern about access to transition and future wellbeing and safety.

Pham A, Morgan AR, Kerman H, Albertson K, Crouch JM, Inwards-Breland DJ, Ahrens KR, Salehi P. How Are Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth Affected by the News? A Qualitative Study. *J Adolesc Health*. 2020 Apr;66(4):478-483. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.11.304. Epub 2020 Jan 18. PMID: 31964610.

A 2021 survey found that exposure to negative depictions of transgender people in the media was significantly associated with clinically significant symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD and global psychological distress.

Hughto, J., Pletta, D., Gordon, L., Cahill, S., Mimiaga, M. J., & Reisner, S. L. (2021). Negative Transgender-Related Media Messages Are Associated with Adverse Mental Health Outcomes in a Multistate Study of Transgender Adults. *LGBT health*, 8(1), 32–41. <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0279>

02 Research, cont'd.



Importance of online connectedness for TGD youth

There are many, many studies that demonstrate the importance and value of online connections with other LGBTQIA+ people for TGD youth, for purposes of identity formation, information sharing, social connection, and as a protective factor against minority stress and other negative mental health outcomes.

Doyle DM, Begeny CT, Barreto M, Morton TA. Identity-Related Factors Protect Well-Being Against Stigma for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People. *Arch Sex Behav*. 2021 Oct;50(7):3191-3200. doi: 10.1007/s10508-021-02029-1. Epub 2021 Oct 6. PMID: 34613539; PMCID: PMC8563541.

Austin A, Goodman R. The Impact of Social Connectedness and Internalized Transphobic Stigma on Self-Esteem Among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults. *J Homosex*. 2017;64(6):825-841. doi: 10.1080/00918369.2016.1236587. Epub 2016 Sep 15. PMID: 27633046.

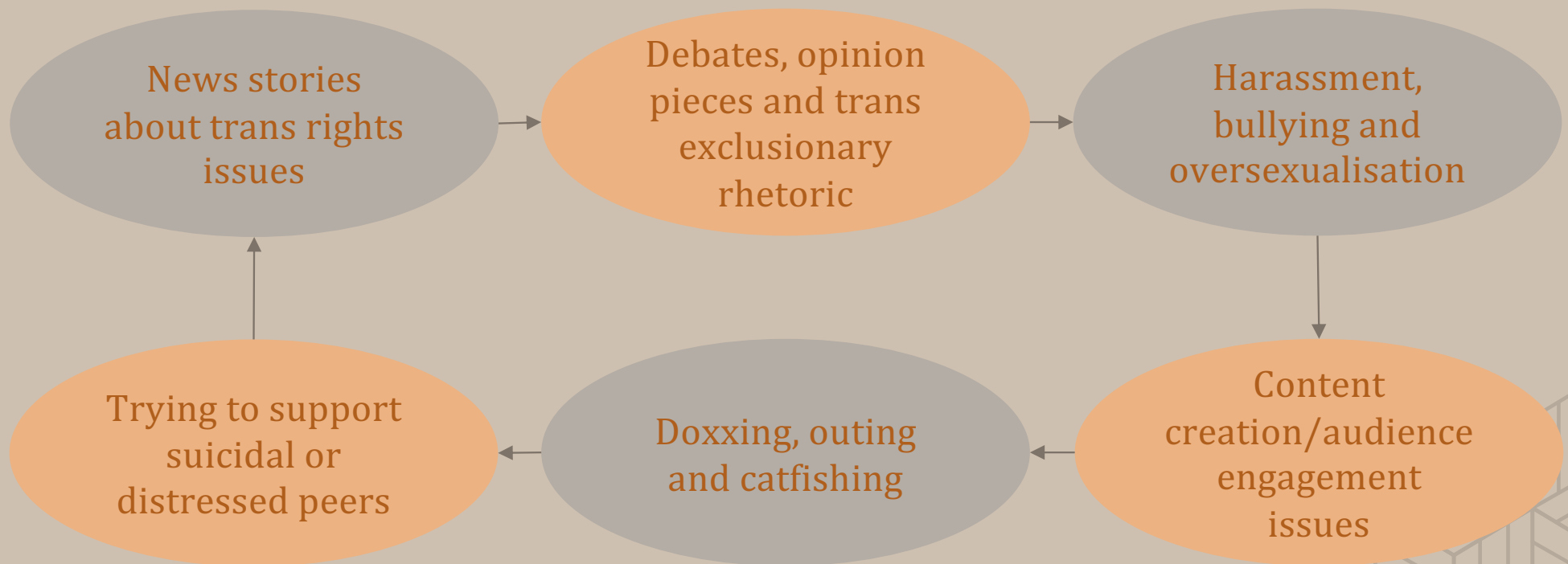
GLSEN, CiPHR, & CCRC (2013). *Out online: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth on the Internet*. New York: GLSEN.

Michele L. Ybarra, Kimberly J. Mitchell, Neal A. Palmer, Sari L. Reisner, Online social support as a buffer against online and offline peer and sexual victimization among U.S. LGBT and non-LGBT youth, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Volume 39, 2015, Pages 123-136, ISSN 0145-2134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.08.006>.

Selkie, Ellen et al. Transgender Adolescents' Uses of Social Media for Social Support, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 66, Issue 3, 275 – 280.

Jesse Fox, Rachel Ralston, Queer identity online: Informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 65, 2016, Pages 635-642, ISSN 0747-5632.

03 Mapping the trends



03 Mapping the trends, cont'd.



News stories
about trans rights
issues

As transgender people receive more attention and coverage in the news, young TGD people are **increasingly exposed to news stories** (both true and false) about various issues pertaining to **trans rights and access**, including:

- Rules about participation of **transgender athletes** in professional, amateur and school sports
- Laws governing **access to bathrooms**, changing rooms, and other public facilities
- Accessibility of **medical transition** for trans people, especially trans youth
- **Murders/suicides** of trans people, or **statistics about adverse outcomes** for transgender people.

These stories can create stress for young people questioning their place in the world, can influence the opinions of parents and others in the young person's life, and can also lead to others raising these issues or talking points with trans youth in other contexts, such as school, social media, etc.

03 Mapping the trends, cont'd.



Debates, opinion pieces and trans exclusionary rhetoric

Alongside the news stories, trans youth are frequently exposed to **“debates” about the validity of their identities and lived experiences**, as well as in some cases highly **vitriolic opinions about trans people, their bodies, their mental state, and their parents and loved ones**. Overtly trans exclusionary rhetoric appears to be increasingly mainstream, and does trickle down to young people. It is not uncommon for this rhetoric to frame even very young transfeminine people as predators and deviants, and transmasculine people as misguided and self-loathing.

This can cause young TGD people to feel **exposed, reviled, unsafe and uncertain about their future**. This rhetoric can also be internalised, which produces shame and can prevent young people from coming out or transitioning.

It also **normalises the idea that the existence of trans people, especially young trans people, and their access to medical care, legal rights and social inclusion, are contentious issues open to debate and questioning**. This then increases the exposure of trans people to these questions IRL.

An illustration on the left side of the slide depicts a digital network. At the bottom, a man stands next to a large laptop screen displaying a 'WORLD CONNECTION' interface, while a woman sits on the laptop's base. Above them, numerous circular avatars of diverse people are connected by dashed lines, suggesting an online community. A grey oval with orange text is superimposed on this network.

03 Mapping the trends, cont'd.

Harassment,
bullying and
oversexualisation

Young TGD people seek community and connection online, and this can be vital for finding support, understanding and information. However, **being out online, even in trans-specific spaces, can create certain risks.**

Many TGD teens report receiving **trolling or abusive comments on social media about their looks, “passability” or identity**, sometimes in an extremely high volume – in some cases hundreds of messages a day, many of them from adult strangers. Many are also **oversexualised or fetishized non-consensually, or receive death and rape threats.**

This bullying and harassment can come from people known to the young person in real life, or can be targeted based on their mere existence as a trans person online.

Unsurprisingly, being bombarded with hateful comments can profoundly **damage a young person’s self-esteem and self-image**, and can lead to very fearful engagement with the outside world.

03 Mapping the trends, cont'd.



Content
creation/audience
engagement
issues

The illustration on the left depicts a digital network. It features a large laptop in the foreground with a screen displaying 'WORLD CONNECTION' and various data points. Above the laptop, numerous circular icons represent diverse people, connected by dashed lines, symbolizing a global digital community. An orange oval is superimposed over the middle of the image, containing the text 'Content creation/audience engagement issues'.

Many young people also use online platforms to **create and distribute content**, sometimes as a source of income, as a way of sharing their experiences, or as an outlet for their creativity.

Online platforms like TikTok and YouTube use algorithms to direct traffic to different creators and to manage content moderation, and TGD people are often impacted in negative ways.

Algorithms trained to maximise engagement **don't distinguish between transphobic audiences and transgender audiences**, and will direct both groups to trans content. This often leads to young trans creators being **swamped with negative comments and feedback**.

Additionally, standards of moderation can **prevent trans people from being able to discuss bodies, medical transition, and items like binders, packers, breast forms, etc.** without being **blocked, demonetised or age-restricted to adult audiences**. This affects both trans creators and young trans people seeking out this type of information.

Doxxing, outing
and catfishing

03 Mapping the trends, cont'd.

- “Doxxing” refers to having information about your real identity, location, image, etc. leaked online against your will or without your permission. **Trans people can be vulnerable to doxxing and threats of doxxing**, especially those who may be “stealth”, may live in places where it is unsafe or illegal to be trans, or who may not be out to everybody in their lives IRL. Leaking **pre-transition pictures, deadnames, and medical information** are all examples of doxxing that some trans people experience.
- Similarly, outing can be a huge fear for trans people, and malicious actors online can **out or threaten to out people** if they can find any information about family members, employers, schools, etc.
- “Catfishing” refers to **posing as somebody else or manufacturing an identity online to initiate contact or a relationship**. Trans youth can be vulnerable to people posing as other young trans individuals, accessing trans online spaces and initiating relationships with **a broad spectrum of possible harms** (soliciting/sending pics, encouraging self-harm/suicide, gathering information later used in doxxing/threats/outing, etc.)

03 Mapping the trends, cont'd.



Trying to support
suicidal or
distressed peers

TGD youth who are active online in trans spaces often report **befriending and attempting to support depressed and often suicidal people within their communities.**

This can provide a sense of connection and meaning, as well as a **peer support network** they themselves can be supported by in difficult times. However it can also be a stressor, as young people **attempt to support or rescue others from suicide, or help them manage their mental health, without training, resources or skills** behind them.

This can also lead to a **perception of trans suicide as inevitable or inescapable**, and of life as a TGD person as exceptionally hard and perhaps not worth living.

It can also lead to **guilt, grief and vicarious trauma**, especially in cases where others end up completing suicide.

04 Case examples

Example 1: The Content Creator

- CC, 18, has been making **popular online content intended for a trans/questioning/allied audience** for 4 years. Initially a hobby, content creation is now their career and **only source of income**.
- Their audience now contains a lot of people using **trans-exclusionary rhetoric, trolls, and people who fetishise transgender bodies**. CC believes this is due in part to YouTube's algorithm pushing their content to both very friendly and very hostile audiences for views.
- They have been inundated with a constant stream of **transphobic abuse, death threats and rape threats**. Their **appearance is picked apart** and their **identity is dismissed** as "being a transtrender". Their **family members have also received harassment and threats**.
- They also experience **adulation, overfamiliarity and occasional blowback** from their largely quite young trans audience, and feel stressed about living up to the expectations of this audience.
- They present with **suicidal ideation, hyperfixation on their image, burnout, and alienation from self**. They have often felt afraid to leave the house due to a feeling that everybody is looking at them and knows who they are, or that somebody will follow through on the death threats. Their family wants them to stop making content, but they do not want to do so.



Image credit: Benz Alonzo

04 Case examples, cont'd.

Example 2: The News Reader

- NR, 12, is not allowed to use social media, but uses the internet to engage with **news and information on trans issues, and content by trans creators**. Their parents remove access when they are concerned about NR's mental health. As a result, NR **no longer shares anything they encounter online with their parents**.
- NR reads **news and commentary about transgender issues**, and is anxious about the rights and status of trans people in the world. They are **worried about the future and feel the world is against them**. They are angered by reading commentary and **opinion pieces which argue against these rights** or which take an alarmist tone about trans youth.
- They report that **when these stories are in the news, other kids will approach them with questions** and opinions on trans issues. NR feels dread about being **expected to have all the answers**, and feels **frightened by how much influence these stories seem to have**. Their own participation in school sports, bathroom use and uniform have been contentious issues which have created a need for them to advocate for themselves continually.
- The internet helps them **find ways to articulate their needs in these difficult conversations**. They also feel **unwilling to look away from these stories**, as they don't want to be ambushed at school by talking points they're unfamiliar with. However, the news causes them a lot of **anxiety, anger and stress**. They also report that they occasionally feel **compelled to engage in "digital self-harm"** by deliberately reading trans-exclusionary sites that cause them to feel a lot of pain and dysphoria..



04 Case examples, cont'd.

Example 3: The Supportive Peer

- SP is a 15-year-old trans girl who is very comfortable and accepted in her identity and presentation as a girl. SP is **very active on trans Discord servers, Twitch channels and subreddits**, and **plays a role as a kind of supportive peer and friend for other young trans people**. She sees herself as being very privileged and lucky in comparison with most other trans youth, and wants to use her position to help and support other people. She does this largely via chatting and gaming with people, listening to them and providing advice.
- Many of the people she speaks to online are **suicidal, and describe living situations that appear hopeless and inescapable**. SP has stayed up all night on many occasions **trying to dissuade people from self-injuring or attempting to end their lives**. She feels immense guilt and stress. SP has begun to develop a **perception that trans suicide is inevitable** and that trans life is perhaps not worth living. While this is not her own experience, she has now developed a fear of ending her life.
- In addition, she has realised that some of the people she has engaged with are **likely not actually trans teens**, but are either “**catfishing**” her or **feigning being in continual crisis to receive care and support on the internet**. One person urged her over weeks and months to engage in self-harm, ultimately without success, but not without causing her psychological harm. She is very stressed and frightened about her pictures and personal information being used against her, and feels unsure who she can trust. However, she doesn't want to stop providing support and friendship to trans people online, as she feels she also benefits from these relationships and that they give her a sense of purpose.



Image credit: Getty Images

04 Case examples, cont'd.

Example 4: The Instagram Girl



Image credit: socialmediaweek.org

- IG, 17, is **not out as a trans girl to anybody in her life**. She posted tame selfies on a **private Instagram of her dressed up in “girlmode”** without showing her face, and her profile explicitly stated that she was underage. Her profile was **inundated by creepy, oversexualising comments and messages** from adult men. She became argumentative with some of the commenters, and as a response, someone decided to **doxx her and threaten to out her to her family and friends**.
- She now feels **unable to enjoy exploring clothes and makeup**, as she has **internalised the comments stating she is a “pervert” and a “predator”**. She is mortified about her own sexuality and doesn't want to think about it. She is concerned that if she transitions she will be **unable to escape an objectified image of trans women** she sees as being informed and constructed by trans porn.
- IG **blames herself** and berates herself for “attention seeking”. She is **depressed and withdrawn**, and she is **afraid that transitioning is no longer an option** for her. She believes the information the trolls have is accurate and would be enough to out her, although she doesn't know how they found it. Nothing has happened yet, but **she lives in fear of being outed to her family**.

05 Questions for discussion



Risk assessment

How do you perceive the level of risk for this client?

What questions might you need to ask for a more comprehensive risk assessment?



Impacts

What do you see as the possible short-, mid-, and long-term impacts of this kind of exposure for this individual?

How might the positive impacts of the internet for this client be utilised or increased?



Interventions

How might you best support this client?

What are some potential protective/resilience factors?

How might you navigate parental involvement in this case?

06 How can practitioners help?

Ask your clients

Ask about online habits and experiences, and provide a safe and non-judgmental space in which clients can discuss and process them.

Take it seriously

Treat online life as real, and don't minimise experiences or relationships that occur online. Consider how other intersections may be in play.

Don't be alarmist

Parents often overreact, leading to young people not talking to them about the internet. Ask about positive impacts, and work on enhancing these also.

Know a little bit

Try to keep somewhat abreast of broader trends in social media, and research things clients mention.

Talk safety

Initiate discussions and share resources about online safety and boundary setting.

Psychoeducation

About the difference between online behavioural norms and real life attitudes.

06 How can practitioners help?, cont'd



- Help clients explore and understand the effects of stigma and minority stress, and ways of counteracting it.
- Have honest and realistic conversations with young people about news stories and political developments in trans rights and access.
- Before involving parents, make sure you understand the client's wishes and what they feel is at stake. Collaborate to find solutions where possible.

- Don't dismiss or minimise young people's concerns about political developments, and don't shy away from discussing serious issues or potential impacts. Provide additional context where you can.



Conclusions

- Internet and social media use is both arguably more important for TGD youth and also potentially riskier or more harmful, due to the potential for constant exposure to transphobia, negative news stories and commentary, and targeted harassment and abuse.
 - Use of technology by teens is only going to increase, and as mental health practitioners we need to take it seriously and understand it, and equip young people to use it as safely as possible.
 - The best way to do this is to ask young people about their tech use and listen to the answers!
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Find me here!

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