

# Trance-Gender

## Working with Transgender Clients in a Professional Hypnosis Practice

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WholeHealth Publishing  
Seattle, WA  
2024

Trance-Gender: Working With Transgender Clients in a Professional  
Hypnosis Practice

First Edition 2024  
by WholeHealth Publishing  
the imprint of WholeHealth Hypnosis  
9451 35<sup>th</sup> AVE SW, Ste. 200  
Seattle, WA 98126  
[www.WholeHealth.today](http://www.WholeHealth.today)

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ISBN 978-1-304-74010-6  
Printed in the USA by Lulu.com for WholeHealth Publishing

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# Contents

*Foreword* by Samuel Lurie

Author's Note.....	1
Introduction.....	5
Chapter 1: What is Transgender?.....	13
Gender Identity.....	21
Intersectionality.....	24
‘The Gender Unicorn’.....	25
Biology, Categories, and Spectra.....	30
Muddying the Waters.....	37
Beyond the Binary.....	39
Generational Differences.....	42
What Trans is Not.....	52
In Summary.....	55
Why Hypnosis?.....	58
Already in Hypnosis.....	58
Needs Not Being Met.....	64
Chapter 2. Helping Clients Through Transition.....	69
Part I: Issues In Transitioning	
Transitioning(s).....	69
Psycho-Emotional Issues in Transitioning.....	75
Somatic (Body) Issues in Transitioning.....	86
Part II – Strategic Considerations	
Resilience.....	93
Enlarging Resilience in the Client.....	97
Resilience for the Hypnotist.....	101
Safety is the Therapy.....	102
Rapport.....	104
Part III: Techniques.....	111
Chapter 3: Helping Transgender Clients Generally.....	121
Pronouns in Regression and Development.....	121

Establishing Trust.....	125
Concrete Steps for Your Practice.....	127
Identity as Self-Concept & Imposed Category.....	135
<b>Chapter 4: How Working with Transgender Clients</b>	
Benefits Cisgender Practitioners.....	141
Glossary.....	153
Appendix: Gender in Jung’s Psychology.....	159
Further Reading & Professional Development.....	169
About the Author.....	177

### **Case Studies**

Case Study: Gender Dysmorphia & Body Image.....	43
Case Study: Gender Dysphoria & Euphoria.....	46
Case Study: Helping a Parent Overcome Reluctance.....	56
Case Study: Accepting One’s Gender Identity.....	78
Case Study: Alleviating Anxiety over Social Transition.....	87

### **Special Notes**

Narrative Intelligence.....	19
Difference in Sex Development (DSD).....	32
Paradigm, Pragmatism & Truth.....	38
Alternative Genders.....	48
Alternative Pronouns.....	50
“Only 90% Male”.....	52
Stigma & Multiple Minority Identities.....	61
Points for Working With Trans Clients.....	67
Gender-Affirming Hormone Therapy.....	71
Questions for Cis Practitioners.....	109
Potential Space.....	126
Identity.....	137
Relational Ethics.....	148
Transgender & Intersex.....	155

# Foreword

by Samuel Lurie, LICSW, MSW, MEd, CHt

## Refreshing and Essential

I was so excited when Christian Skoorsmith asked me to write the foreword for this book because it is written in much the same way I experience him: thoughtful, kind, and smart. I am impressed that Christian created this book, a remarkably comprehensive yet accessible overview combining issues of transgender experiences and hypnosis. After he asked, I sat with the task of writing this for some time because this is also very personal to me. As a dedicated hypnotherapist and a transgender man, this speaks deeply to my place and work in the world. I feel an alignment with this exact work and spent time reading and appreciating the layers of *Trance-Gender*. In this work, Christian offers his own developed knowledge on trans issues, a wonderful set of hypnosis skills, and a deep, profound labor of love that now adds to the resources for practitioners working with trans people. He provides a great deal of information and history, smoothly consolidated and easily digestible, but also directly helpful. All with the central theme and tenet of hypnosis: help your client see that they are lovable.

While recognizing that transgender and gender non-conforming people bear a particular burden, more so in our current climate with many states passing laws that ban access to healthcare and participation in public life, how we dress or play, even barring access to public restrooms, Christian centers the experience of trans people with compassion. Recognizing that trans people are apt to have increased levels of pain, anxiety and trauma, he emphasizes how to use skills we already have as hypnotherapists, that we are already equipped to address issues of shame, feelings of being unworthy or not good enough. Moreover, it is crucial—and satisfying—to direct healing work to trans people specifically.

Christian and I first met through the National Guild of Hypnotists convention, where we both have been on the faculty. We connected after he presented on trans issues, bringing this important and sensitive topic to an audience that operated largely outside of any activist or political scope. In my life outside of hypnosis, I have worked in public health and transgender healthcare for over 20 years, so I often attended conferences where participants were seeking education on better serving marginalized groups. I ran a business called Transgender Training and Advocacy where I trained over 30,000 providers in 30 states on working with trans people. I have also taught courses on how to design and deliver these kinds of trainings and often looked for different resources to help participants strengthen their competency and confidence in serving trans people in their own professional areas. *Trance-Gender* does this powerfully well, and I am so pleased that there is now this resource in the field where I practice my own healing work.

In this book, Christian offers an excellent overview of key concepts of gender-affirming care: challenging gender binaries, distinguishing between sexuality and gender identity, obtaining informed consent, recognizing diversity within the trans community, rejecting pathologizing stereotypes and suggesting specific ways to make our actual practice environment more trans-inclusive.

Christian uses his own experiences to explore the inherent vulnerability for practitioners in this work, in looking at ways we may flounder or feel fragile ourselves. He acknowledges that there is always a risk when building trust, that rapport can be broken through small missteps, as simple as getting a name or pronoun wrong, yet he models the value in working through these missteps, teaching us to “get good at rupture and repair” because of its deep value in demonstrating the actual experience of healing.

Another way he shares his own vulnerability is through an honest reflection on his own gender identity, ways he has felt judged (or internalized shame) for “not being masculine enough” and how he has grown in understanding how social construction of



binary genders often limits everyone, not just those who identify as transgender or gender diverse. This self-reflection and self-awareness is essential for practitioners to do this work.

Christian's own kindness, openness and non-judgmental approach is contagious and a wonderful advertisement for the effectiveness of hypnosis techniques. He is guiding readers to incorporate skills they already have to support client growth, using strategies for ego-strengthening, confidence building, emotional regulation, expressing and transforming anger, exploring root causes, establishing safety, and visualizing a joyful future self.

For readers who may not know as much about hypnosis, the layered and confident approaches here should certainly draw your interest. Christian also cites other psychotherapy approaches which overlap with hypnosis such as Jungian analysis, Gestalt dialogue, Internal Family Systems and general somatic and mindfulness techniques. He clearly finds a geeky joy in exploring different theories and integrating them to create his unique voice and approach.

I also want to take a moment to speak to trans and gender non-conforming folks who may be reading this book: You may find this book a tool that helps explain your experience to others, including counselors or therapists. If you are a practitioner yourself, or aspiring to be, you may find this helpful for building your own clinical toolbox. You may also find yourself drawn to hypnosis as a methodology, an added benefit of this book. As more of us are becoming practitioners, we are helping to bring so much more capacity and joy to this work.

Finally, I want to speak to joy, and especially to trans joy. To honor the movement from dysphoria to euphoria. To not only coming to a place of self-acceptance, but to a place of excitement and love and seeing our own beauty radiate and shine and benefit the world. The antidote to brokenness and pain is joy and, even if temporary, it has the key to meaning making, survival, and connection. When those of us who provide therapeutic hypnosis help a client find access to that joy, that moment of core belief of

worthiness and safety, we are part of a long line of healers helping to change the world, one person at a time.

In creating *Trance-Gender*, Christian Skoorsmith has given us something refreshing and essential. To read this unapologetic, deeply compassionate and inspiring guide for providing affirming, healing transformative care to transgender people is a gift and I truly thank Christian for creating it.

April, 2024

Samuel Lurie, LICSW, MSW, MEd, CHT

- Certified hypnotherapist with Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis
- Member, World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH)

## Author's Note

In the Autumn of 2019, I gave a one-hour presentation at the National Guild of Hypnotists' annual education conference in Marlborough, Massachusetts, on working with transgender clientele – the first such presentation in the history of the NGH. Fewer than a dozen people attended, but were thankful that these kinds of topics were being raised. The following year, I was invited to expand it to two hours, and more people came. A colleague of mine, a transgender hypnotist himself, joined me in team-teaching the workshop. When he and I presented the workshop again, it was to a packed room, and people stayed well into their lunch break afterwards with questions and stories of their own. A magical community was unfolding before our eyes.

Since that first presentation, I have spoken to audiences across the country and around the world, in-person and online, for short talks and longer workshops, about hypnosis with transgender clients. These haven't been stadiums full of people, but the attendees have always been engaged, curious, sincere, and caring people. This openness and curiosity among hypnotists seems to reflect a growing sensibility in our (Western) culture more broadly.

As a result of my work with transgender clients and sharing this information with my colleagues, I have been introduced to some amazing professionals who have contributed to the curriculum that has been distilled into this book. I cannot thank all of them enough, but I would be remiss if I didn't name a few of them specifically.

Aiden Key, founder and director of Gender Diversity, was a large part of my first, formative experiences in the transgender community. He took time to walk me through a lot, hosts both the Gender Odyssey conference and support groups for families of transgender persons, and consulted with me early on in making a

hypnosis practice a welcome and responsive space for transgender clients. His work as an advocate, guide, trainer, and model for transgender awareness and health is moving and inspiring.

Robert Fried is an absolute gem, a bubbly, supportive person, and has been an encouraging, guiding influence on work with trans clients from nearly the very beginning. His wife, Joann Abrahamsen Fried, has been a joyful thorn in my side to produce this book. Samuel Lurie is a deeply-informed and compassionate clinician and a lovely person, and provided invaluable feedback on much of the information that has shaped this book. His guidance has made an enormous difference. Erica Flint is a shining mentor and a good person. I appreciate her candor, openness, and integrity in so many ways, not the least of which are several ongoing conversations related directly and indirectly to this work.

Although he is neither a hypnotist nor active in transgender circles, Gregory Flynn has consistently provided a challenging and safe space for me (and others) to wrestle with aspects of masculinity, male-bodied-ness, and internalized white supremacy culture. This work, while not directly related to hypnosis with transgender clients, has informed, expanded, and shaped my understanding of gender generally, and compassionately holding space for the troubling experience of diving deep on it, particularly.

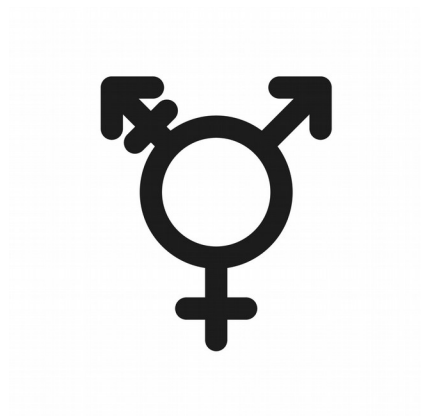
My wife, Christie Skoorsmith, deserves more credit than I can articulate for her support of me and my work, for her presence of mind and sense of integrity, for her adventurousness as a partner, mother, social change agent, and friend. She is the real source of wonder behind this material and our family's journeys in gender identity. Her intelligence and instincts continue to shape our family and the world for the better.

My children, each in their own fashion, have also shaped this book, which in key ways started with them, their journeys and those of their peers. Being a father to such wonderful human

beings is an inexpressible privilege. I hope with this book I can make the world they are entering some measure better.

I also wish to thank the NGH for accepting that first proposal – from an untested speaker on an unusual topic – and for continuing to be a place where many ideas from many perspectives can still be discussed in earnest.

And you, dear Reader, I thank you. I know there are many ways you can be spending your time, there are many demands on your attention. That you have decided that this topic is important enough for you to spend your energies with the issues, questions, and challenges of this book and the opportunities in this wonderfully beautiful community, is tremendously heartwarming and encouraging. Thank you.



# Introduction

My wife and I had just dropped off our three kids at the childcare/activity area for the second day of the conference. In our first real exposure to transgender experience, information, and community, we found ourselves at Gender Odyssey, one of the largest transgender conventions on the West Coast. To say it was overwhelming would be an understatement. So much new data, perspective, and more questions around every corner. It was upsetting in the very best ways. We were there because members of our family had been expressing (persistently and consistently) gender expansive behaviors and desires, and we had no idea what we didn't know. While our kids were playing crafts, listening to children's books with all kinds of different characters being read by an elderly mermaid in a wheelchair, and dressing up with costumes that were not divided into boys' and girls', we were in the deep end of an entirely new ocean. Between clinicians, panels, life stories, struggles and challenges and affirmation, we were just trying to take it all in.

We were in a line outside a room waiting to be let in for an upcoming speaker. In front of us were some Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a charitable and street-performance group that uses drag and religious imagery to satirize sexual prudery. Behind us was a fairy – not a pejorative term, a male-presenting person dressed as a fairy (like Tinkerbell) complete with big wings and mischievous smile. The Sisters turned around and in their characteristic enthusiasm and boldness engaged the three of us (me, my wife, and the fairy) in conversation. We chatted. I asked questions about their Order. We complimented the daily – sometimes hourly – outfit changes of the fairy. They asked about us. At some point I commented that we look fairly straight-laced and boring, and that I am not accustomed to being the most conservative person in the room.

The Abbess reached out and touched my arm. She said, “Honey, you be you. There’s room here for everyone to be their beautiful selves.” In that moment something in me melted. All the questions, concerns, anxieties – about our family, about this community I was just becoming aware of, about these people I was beginning to love, about my own ability to be the parent/ally/advocate/person they needed me to be for them – it all sank to the floor around me. I almost cried. I was welcomed into a community that a few months earlier I did not know existed, and that I had no expectation of belonging in/to/with. In that jeweled moment, I had a sense that I had been found.

That was ten years ago now. My family has continued on their personal journeys and we have as parents. It was about the time I was growing into awareness of the dynamics and needs of the transgender community, that I was personally and professionally growing in the direction of hypnotherapy. As I trained and expanded in understanding the depth and power of well-done hypnotherapy, I knew that I wanted to marshal those tools to particularly benefit transgender clients. It was a natural intersection of several streams for me, even as it was the beginning of a long journey of its own.

Perhaps it was because of my children, or perhaps living in Seattle and the more open culture of the urban Pacific Northwest, or maybe simply witnessing the increasingly public consciousness of younger generations, but the necessity of being prepared to work with transgender clientele seemed obvious. No one, however, among the established hypnotists at the conventions I attended, was talking about it. So, I started with offering a one-hour presentation at a national hypnosis conference. The next year, expanded it to a two-hour workshop, and the room was packed. As a result of these seminars, I was befriended by a hypnotist who is himself transgender and a delightful person, Robert Fried. The following year Robert and I team-taught the



class together, and it seemed the perfect blend of ‘information’ (my part, from a cis/ally point of view) and ‘formation’ (his lived experience and perspective). In the years since, I have been invited to present on hypnosis with transgender clients at other hypnosis events, from St. Louis, Missouri, to Melbourne, Australia. These led to more conversations, more introductions, more information and perspective and stories.

The result is what you hold in your hands. I imagine my best work with transgender clients to be much the same: a container for them to share and discover who they really are.

Before diving into the content, it is prudent and important to lay some groundwork. Foremost, this work is explicitly and unrepentantly *affirming*. By which, I mean that this material assumes we are working with clients to affirm their best selves as they are discovering/discerning and creating themselves to be. This work is expressly *not* ‘conversion therapy’ or in any way trying to make a transgender person ‘not-trans.’

First, as hypnotists we know that we cannot force someone to do something they do not want to do. Hypnosis is not mind-control. It is incongruous with ethical hypnosis to attempt ‘re-programming’ someone in this way. Whatever a practitioner’s or client’s understanding of the origins of transgender identity to be (neurology, chemistry, experience, choice, etc.), it is not appropriate for a hypnotist to attempt a contravention.

Second, it is not only unethical to attempt ‘conversion therapy’ – attempting to ‘convert’ someone from being transgender – it is increasingly illegal in the United States. Conversion therapies are largely discredited and shown to have little ‘positive’ effect and do a great deal of harm to individuals. If you are looking for a resource to help you change someone from being transgender, this book will not be helpful at all.

I emphasize this point because, of all the material on my website ([www.WholeHealth.today](http://www.WholeHealth.today)), a blog post I made several

years ago about hypnosis for transgender clients consistently gets the most visitors every month. By a lot. Occasionally, I get a parent asking if I can help ‘cure’ their child, so they clearly haven’t read the article. It may be presumptuous, but I suspect that so many people come to the article but never contact me about hypnotherapy after reading it, because a good deal of them are probably hoping for something different, more along the lines of ‘conversion.’ There is still a great deal of misinformation out there about ‘conversion therapy,’ about being transgender, and about hypnosis, so I take pains to clarify this at the outset. I trust you understand.

I believe that hypnosis is most effective when it is directed at empowering people to be their most authentic selves. I say that without judgment or preconception. Whatever a client can believe themselves to be, after the negativity, trauma responses, shame, and habitual reactions have been stripped away, *that* is the voice I want them to listen to and lean into. With weight-loss clients, sometimes that ends up looking like simply loving themselves as they are, living a lifestyle that is healthy for them, apart from any social expectations or shame. With smoking-cessation clients, sure, quitting smoking is part of it, but almost always there is the recognition that whatever guilt or trauma or negative belief that underlay the habit of smoking is the really important wound to heal. Similarly, I do not make preformed judgments about transgender people, where they are, how they identify themselves, or where their journey is taking them. My concern is helping them to be integrated and authentic.

Transgender people are *people*. They can benefit in the same way(s) from hypnotherapy that most any person can. Hypnosis that helps *anyone* become a healthier, more integrated person is effort well spent.

It should also be said that working with transgender clients has been personally rewarding in many ways. Each individual continues to expand my awareness of the amazing

diversity of human experience and perspective. They challenge me in important ways – when I feel surprise or physical tension or judgment rising in me, it is a gift to me to become aware of this element of my unconscious I had not known was there. It sharpens my sense of curiosity, I consider ‘leaning in’ a skill that can be developed. It is also powerfully heartwarming to witness people genuinely loving themselves as they are – true in any context and with any stripe of human being, but especially so, I find, with transgender clients, given so many messages to the contrary that they must overcome in order to feel the truth of their inherent and unalterable lovability. Even though I am not transgender, when I am speaking to my clients and working with their wounds and struggles, I am also speaking to a part of myself that has felt alienated, negated, bullied, or dismissed, and having the earnest occasion to articulate these things over and over is a balm to my soul too. When considering working with transgender clients, do not overlook this delicate and precious aspect.

On a more commercial level, for the professional hypnotist, working with transgender or gender-expansive clients is an explosive growth market. It varies region to region, surely, but as our (United States) culture moves into more freedom and awareness on the issues of transgender identity and human rights, it will only be more beneficial for practitioners to be positioned to provide skilled, compassionate, informed assistance to the transgender community. ‘Acceptance’ of transgender identity has its own dynamics, baggage, and timeline in our civilization – tied to many things that are not necessary but nonetheless influential, such as politics, economics, laws, religion, and so on. Nevertheless, despite virulent and sometimes violent efforts to deny it, it seems that the clock cannot be rolled back and the journey of our national dialog will continue to progress toward inclusion and respect.

From a strictly economic point of view, it pays for hypnosis professionals to be versed in the elementary dynamics of transgender identity and issues. If you have not already, if you are in practice for any amount of time you no doubt will have transgender clientele. Being explicitly supportive of transgender clients also sends a welcoming message to all sorts of ‘othered’ categories of people that have been underserved in our culture. These are people who will want to come to your practice.

Also, transgender individuals are in need of help (just like all humans) but have encountered stiff and harsh resistance in too many places. Having a helping-professional take the time and effort to prepare to help them is a tremendous gift. The trans community is tight and communicative, so a proficient and welcoming professional will benefit from their clients’ connections and referrals.

Hypnosis is best when we help people become their best selves. Anyone coming to hypnosis deserves that confidence, hope, and agenda. Transgender people are no different.

Allow me to expand on one important note of clarification: I am not transgender. So when I speak in this book about these issues and dynamics it is from the point of view of an ally, not a member of that community. I have training and experience working with transgender clients and I have personal experience walking with close family members through some of that journey. For this book, particularly, I have consulted with transgender colleagues, clinicians, and service providers. I also work hard to stay abreast of current psychological and medical research and applications, being active among licensed professionals who specialize in working with transgender clients. However, all of my discussion is from the perspective of a cisgender ally and provider.

In opening a conversation about working with transgender clients in hypnosis, it might help to clarify the topic. If you are anything like I was before members of my family expressed gender-expansiveness, you might not know hardly anything real about the transgender community. That is OK. That is in large part what this book is for. Let us begin, therefore, with a short (and surely insufficient) survey of what we mean by 'transgender.'