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What is gender dysphoria anyway? (And who decided it had to be a thing?)



Tattie · [Follow](#)

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Reddit meme, May 2021, by the author

I introduced gender dysphoria in a previous article, “Body Positivity Whilst Trans”, as a fundamental feeling of discomfort with your body that can’t

simply be willed away through positive thinking. I also mentioned in that article not understanding at first that I *did* experience this sort of discomfort, because I had a mistaken idea of what it was like.

I can't remember when I figured out that gender dysphoria was applicable to my own life— and so much of my own life! I guess it was more of a slow, dawning realisation than anything else. But it didn't begin to really click until I began talking to other trans people about their experiences. One of the things I did during the immediate lead-up to my transition was to join Reddit and subscribe to trans subreddits. One of the ones most helpful to me was the trans meme subreddit r/traaaaaaannnnnnnnns — r/traa for short.

As I write this, r/traa is one of the subreddits which has gone permanently dark as a result of the disastrous new Reddit policies on third-party tools, making moderation of many subreddits nearly impossible. Many trans subreddits are suffering the same fate, and it's hard to overstate what a massive and important community is being lost, or at least dispersed to the four winds. I can only encourage any lost Redditors reading this to join me on Mastodon/Fediverse.

The r/traa community were quick to point me to the [Gender Dysphoria Bible](#), an online project that correlates and catalogues experiences of gender dysphoria from trans people all over the internet. The Gender Dysphoria Bible takes the concept of dysphoria further than just a relationship with your body. Alongside physical dysphoria it has sections on

biochemical dysphoria (having a hormone balance that makes you feel less yourself), social dysphoria (being treated as the wrong gender), societal dysphoria (filling the wrong societal roles), sexual dysphoria (the wrong sexual and romantic dynamics), presentational dysphoria (the wrong clothes and presentation), and existential dysphoria (missing out on experiences associated with your true gender).

Some trans people speak of their first encounter with the Gender Dysphoria Bible as a life-changing revelation. I just found myself nodding and sighing a lot, and mumbling “yup, that tracks”. It was both validating and humbling; like a lot of ‘baby trans’ folks I was quietly convinced that my experiences were unique and different to anyone else’s. But they weren’t. Here was tweet after tweet of people thinking and feeling almost exactly the same thoughts I’d had over my lifetime.

I was not special. I was not uniquely broken. I was not alone.

A month after joining r/traa I had sorted out and catalogued my feelings of my own dysphoria enough to post them in meme format— as the image seen at the top of this article. The result of me posting this meme was a good chunk of upvotes and numerous responses asking “Wait? That’s all dysphoria?”

Well, obviously not everyone who is depressed or everyone who has social

anxiety has dysphoria. But for me, at least, all of these things stemmed from a deep discomfort with my body and the role I was expected to play in society. Shapeless clothing: an attempt to hide my body shape, its bulk and its linearity. Discomfort when showering: an unwillingness to confront my body in all its naked obviousness. Reluctance to exercise: because it makes me so aware of how disconnected I feel from my body, how it didn't even *move* right. (It wouldn't be until a year later that I discovered another factor in this, and that was the smell of my sweat when I was testosterone-dominant.) Comfort eating: I had been punishing my body by eating even when I wasn't hungry— a pattern which had started in puberty, and which went away almost overnight as I made the decision to transition.

Depression: caused by the absolute conviction that the life and body that I truly wanted were unattainable, and that the body which I currently lived in was as unloveable to everyone else as it was to me.

And finally social anxiety. This is something I explored with my counselor for months before figuring out: the root of my anxiety is basically the fear that I will be 'unmasked' as something I'm not. That mask was built up through a decade of bullying during my formative years at both school and home, being picked on both because of my 'weirdness' (i.e. my autism) and my 'girlyness' (i.e. my transness). My breakthrough moment in counseling was when I reached the conclusion that my fear of being unmasked at any moment was perhaps even worse than my fear at the prospect of walking around visibly trans.

All of these problems in my life, from minor nuisances to life-threatening conditions, I could trace back to gender dysphoria. But I recognised none of them as such until after I accepted that I could be— nay, probably was— trans. This is one of the reasons why I will always go to bat for the ‘you don’t need dysphoria to be trans’ position. Gender dysphoria makes for a terrible diagnostic criterion when you consider how many trans people have never lived a life when they *haven’t* experienced it. (Or at least never an adult life— a lot of these things for me started in puberty, and were all too easy to ascribe to the ‘growing pains’ of that phase of life.)

Another reason not to make dysphoria diagnostic is that an increasing number of trans people are understanding their transness through *euphoria* instead. These people tend to say things like “I’m not unhappy living as my gender assigned at birth, but it would make me a lot more happy living as a different gender instead.” I first encountered people like this through Reddit, many of them from a younger generation than myself, and it was a joy to see transition justified as maximising happiness rather than just minimising suffering.

Euphoria can be easier for a trans person to spot in themselves because it *is* something new. For that reason the r/traa community often urges people to “forget dysphoria, euphoria is the real proof that you are trans”. But I would argue that it would be a mistake to simply swap dysphoria for euphoria as the key diagnostic criterion for being trans. Thinking back to when I was at the lowest point of my life, suffering from terrible depression, I certainly wasn’t feeling euphoric when I indulged in my coping mechanisms of

dressing fem or fantasizing about being transformed. It just brought a little temporary relief from the grey featureless emotional landscape that I was existing in.

Plus, I skeptically wonder whether gender euphoria is not simply a 'glass half full' version of dysphoria. When people ask what euphoria feels like, I say "like the sun has finally come out from behind the clouds". But doesn't that imply a time of cloudedness, of cold and grey feelings? And the further into my transition I get, the less frequently and less emphatically this euphoria pops up. It's replaced by a contentedness, a *normality*— and the increasingly fierce insistence that I could never return to how I was.

More to the point, why do people still feel the need to define diagnostic criteria at all? Even the trans community still seems to be stuck thinking of being transgender as a medical condition, and specifically as one within the realm of psychiatry. This is an incredibly twentieth-century way of looking at trans people. Under this model, gender dysphoria is our defining characteristic, and since all attempts to cure dysphoria through psychiatric methods have proven fruitless, the only solution is to permit us to transition to the opposite gender.

What astounding cisnormativity in that! The unquestioned belief that society belongs to cis people, and that trans people are some sort of malfunctioning version of them, to be "permitted" to exist at the discretion

of the cis.

Medical science has moved on since then, but the attitudes to us and the stigmas around us have lagged behind, and even become worse in a lot of ways. We still have to fight our insurers or national health systems to be allowed to transition, put up with massive waiting times, or pay for it out of pocket— if it's even legal where we live. We are attacked by transphobic politicians seeking to legislate us out of existence, and a media that smears us with the most horrible libels. We are attacked on the streets and met with hostility and suspicion in communities.

With that in mind, is it any wonder that mental suffering is such a common trans experience? What if a large proportion of what we call gender dysphoria is simply trauma from growing up in a society fundamentally hostile to who we are?

If I hadn't felt a justifiable terror of how I would be treated if my transgender nature were to become known, would I have developed the social anxiety I did? If I knew there was a place for me in society regardless of my gender identity, that I would be accepted and loved for who I was, would I have developed depression? I can't see that I would have. So much of my mental health struggles come from a childhood of being told that my natural self was bad and shameful, that I had to be 'corrected', through force if necessary.

And what about the other four panels of the meme?

I've seen this train of thought taken to its ultimate extreme, arguing that *all* gender dysphoria stems from social pressure. It's not about our bodies at all, these people argue, or it wouldn't be, if society didn't equate bodies to gender. Proponents of this theory tend to be gender abolitionists, believing that all gendered social roles and stereotypes should be banished from society. If gender no longer existed, and sex differences considered entirely arbitrary, would anything resembling gender dysphoria exist? Could it exist?

Like many, I find this somewhat hard to reconcile with my experience of being trans. The incredible improvement in my life just from having appropriate hormones in my body doesn't feel socially constructed, it feels a lot more personal than that. I didn't transition for society, I did it to transform how I felt about myself. Such objections tend to be met with "yes, but you only feel that way about yourself because you weren't raised in a society without gender".

That's rather the problem. Nowhere in human history has such a society evolved, which raises the question of whether human nature even *allows* us to erase gender as a construct. Quite apart from the growing evidence of gender identity having a neurological basis, humanity is just far quicker to create new social categories around even the most arbitrary things than it is to erase them. If a genderless society is possible, a society where sexual differences are no more significant than the colour of your eyes, it may

require fundamental changes to the way we think. I don't begrudge the believers in this project their ambitions, but it seems to me like chasing a utopia, rather than focusing on the societies we do live in.

Regardless of how much of gender dysphoria is externally imposed, and how much is inherently linked to our bodies, there is a growing understanding that it is all essentially trauma. A much-boosted thread on Mastodon this year posited that much of what the trans community describes as "dysphoria" is better understood as complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD). Reading this was timely for me as I was just coming to terms with the fact that I did, in fact, suffer from that condition—something that my counselor had been heavily implying to me for some time, but which I never believed I was "suffering enough" for.

In fact, the author of that thread later asks, should the trans community even be using the phrase "gender dysphoria" at all, given its roots in medical gatekeeping? She suggests using "gender trauma" instead, making it sound less like something mysterious that we *have*, and more like a result of the things that we go through and that were done to us. After all, she points out, trauma is something that cis people can understand and relate to, even if they don't understand the nature of our trauma specifically.

Gender dysphoria. Gender euphoria. Gender trauma. Regardless of how we speak of it, is any of it actually *implicit* to being trans?

The Gender Dysphoria Bible doesn't only cover dysphoria. Its later sections cover the effects of masculinising and feminising HRT in some of the greatest detail ever collected in one place. Reading it at the age of thirty-nine, after I'd already decided that I'd be transitioning in some way, it struck me how much of it was completely new information to me. Almost everything I knew about medical transition before that had been focused on gender-affirming surgeries; something that had never really held much appeal for me.

It goes without saying that I had never learnt about cross-sex hormones in sex education at school. They hadn't even mentioned gay people, let alone trans people.

I wondered earlier how my mental health would have been different had society not held such prejudice against trans people. What if, on top of this, I had been given accurate information about transgender medical care, been told that blockers and hormones existed and were available for anyone who felt that they might not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth? Would I still have lain awake at night wondering *what the hell is wrong with me?* If I had felt that the fate of my body was within my control, would I ever have developed the same revulsion for it, tried to hide it away, dissociated so I didn't have to think about it, developed disordered eating habits?

I don't believe I would have.

We don't need to abolish gender in order for trans people to be happy. Only for our existence to be normalised, and autonomy granted over our bodies.

That is of course the exact nightmare of Republicans, conservatives, TERFs, and countless other groups of transphobes. They scoff: how can a *child* be trusted to make such a drastic decision over their body? They accuse: you're just brainwashing kids into thinking they are trans, they will inevitably regret it later!

And you can calmly show them all the data you want pointing out the incredibly low regret rate for gender affirming treatments, and it will matter not one jot. To these people, even one cis person mistakenly thinking they are trans is a tragedy that outweighs the suffering of every trans person in the world. Because they have never moved on from the model of a trans person as a defective version of a cis person, a mental disorder, a problem to be solved rather than a person of equal respect and value.

Even liberal and progressive cis people hesitate at the idea of allowing trans people to be ourselves *just because we want to be*, just because we think it's right. You have to be sure, they demand. Wait until you're definitely old enough to make an informed decision, and then maybe wait just a little bit longer in case you change your mind. Talk to a therapist first. Jump through a few bureaucratic hoops. There's always some minimum level of suffering

they demand from us in order to be satisfied that yes, we must really want this, we definitely aren't cis.

What is gender dysphoria? Only the price in trauma that cis society exacts from us before it will permit us to exist as trans.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Transgender

Gender Dysphoria

Trauma

Cptsd



Written by Tattie

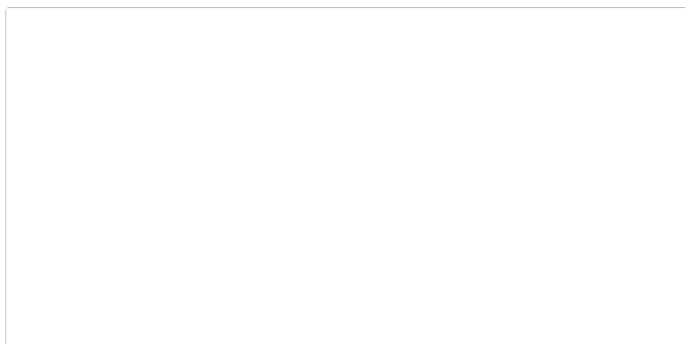
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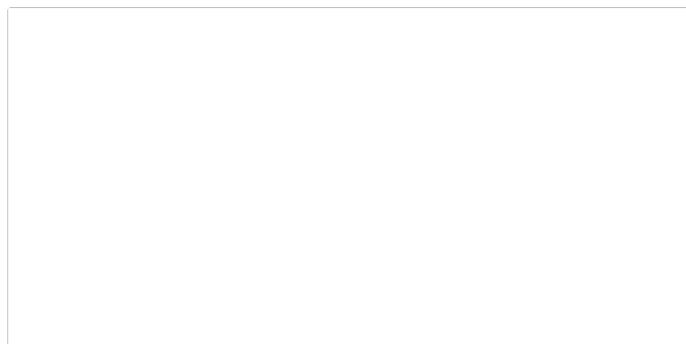
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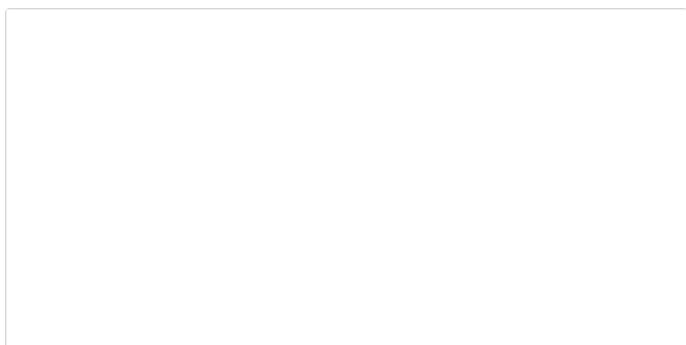
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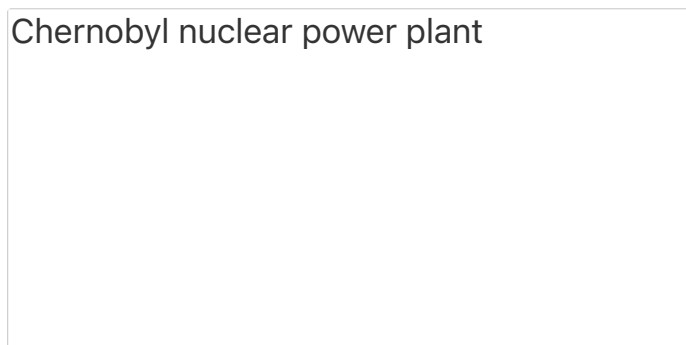
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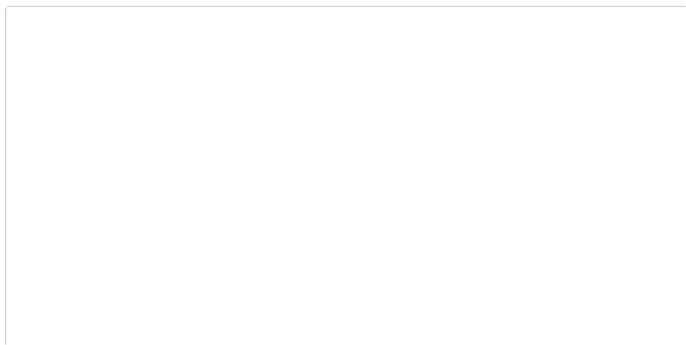
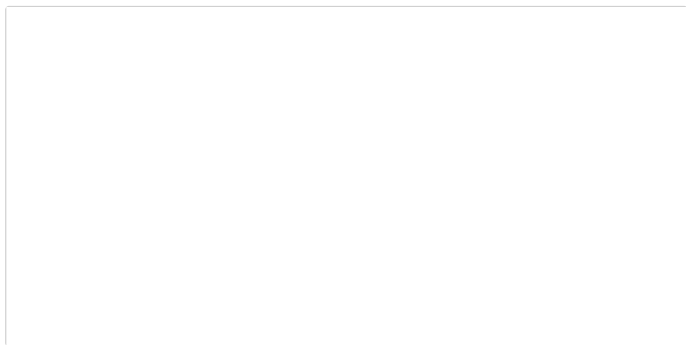
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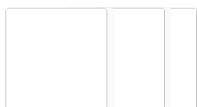
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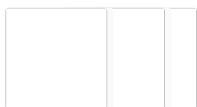
 

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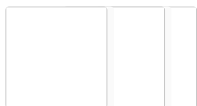
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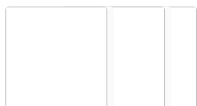
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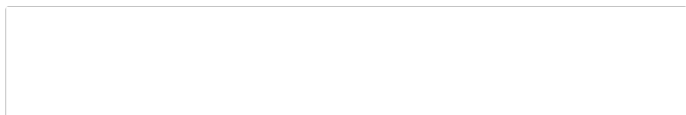
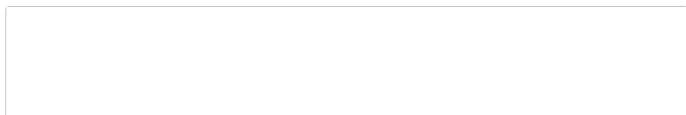
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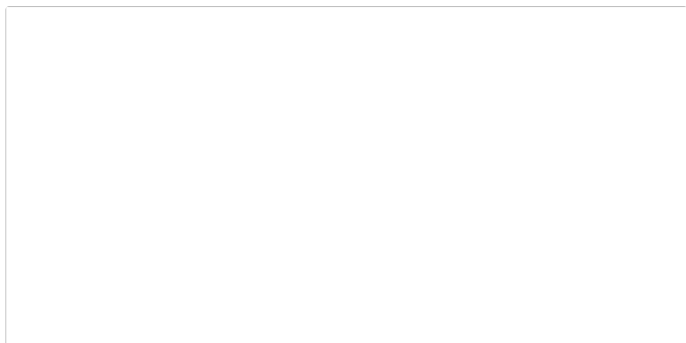
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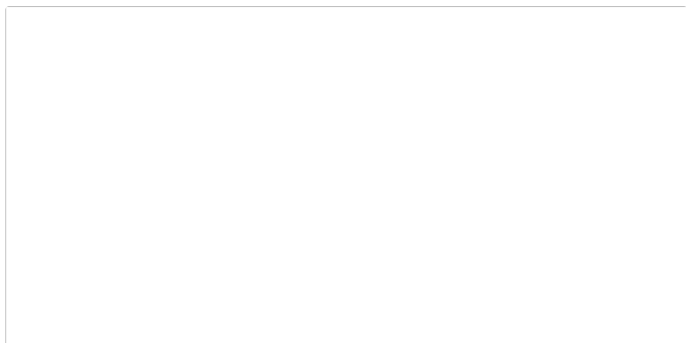
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