



Are clinicians ready to assist an influx of transgender people liberated by Cait?

by David Heitz

Nobody who watched the premier of “I am Cait” can deny that Caitlyn Jenner appears joyful, well-adjusted, compassionate, and ready to change the world.

Caitlyn admits that her money has made transitioning from male to female a lot easier than it is for most people. The hard facts are that 41 percent of transgender people attempt suicide at least once, according to a 2010 [National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#). That compares to 1.6 percent of the national population.

But Caitlyn’s story is one of triumph over pain, indeed for anyone who has experienced harassment, discrimination and brutality. But for transgender people in particular, Caitlyn represents hope, acceptance – even celebrity. It’s a welcome change for a demographic that has been knocked around like no other for decades on end.

Are clinicians ready to help transgender people who likely will be inspired by Caitlyn, but who lack the resources to openly be who they are without the type of comfort and support that Jenner can afford?

“How well prepared are the majority of clinicians to address the needs of gender non-conforming patients?” echoed [Dr. Michael Leslie](#), founder of the [McLean Hospital Initiative for LGBT Mental Health](#), when I spoke with him Monday after the premier of Jenner’s new show on E. “Whether it be treating children or adults, the reality is most clinicians have a very minimal, if any, introduction to working with transgender folks.”

McLean Hospital is a Harvard Medical School affiliate, and its initiative for LGBT Mental Health is two years old. Leslie agreed when I asked him if he, like I, feels like the transgender equality movement is about where the gay rights movement was in the 1970s, but moving forward at a much higher rate of speed.

Little Jackie’s Big Example in a Mid-Sized Town

Jacqueline Mathis is a 40-year-old transgender woman who lives in Davenport, Iowa. A far cry from the rich and famous Caitlyn, “Jackie” lives a quiet but open life and works as a slot attendant at a casino.

Although she is small in stature and soft-spoken by nature, she leads a local transgender support group and has become the face of transgender people in the Quad-Cities, the community in which she lives. The Quad-Cities is a collection of cities straddling the Mississippi River in Iowa and Illinois with a combined population of about 400,000.

Jackie twice attempted suicide. Once while living in Detroit about 15 years ago; a second time about three or four years ago while living in Rock Island, Ill., when she walked into oncoming traffic.

“There was just too much worry, being afraid, not knowing what to do,” she said of why she tried to end her life. “It was my own phobia and denial that kept me from transitioning earlier. I thought it was something I could ignore, but it always came back.”

Country Boy Sought Acceptance in the City

Jackie moved to the Quad-Cities from the country at the age of 19. Like so many people new to the community, she badly wanted to be accepted by a group of older men, mostly professionals, who hosted the younger men on wild boating parties on the Mississippi River.

“I only knew one Trans person, and I admired her, but I was afraid to even talk to her,” Jackie recalled. “Because the way I saw people talk about (her), never to her face of course, but like, those people on the boat, the things they said...I was scared.”

The woman Jackie admired was unlike the other female impersonators at the local gay bar. She lived life as a woman every single day. Not only that, but she is feminine, funny, and generally well-liked, even if not by the group of older gay men who ogled after skinny, hairless, young men.

“She scared the shit out of me, because that’s what I wanted,” he said. “I couldn’t accept my own self. I was one of those young, hairless boys. I had to overcome my own phobia.”

Jackie did try to get professional help about her gender struggle. She tried going to a mental health center on the Iowa side of the river, but could not afford its fees. “They wanted something like \$400 for a follow-up,” she recalled.

She then went to the community mental health center on the Illinois side of the river. “I filled out 40 pages of paperwork, and then they lost it and wanted me to fill it out all over again. That’s when I said screw it. I was already accepting (being transgender) to a certain point and not giving a shit. That’s when I started to take things into my own hands and began to order (hormones) online.”

Is Being Transgender a Mental Health ‘Disorder?’

Leslie said Jackie’s story is not unique. “Jackie’s story speaks to the desperation and loneliness that a lot of people experience very early on in their process. I think there’s more awareness now than there was 15 or 20 years ago, as people have went through this process and had these troubles. But it’s still very hard, especially for folks who are not in place where this is an established supportive community. Kids who are in relatively progressive high schools where there are functioning, working GSAs are under a lot of pressure to define themselves in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity.”

That leaves those people with really having no other choice but to seek professional help, usually from a mental health provider.

But isn’t it stigmatizing to say someone struggling with gender issues has a mental health problem? In the DSM-5, the most updated “Bible” for mental health practitioners, the push and pull between the gender assigned at birth at what one believes their gender to be is called gender dysphoria.

“Gender dysphoria, which used to be called gender identity disorder, is a thorny topic,” Leslie said. “Having it in DSM does pathologize it. I certainly don’t think gender is a binary entity, it’s more nuanced and complicated. But it’s the diagnosis that makes it open to treatment.

More and more providers and government agencies are paying. If you can't have a diagnosis for which treatment is indicated, would Medicare be willing to pay for it?

How Do Doctors 'Treat' Gender Dysphoria?

And just what does treatment for people with "gender dysphoria" involve?

"Folks that don't have a lot of experience working with Trans clients view this as an exotic type of work," Leslie said. "Even doing gender therapy with someone is not rocket science. The ultimate goal is to find happiness and help them function well, become well integrated and whole. This is not unique."

Leslie says doctors not experienced in transgender issues can refer to the [World Professional Association for Transgender Health](#), which already has established standards of care. But much, much work remains to be done. "It's changing...there is more emphasis on (transgender mental health care) within professional education, among psychiatric, psychology, and for sure among social workers."

He pointed to additional statistics from the 2010 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, including:

Nineteen percent reported being refused medical care due to their transgender or gender non-conforming status, with even higher numbers among people of color in the survey.

Fifty percent of the sample reported having to teach their medical providers about transgender care.

Ninety percent of respondents reported experiencing harassment, mistreatment, or discrimination on the job and took actions like hiding who they are to avoid it.

But the most important statistic?

"What people don't necessarily realize is that the suicide rate approaches 50 percent," Leslie said. "Even in demographics such as those with major depressive disorder or anorexia, you don't see suicide rates that's high. When I training residents or medical students, or even other doctors, I explain, every other person who is transgender, statistically, is at risk of suicide."

Jackie: 'Captain America' Cait Has it Tough Too

Meanwhile, Jackie doesn't think Caitlyn has it so easy either, even with her money and fame. "With Caitlyn, she was an all-star Mr. America. If you would have given her a star on a shield she would have been Captain 'America,'" she joked. "She also was a father. Within the transgender community, I know so many right now who won't transition, who choose not to, because of their wives and their children."

Jackie explained that meant years of being in the closet for Caitlyn. And now? Jackie doesn't think fame and fortune is all that wonderful either. "She looks great, on the other hand, she doesn't get two seconds to herself. She cannot go into a restaurant and not be recognized. That would drive a lot of people to suicide."

So how does Jackie keep her head up, going on television and speaking out for transgender people, without a home on a seaside cliff, a staff, and experts of any kind at the ready?

"There are good days and bad days," she said. The bad days come when you look into the mirror and you're not what you want to look like. That's more than a mid-life crisis, when you look into the mirror and see a guy instead of the person you want to be."