



MANUAL

TRANSILIENCE

Mental resilience

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INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by mental resilience?

Resilience means being able to cope with stress, uncertainties and setbacks, and even viewing them as opportunities for personal growth.

Mental resilience is a concept from positive psychology, which explores the factors that can help people experience positive emotions and how these can be strengthened.

The core of resilience is coping: the way you deal with stressful situations and problems. Some coping strategies (such as active problem-solving thinking, seeking help, etc.) have a positive effect on your mental well-being. While others (such as avoidance) can, in the long term, strengthen negative feelings.

What is its importance for our target audience?

Recent research shows that transgender and non-binary youth are more likely to be victims of bullying, discrimination, exclusion and violence compared to their cisgender peers. Additionally, their gender identity and expression are not always accepted by important people in their immediate surroundings (parents, partners, etc.). These factors have a negative impact on their well-being.

In media coverage about transgender individuals, there is often a focus on their victimhood and mental vulnerability. However, what is often overlooked is that the causes of these issues partly lie outside of them and are, among other things, the result of stereotypical thinking about gender in our heteronormative society.

Within the mental resilience module, we aim to raise awareness among gender-diverse youth about this and focus on strengthening their resilience. Together with them, we will explore positive coping strategies that truly work and that they can easily integrate into their daily routine.

Module approach

In developing this module, we based our work on the input from transgender youth gathered during a co-creation session. We also consulted colleagues from UZ Gent regarding mindfulness and relaxation techniques. Additionally, we relied on relevant scientific literature and the group program developed by Nicholas Heck for working with transgender clients.

Input from the co-creation session

After a broad brainstorming session about the different forms of resilience, the youth reflected together on what they wanted to learn or explore within each module. For the module on mental resilience, this resulted in the following outcomes:

I want to learn how to better cope with negative emotions (e.g., fear) and social pressure...

How can we cope with norms and stereotypes around gender and support each other in doing so?

I want to be able to be alone in a positive way...

I want to feel more comfortable around cisgender people...

I want to learn where fear and stress come from..

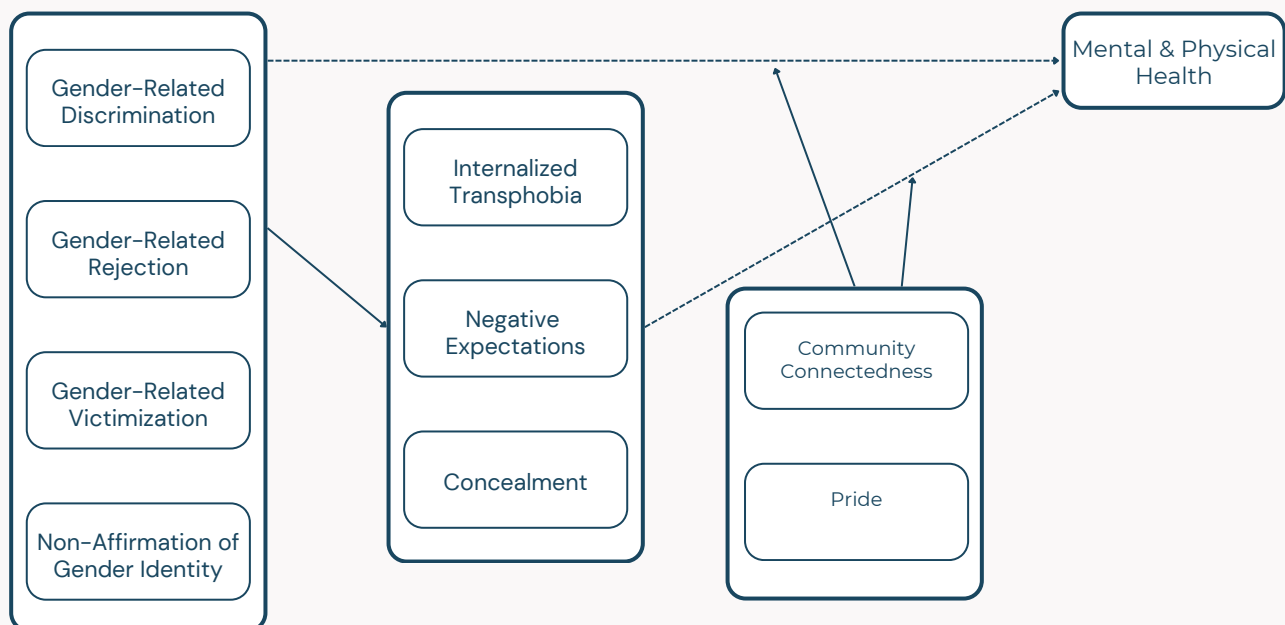
I want to know how I can clear my mind and recharge my batteries...

Input from research

We live in a **heteronormative society**. This means that legal, medical, and institutional practices maintain the assumption that there are only two genders, that gender reflects the sex assigned at birth, and that only sexual/romantic attraction between these two opposite genders is considered natural and acceptable.

In such a society, heterosexuality, a cisgender identity, and a clear, socially categorized gender are regarded as normal. On the other hand, homosexuality, a transgender identity, and an **intersex** experience are seen as unnatural expressions of sexuality and identity.

The minority stress model.



The concept of minority stress, introduced by Ilan Meyer, an American professor and expert on health issues in minority groups, refers to the chronic stress that minority groups experience due to regular exposure to stigmatization, discrimination, and social exclusion.

This ongoing exposure to negative social circumstances can have a significant impact on an individual's mental and physical well-being. Testa and colleagues later expanded the minority stress model to include transgender and gender-diverse individuals. They identified seven stressors that, according to research, closely align with the experiences of this group:

Gender-related discrimination includes all forms of unequal treatment based on gender identity or expression. **Gender-related rejection** refers to the rejection or exclusion of someone due to their gender identity. **Victimization** involves direct forms of violence, bullying, or harassment directed at transgender and gender-diverse individuals. **Non-affirmation** occurs when a person's gender identity is not recognized or validated by others.

Internalized transphobia is an important proximal (internal) stressor and refers to the negative attitudes and beliefs that transgender individuals have about themselves. These can develop from negative messages received from the environment. This can lead to self-hatred, shame, and a reduced sense of self-worth. **Negative expectations** about future events involve fear and concern about potential future discrimination or rejection. **Non-disclosure** is the decision to hide one's gender identity out of fear of negative reactions, which can lead to chronic stress and feelings of isolation.

Crucial to this model is the distinction made between distal and proximal stressors. **Distal factors** are external events or circumstances that occur in a person's environment, such as non-affirmation. These factors are often visible and directly observable. **Proximal factors**, on the other hand, are internal processes (thoughts, feelings, etc.) that develop as a response to distal stress. This includes, for example, internalized transphobia and non-disclosure. Proximal factors can sometimes have an even greater negative impact on one's mental well-being than distal factors because they can be ever-present. Additionally, people are often less aware of the influence of proximal factors on their (mental) health.

An example:

June, an older trans woman, no longer attends snooker matches, a hobby she used to enjoy greatly. The people in her snooker team are unaware of her transition. She started her social transition at work and doesn't want to play snooker in men's clothes. She feels much better now that she can express herself. At work, in a male-dominated sector, she notices that some men have become more distant since her coming out. She is also afraid that the men in her snooker team will not accept her into their team.

Due to the experience of gender-related rejection at work (distal stressor), June has negative expectations (proximal stressor) about what she might face in her snooker team. As a result, she starts to socially isolate herself, which can further negatively impact her mental well-being.

As important **protective factors** against minority stress, Testa's model highlights 'Pride' and 'Community Connectedness'.

'Pride' refers to experiencing pride in one's gender identity. This helps to develop a more positive self-image and protects against the negative effects of minority stress.

'Community connectedness' refers to feeling connected to the LGBTQIA+ community, or another supportive community. This provides both emotional and practical support.

Research also shows that the following factors are important: understanding, accepting, and being satisfied with one's own gender identity; being able to describe one's gender identity in one's own words; experiencing emotional stability, self-confidence, and a sense of control over one's life; and having a supportive network of friends and/or family.

HOW TO APPLY THE MINORITY STRESS MODEL IN GROUP SESSIONS?

This approach is based on research by Nicholas Heck.

- Start the conversation with an open question, such as: "*Why do transgender people experience mental health problems more often?*"
- Next, explain the concept of minority stress (as described above).
- Discuss with the participants how distal factors can impact how they view themselves and behave. This helps them make an **externalizing shift**, where they no longer (solely) attribute the cause of their mental health problems to themselves, but also to society (= *cognitive reframing*).
- Make the minority stress model concrete through a sorting exercise (see session 2 handbook), where you discuss several case studies and ask which stressors they recognize in them.

Conclusion

Based on this input, we developed a group program consisting of 5 sessions. In these sessions, we combined psychoeducation with relaxation exercises based on mindfulness, tai chi, and yoga. We also used artistic methodologies as conversation starters and for self-expression.

SCRIPT



SESSION OVERVIEW

Session 1: Introduction

Session 2: The Minority Stress model

Session 3: Emotion regulation

Session 4: Dealing with body dysphoria – body image (1)

Session 5: Dealing with body dysphoria – self portrait (2)

General Objectives within this Module

- Participants discuss topics that concern them and learn from the experiences of others.
- Participants learn simple techniques to regulate their emotions and calm themselves.
- Participants explore creative methods that can help them relax and/or express their emotions.

Before You Begin...

What follows is a description of the sessions we have conducted.

This serves as inspiration. Feel free to adjust and tailor it based on the context in which you work, and the questions and needs of your participants.

Be sure to also read our guidelines for caregivers and those related to autism-friendly practices, which we developed based on our experiences within TRANSILIENCE.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this session is to create a safe environment where participants can be themselves and where everything is open for discussion.

Materials

- Name tags
- Large sheets of paper and post-its
- writing materials
- Joker cards (**Appendix I**)
- A (white)board
- Yoga mats

Program overview

- 1) Welcome
- 2) Grounding exercise
- 3) Shake exercise
- 4) Icebreaker
- 5) Group discussion
- 6) 'Safe place' exercise
- 7) Evaluation
- 8) Homework assignment

1) Welcome

Always meet at the same location, even when the session venue changes (ensure predictability).

Greet participants or pick them up to go to the room together.

Always start your session in the same way, for example by having participants write their name on a name tag, offering them a drink, and going over the program together.

Also see our '**Guidelines for Autism-friendly Work**'.

You can download them via the following link: <https://www.uzgent.be/transilience>

2) Grounding exercise

The goal of grounding is to reduce stress, anxiety, and dissociation by directing participants' attention to physical sensations and/or their immediate surroundings. Grounding helps people step out of their heads and back into their bodies, allowing them to regain calm and control in stressful situations.

There are many ways to ground, such as focusing on your breathing, the texture of an object, or sensory perceptions (for example: "Name five things you can hear"). Below is an example of an exercise that works on body awareness:

Progression

- We take a few deep breaths in and out, focusing on how we feel our breath in our body (chest and/or abdomen).
- Next, we lean forward as far as possible without letting our heels lift off the ground: "Find the point where you almost lose your balance. It's okay if that happens, or if your heels briefly lift off the ground. Try to bring your attention to your feet."
- Next, we lean backward as far as possible without letting our toes lift off the ground.
- Then, we rock from front to back, gradually making our movements smaller until we are back in the center.
- Repeat this exercise, bending to the left (without letting the right foot lift off the ground).
- Repeat this exercise once more, bending to the right.
- The goal is to stand firmly in the center (with your hips directly above your feet and your shoulders directly above your hips).

3) Shake exercise

- Choose a rhythmic song.
- Stand firmly with both feet on the ground. Bring your attention to your feet and feel them on the ground..
- Bend your knees and shake your legs.
- Bring your attention and the shaking progressively up to your pelvis, diaphragm, shoulders, arms... Continue until your whole body is shaking.
- Meanwhile, keep connected with your breathing and stay connected with your feet onto the ground.
- Breathe consciously in through your nose and out through your mouth (breathing in and out through the mouth is also fine if that feels better).
- Remember, there is no right or wrong. You can also freestyle by, for example, shaking your left leg first and then your right, or by jumping and dancing. Make it a party!

REFLECTION BY THE COACHES

Starting with grounding or shaking can help reduce stress for participants and break the ice. It is important that you, as a facilitator, feel comfortable enough with these exercises to fully engage in them. This lowers the threshold for participants. Also, mention that the exercise may look funny or feel awkward. This makes it easier for participants to be open about how they experience the exercise.

For some participants, moving together right from the start may feel like too big a hurdle. One of our participants said afterward: "I didn't feel comfortable at all when we started with something physical. If you did that now, after getting to know the people a bit better, I might feel a little more at ease than at the start of the module."

Participants can use their joker cards, but it can be difficult to do this right from the start and make sure no one feels excluded. Therefore, we would recommend discussing the exercise with the group first and doing it later on in the module.

4) Icebreaker

A statement is read aloud, and participants position themselves in the space according to their answer (for example, those who say "yes" stand on the left, and those who say "no" stand on the right...). The goal is to lower the threshold for sharing experiences with each other, discover common ground with other participants, and introduce topics in a playful way that will be explored in more depth during the following sessions.

Preparation

Write down the possible answers (agree, disagree, neutral) on large sheets of paper and hang them up around the room, or mark different zones on the floor with tape that correspond to the answers.

Progression

We start with a few lighthearted statements from the game 'Dilemma Tuesday'. In this game, you must choose between two options that are equally (un)appealing (a neutral answer is not possible). For example: "You can only type with your nose, OR you can only mumble."

Over time, we move on to statements created by the facilitators. These are more personal and closely related to the content of the module. Participants can also choose a neutral answer for these.

Possible statements:

My parents/caregivers accept my gender identity.

I have already taken steps in the process of my transition.

I find it difficult to explain to others what being trans or gender-diverse means to me.

I am open about my transgender identity/transition in my environment (school/work).

I sometimes feel insecure around cisgender people.

I see my gender diversity/trans identity as something positive in my life.

I prefer not to use the term 'transgender' for myself.

I have transgender friends.

I find it difficult to meet other trans youth.



TIPS

- Ask participants who stand alone for a longer time during the statement game how they experienced it afterward. Emphasize that others can have understanding or empathy for their point of view, even if they gave a different answer.
One of our participants found it quite confronting to play this game so early in the process, but the intention was to gauge questions, needs... that we could address in the following sessions.
- As a facilitator, don't hesitate to ask active questions when participants are reluctant to share. For example, ask them: "*Would you like to share why you stood here?*" without applying pressure. From the evaluation of our first program, we learned that certain participants benefit from being encouraged. Thanks to the greeting cards, they also felt safe enough to set boundaries. They also found it interesting to hear from each other why they took a certain position during the statements.

5) Group discussion

In this group discussion, we introduce the concept of minority stress.

We map out the participants' coping strategies (both positive and negative) and collectively explore helpful strategies. We emphasize that what works for everyone is different, but that we can learn from each other.

An important aspect of the group discussion is creating space for participants to share their experiences (related to minority stress) and ensuring that everyone truly listens to each other.

If a conversation arises right after the first question, that's perfectly fine.

Feel free to engage with it and save any questions that may not be addressed for the next session.

Progression

The group discussion is structured around a few questions.

Possible opening question:

"We often hear that transgender youth experience more mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal thoughts. Why do you think this is the case?"

The answers shared by the youth can later be linked to factors in the minority stress model. A question like this can also encourage youth to share their own difficulties. If needed, follow-up questions can be asked, such as: *"What do you find difficult at times?"*

Next, you can briefly introduce the minority stress model and explain that it will be discussed in more detail in session 2:

"The mental well-being of transgender youth is more at risk than that of their cisgender peers because they are more frequently exposed to various stressors resulting from their minority status, such as gender-related violence, rejection of their gender identity, etc."

One of our participants responded to this view, noting that gender-questioning youth are more easily directed towards support services: for example, conversations with a psychologist are mandatory for those considering a medical transition, making mental health issues more easily detected.

A good follow-up question is: *"What stressors do transgender youth face, according to you?"*

Here are some examples of what our participants shared:

- Violence (verbal, physical, psychological, material).
- Feeling unaccepted by the broader society.
- Sensationalized, mocking portrayals and negative media coverage about transgender people (focusing on victimization, suffering...).
- Stereotypes and prejudices, such as: transgender people are sexually promiscuous, being transgender is just a trend, or young people are easily influenced to think they are trans...

Then, you can use the following question to explore their coping mechanisms: *"What reactions do these stressors trigger in you?"*

Here are some of the answers given:

- Isolating yourself. Avoiding social situations to not have to answer the same questions repeatedly or because of feeling unsafe (which can be more pronounced in rural areas compared to cities).
- Shame.
- Fear of negative reactions from others.

Next, you can discuss with the youth the short- and long-term effects of these coping mechanisms. For example: *"Avoiding social situations may help in the short term, but in the long term, it may make you feel lonely and completely isolated."*

6) Relaxation exercise

In this exercise, we help participants relax through a guided visualization. Please refer to **Attachment II** for an example.

WHAT IS VISUALIZATION?

Visualization is a form of meditation where you use the power of imagination to achieve a specific goal. You create images in your mind that help you:

- Relax
- Feel less anxious
- Feel stronger
- ...

For example, you mentally go to a situation or place where you feel comfortable. You vividly imagine that place or situation using all your senses (What does it look like? What can you see, smell, hear, or feel?).

You can do this exercise on your own, or it can be guided by a voice. In the latter case, we refer to it as a guided visualization.

Progression

The participants will lie down on a yoga mat and find a position that feels comfortable for them. A story will be read aloud, which invites them to use their imagination and evokes sensory experiences.

REFLECTION OF THE COACHES

Visualization proved to be challenging for some participants with (or suspected of having) autism. Therefore, it's important to explain beforehand that this technique may not work for everyone, and that this is completely okay. Additionally, the focus on breathing caused extra stress for some participants. It's important not to be too suggestive by saying things like: "Focus on your breath and notice how you are becoming more and more relaxed," because for some participants, this may actually increase their stress if they are unable to relax. It's better to guide participants to simply observe their breath, paying attention to its nature (whether it's calm, fast, shallow, deep) without expecting any specific outcome.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION



In "Mindfulness bij volwassenen met autisme", Annelies Spek provides tips for professionals who want to work on mindfulness with individuals with ASD.

7) Evaluation

Each participant receives 3 post-its. On these, they write their answers to the following questions:

- How do you feel in the group?
- What did you enjoy today?
- What would you definitely like to discuss in one of the upcoming sessions?

REFLECTION FROM THE COACHES

At the beginning, we experimented with a different evaluation method for each workshop, but this caused unnecessary stress for the participants. Using post-its to write answers to recurring questions worked well. We also distributed a short evaluation form where participants could use emoticon stickers to express how they felt during the various activities within a workshop. They were also allowed to design their own emoticon or write written feedback. The question about how they felt aimed to encourage participants to pause and reflect on their emotions and learn to put them into perspective. Just because they didn't enjoy a particular exercise doesn't mean it wasn't interesting or useful.

*Finally, we also gave participants the option to send feedback via email afterward, which some did extensively.
(photo to be added)*

8) Homework assignment

"Think about which transgender person or transgender character is a role model for you and why. Next time, we will have a conversation about this."

SESSION 2: MINORITY STRESS

From the previous session, the participants already know that minority stress can be at the root of their potential mental and/or physical issues. In this session, they will discover that feeling part of a community ("community connectedness"), as well as being proud of their gender identity (transgender pride), are important protective factors against minority stress.

Materials

- See previous session
- Handouts of the minority stress model and sorting exercise (see **Appendices III and IV**)
- A box or envelope to place questions in.

Program overview

- 1) Exercise: Relaxation with Tai Chi
- 2) Group discussion: Transgender Role Model
- 3) Minority Stress Model & Sorting Exercise
- 4) The Question jar
- 5) Homework assignment

1) Exercise: Relaxation with Tai Chi

Breathing exercises based on Tai Chi, where you also move your arms, are more accessible for some people than exercises that focus purely on breathing. This approach can provide participants with more support, as they can perform a movement in sync with their breath, and if that isn't possible, they can simply follow the movement.

Progression

- Stand with your knees slightly bent, shoulders relaxed, and back straight.
- Pretend you are holding a large ball and slowly raise both arms at the same time to chest height.
- Feel the energy (chi) flowing between your hands as you breathe calmly.
- Then, slowly move your arms downward as you exhale, as if you are pushing the ball away from you.
- Repeat this movement in a smooth, continuous flow..

2) Group discussion: Transgender Role Model

In her thesis titled "The Importance of the Media as a Source of Information and Representation for Transgender People" (2016), Cato Samyn writes that positive role models for trans and non-binary youth are important for various reasons:

- They can serve as a reference point in the development of one's own identity. Transgender individuals form a self-identifying group: unlike ethnic or religious minorities, where family members share the same minority status, transgender and non-binary youth often lack someone in their personal network with whom they can identify or exchange experiences.
- Most youth look to the media and popular culture for their role models, such as singers, musicians, actors, and entertainers. However, many transgender youth have no role models. This may be due to the fact that certain minority groups (such as non-binary, gender-fluid individuals, or transgender people of color) are still underrepresented in traditional media and popular culture.
- Positive role models can help challenge the often one-sided, sensational, and stereotypical portrayals of gender diversity.

REFLECTION OF THE COACHES

Several young people mentioned TikTok stars and cyberactivists as role models. For a young person who identifies as non-binary, Demi Lovato (singer-songwriter) is a role model because they came out about their mental health issues and discussed topics that trans and non-binary youth struggle with. For instance, they once identified as non-binary but later reverted to using "they/them" pronouns because they found it too exhausting to constantly explain this.

Another young person said that celebrities could never be role models for them because: "Their struggles seem less real or intense... When they come out, it's met with applause, while for me, every conversation (about my transition) is difficult and heavy."

Many trans youth find their role models through social media. They perceive these role models as more reliable than traditional media because transgender and non-binary people share their stories directly (insider versus outsider perspective). Unknown trans individuals who are further along in their transition can also serve as role models, offering something that a support network of cisgender individuals cannot provide. That "something" is the difference between empathy and "lived experience."

3) Minority stress model & sorting exercise

Go through the minority stress model (see p. 3, Appendix III) together and connect it to the conversation about role models. Explain that feeling connected to a role model falls under 'transgender pride' and 'community connectedness,' and can therefore offer protection against minority stress.

Then, make the minority stress model concrete by using the sorting exercise (see Appendix IV).

The youth will read (in pairs or small groups) the various cases described and discuss together which minority stressors they recognize in them. Afterward, all cases will be reviewed as a group. Take some time to reflect on personal experiences with minority stress as well.

An example:

Gunter experiences a strong urge to wear women's clothing. In some way, it feels better for him, especially when he sees himself in the mirror dressed in women's clothes. But at the same time, he feels a great deal of shame about this desire and hides the clothes under his bed. He believes he has a psychiatric disorder and thinks it is wrong to give in to his desire. As a result, he tries to compensate by doing the opposite, behaving like a macho at work and with his family.

This is an example of internalized transphobia..

4) The question jar

Ask the participants to write down questions they would like to ask the other participants. These can (but don't have to) be related to the topic of the sessions. You can use these questions in upcoming sessions to start group discussions.

Here are a few examples from our session:

When did you know you were "different"?

How do you deal with binary restrooms?

How do you explain to your family that you are non-binary?

How can you be sure that transitioning is the right path?

Do you still get misgendered sometimes, and how do you deal with it?

What are the effects of hormones?

Do you have any tips on makeup and clothing?

How did you come out at work?

5) Homework assignment: self-portrait

In sessions 4 and 5, we work towards creating a self-portrait. We do this through cyanotype, an old photography technique where an image is developed using sunlight. What's interesting about cyanotype is that the result is partly determined by chance (which makes it a great exercise in learning to let go of control and deal with what might seem like "failures," as well as recognizing the creative potential in them). You can also add additional layers of meaning to an image by drawing or writing on the negative. However, it does require some preparation and materials, especially if you're making the photo paper yourself.

If this feels too complex or time-consuming, you can ask the participants to simply take a portrait or selfie with their smartphones and print it on photo paper.

Posing for a photo often presents a barrier for trans individuals. In session 4, we will discuss why this is the case and explore ways for our participants to feel safe while being photographed.

Since we want to give our participants enough time to prepare for these sessions, we ask them to already start thinking about how they want to appear in their image and what message they want to convey with their photo.

SESSION 3: EMOTION REGULATION

In this session, we aim to lower the threshold for discussing difficult topics by focusing on an action (felting) or object (Dixit cards, emotion ball). Additionally, we explore felting as a relaxation method: the repetitive nature of the activity and its multisensory qualities (the softness of the wool, the lukewarm water, the wide variety of colors, the scent of sheep wool and olive soap, etc.) can have a relaxing effect on some participants.

Materials

- Dixit cards
- Felting materials: a basin, olive soap, strands of wool felt in various colors, old towels
- Fabric scissors
- Question jar from session 2

Program overview

- 1) Check-in with Dixit
- 2) Felting the emotion ball
- 3) Awareness exercise with the emotion ball
- 4) Group conversation during felting
- 5) Closing activity
- 6) Homework assignment: Small joys

1) Check-in with Dixit

Dixit is a game with beautifully illustrated cards that stimulate the imagination. We use them as conversation starters: participants choose a card that resonates with them or reflects how they feel at that moment, and are invited to share something about it.

2) Felting the emotion ball

Take a moment to reflect on how you're feeling right now. Which color represents that emotion? Often, we focus on just one emotion, but sometimes we feel multiple things at once. Other times, we're not sure what we're feeling exactly, or emotions quickly follow one another. Today, we'll take a moment to acknowledge the complexity and layers of our emotions.

We'll visualize this by felting different colors of wool on top of each other (and blending them) into a ball. Then, we'll cut this 'emotion ball' in half. You can keep both halves for yourself, or give one half to someone else.

Progression

- Take a strand of wool with dry hands (so the felting process doesn't start yet!) and hold it about 10 cm from the end. With your other hand (your writing hand), gently pull off a small tuft of wool.
- Roll this tuft firmly into a small ball.
- Now, dampen both hands by dipping them into the basin of lukewarm water and briefly rubbing them over the piece of soap.

Water and soap work together to provide an initial surface bonding of the wool. We avoid using liquid or synthetic soap, as these can foam too quickly and too much.

- Gently roll the ball in your palm, using one or more fingertips.
- As the ball gains firmness, you can increase the pressure and use your whole hand.
- Once the ball is firm enough, you can add a second color.



3) Awareness exercise with the emotion ball

Beforehand

Let participants choose a new color and loosely felt it around the ball to avoid their attention drifting too much during the exercise towards wool that might come loose.

Progression

The participants should sit or lie down in a position that feels comfortable to them. While they continue felting, they should focus on their breathing and the sensations that felting brings. Guide them by giving verbal instructions such as:

- 'Describe small and large circles with the ball in your palm, can you feel the difference?'
- 'Use just your fingertips once and then your whole palm the next time.'
- 'Start felting with your left hand, then with your right hand. Which hand do you feel the most?'
- Encourage them to experiment and notice how it feels to apply less pressure ('Can you still feel the ball in your palm?'), or more ('Can you slowly apply more pressure, how does that feel?').

An important message throughout all of this is that it's normal for your thoughts to wander while felting. If you notice this, simply bring them back to the felting and try not to attach any judgment to it.

REFLECTION FROM THE COACHES

Some participants turned out to be allergic to wool, others became nervous from the felting process, or found the feeling of wet wool in their hands unpleasant. For those participants, you could provide an alternative, such as modeling clay, so they can still participate.

4) Group conversation during felting

We will continue discussing the questions from the jar. Anyone who wants to can keep felting during the conversation, as this can lower the barrier to speaking. We have also added a few questions about emotion regulation, namely:

What do you feel in your body when you are angry, and where do you feel it?

What do you feel in your body when you are sad, and where do you feel it?

What do you do to relax when you are feeling tense?

How would you like others to respond to you when you're going through a tough time?

Do you ever worry, and what about?

5) Closing activity

We cut our emotion ball in half with fabric scissors. We also take a moment to reflect on the emotions that came up during this session (also triggered by the felting): *What did you feel while felting? How difficult was it to feel these emotions, put them into words, and translate them into a color?*

6) Homework assignment: Small joys

According to the 'Great Happiness Study' from KU Leuven, people who take a moment each day to reflect on the things they are grateful for experience the positive effects for weeks afterward. For this reason, we asked our participants to note down three things each day for a week that made them feel positive or grateful. In session 1, we created a Padlet (online bulletin board) for this purpose, where participants eagerly posted. The young people shared that they appreciated being able to share things visually, without the need to verbalize, and to look at others' posts without any expectations, such as needing to provide feedback.

SESSION 4: DEALING WITH BODY DYSPHORIA – BODY IMAGE

In this session, we create space to talk about how we experience our bodies and about gender dysphoria (which is when you experience discomfort because your external physical features do not align with how you feel on the inside).

We also raise awareness among young people about the fact that their body image is influenced by societal norms and stereotypes related to gender.

Additionally, we address how heteronormative body ideals can impact their relationship with their body and their mental well-being. Finally, we introduce them to different types of aids and discuss how these can be used as part of one's gender expression and/or to achieve a certain body image.

Materials

- Hand-outs with outlines of the human body (see **attachment V**)
- Orange, red, and green colored pencils (1 per participant)
- Questions about body image (see p. 26)
- Prints of (self)portraits (see **attachment VI**)
- (Photos of) different types of aids (binders, prosthetics, etc.)

Program overview

- 1) Welcome and overview of the program
- 2) Group discussion: How do you feel about your body?
- 3) Demonstration of different aids

1) Welcome and overview of the program

See session 1.

We will also briefly reflect on the homework from the previous session (Small Pleasures) and ask the participants how they experienced it.

2) Group discussion: How do you feel about your body?

Each participant will receive a sheet with the outline of a body.

Ask them to color in the body parts they are satisfied with or feel good about in green. Use orange for the body parts they are sometimes okay with. Use red for the body parts they are currently not satisfied with at all. Parts they feel neutral about can remain white. Ask them to note any thoughts and feelings that come up during the exercise next to the colored areas.

Afterward, ask who would like to share something about their drawing.

Now, give each participant a sheet with the questions about body image. They can use these to interview each other. Those who prefer not to do this can answer the questions individually.

What messages do you sometimes hear about trans bodies (in the media/from other people)?

What thoughts do you regularly have about your own body?

What do you feel about your body?

Who or what influences the way you think about your body?

What impact do these thoughts/feelings have on how you treat your body? (For example: dissatisfaction with my body leads me to exercise excessively to achieve my ideal body image).

What helps you feel better about your body or how you look?

REFLECTION OF THE COACHES

These questions sparked a lot of discussion among the participants. They found it very pleasant to talk about these topics with each other and later in the group. For some groups, discussing the questions in pairs first helped lower the threshold, while other groups preferred to discuss the questions directly with the whole group.

3) Demonstration of different aids

Aids are worn by transgender and non-binary individuals in anticipation of, as a substitute for, or as a complement to gender-affirming surgery to create a specific body image.

Show various aids. Ask questions such as:

Do you know what this aid is called and what it is used for?

Who here has ever used an aid, and which one?

Provide tips on how to properly wear aids and inform participants about what to pay attention to when purchasing different types of aids.

For more information about aids (in Dutch), you can visit the [Transgender Infopunt](#) website. You can also make an appointment to try on aids there.

SESSION 5: DEALING WITH BODY DYSPHORIA - SELF PORTRAIT

*It takes (self)confidence to have yourself (photographed by others).
In this session, we want to focus on building that confidence.*

Materials

- Various examples of photographed (self)portraits

Program overview

- 1) Welcome and overview of the program
- 2) View and discuss examples of portraits
- 3) Take photos, develop them, and discuss them together

1) Welcome and overview of the program

See previous sessions

2) View and discuss examples of portraits

First, we will have a short group discussion. We will ask our participants the following question: *"What goes through your mind when someone asks you to pose for a photo?"*

Then, we will look at various (self)portraits taken by both well-known and lesser-known photographers. The aim is to explore what type of images our young participants find appealing, what they understand by (self)portrait, and what form of portraiture makes them feel comfortable. We will also touch on some basic concepts in photography such as framing, perspective, lighting, staging, and the use of props. This way, the participants will realize that they don't necessarily need to appear up close, frontally, or recognizable in the image. They will understand that they can play with all these aspects to influence how others perceive them and to tell their own story.

The goal of this exercise is for the young participants to come up with ways to deal with the inner barriers they feel when being photographed.

For example:

- By capturing someone in profile or from behind.
- By photographing not the person itself, but their shadow.
- By having the model look away from the lens.
- By focusing on a body part other than the face. Here, you can ask: *"Which body part are you proud of? What part of yourself would you like to show to others, and what do you like about it?"* You can also refer back to the first exercise of the group discussion.
- By using props (hats, glasses, etc.) to disguise themselves (although sometimes, a prop can be very characteristic of a person).
- By photographing someone's tattoos or piercings: these are part of a person's identity and can mark an important life event.
- Who has one? Who would like to share something about it?

3) Take photos, develop them, and discuss them together

Since we used cyanotype (an old photographic technique), which is quite labor-intensive, we needed an extra session for this.

REFLECTION OF THE COACHES

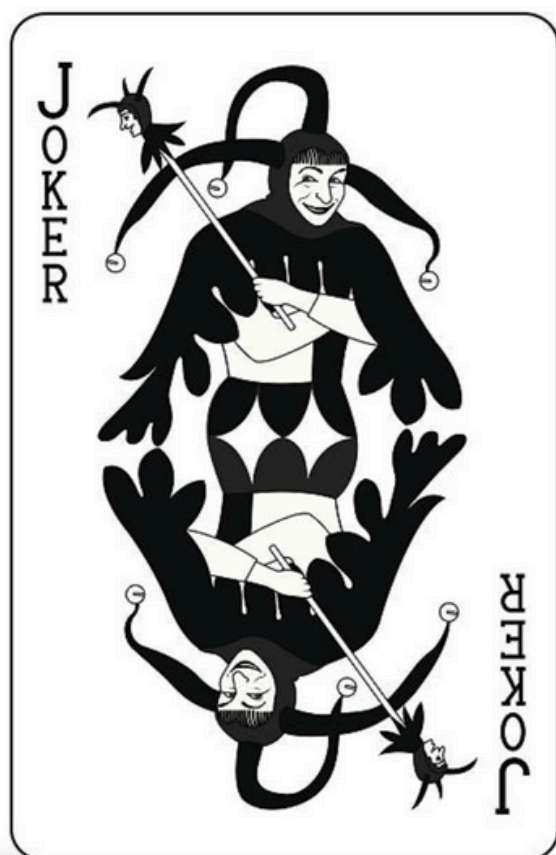
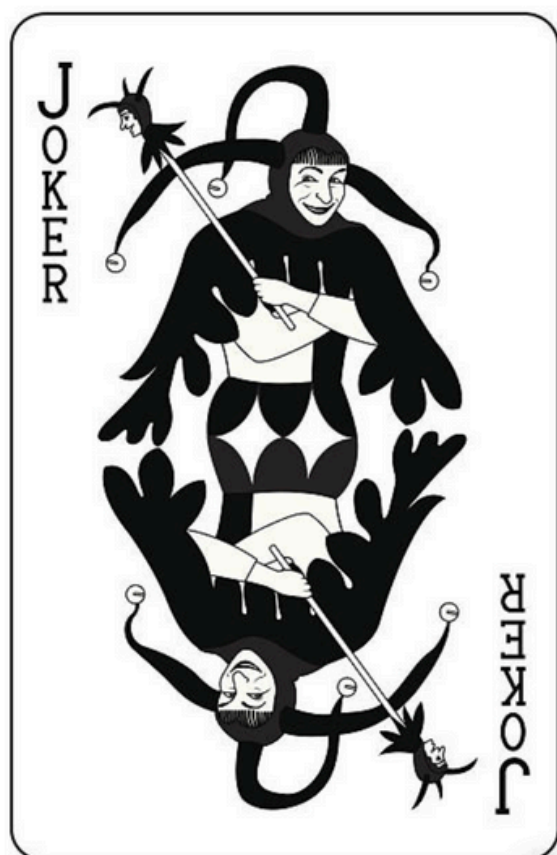
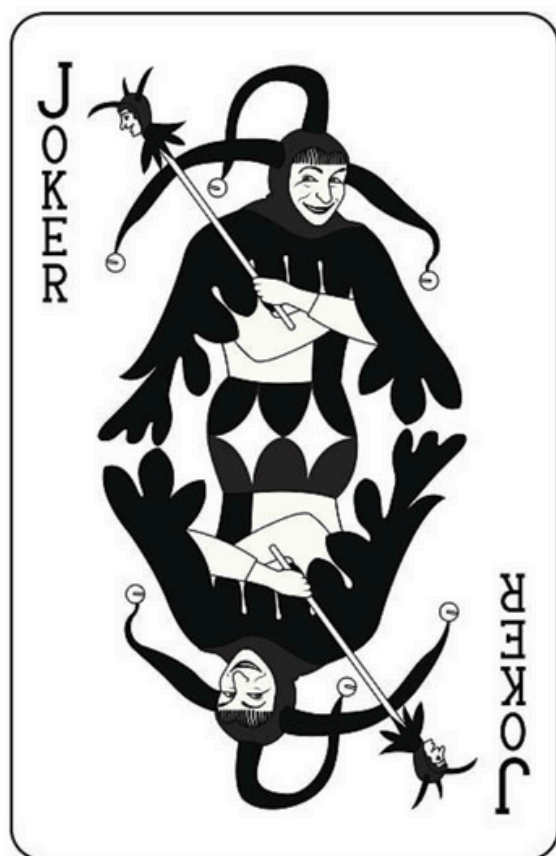
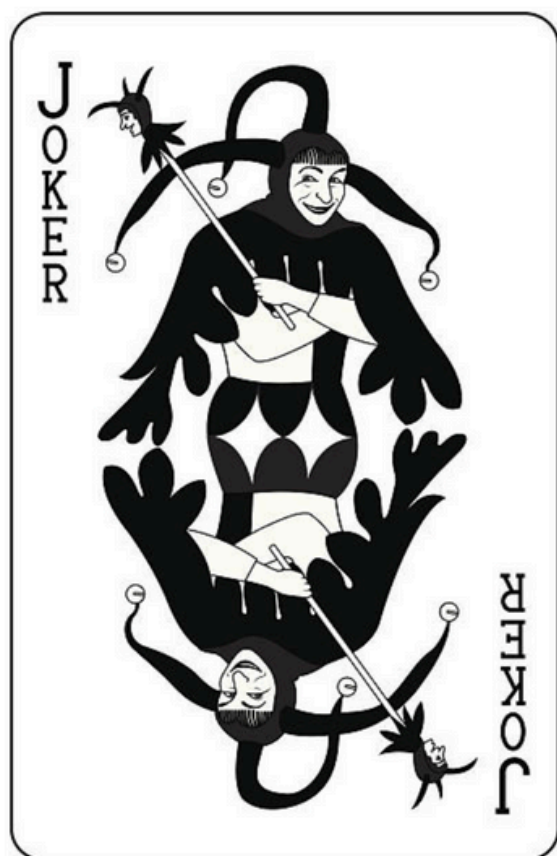
Photographing each other can be a fun activity that has a positive impact on group cohesion, but it can also create additional pressure. Some of our participants found it difficult to decide how they wanted to appear in the photo, or what they wanted to convey with their image. Others still felt uncomfortable being photographed. In any case, we recommend announcing this activity well in advance so that participants can mentally prepare for it. Additionally, it's helpful to discuss the barriers participants experience and how best to support them. Ask participants whether they would prefer to take their photo at home or during the session.

Our participants preferred to do this on their own. Be sure to allow enough time to discuss the photos afterward: How difficult did participants find it to tell something about themselves through a photo, to appear in the image, and to show their (self)portrait to others?



Cyanotype by Byron De Weerd

ATTACHMENT I: JOKER CARDS



ATTACHMENT II: RELAXATION STORY 'IN SPACE'

We lie completely relaxed on a mat, feeling how it supports every part of our body.

We feel our feet on the mat, our knees, our back... We feel how our head rests on the pillow. And we feel how our belly gently rises and falls as we breathe in and out.

Now imagine slowly standing up and in your mind you go outside, away from this room.

Open the door, and you find yourself in the hallway (continue describing in a visual way how you walk outside from the space where you started).

Outside, it's dark, but the streetlights provide some light. On the small grassy field outside, you see something glowing very brightly.

You're curious and walk towards it. The closer you get, the bigger it seems to be. The light shines brightly into your eyes. It almost hurts. But you're not scared. You keep approaching and see that the object is oval in shape. The light hits your face, making your cheeks feel pleasantly warm.

When you are just a few meters away from the light, you see that the object is actually a rocket.

A rocket ready to launch. The light and warmth you feel come from beneath this rocket.

A small door at the very bottom is still open. You need to climb a little ladder to get inside. Even though you've never been inside a rocket before, you're not afraid. You feel at ease with this rocket.

You step inside and enter a room full of panels and flickering buttons. It's the control room. This is the first time you're in a rocket, but somehow you know exactly how to operate it.

You press a few buttons, and... feel butterflies in your stomach as the rocket begins to ascend into space.

Around you, you see various stars and planets. The moon is getting bigger. You see the sun. The Earth is getting smaller and smaller. The further you get from Earth, the more relaxed you feel.

All the things or people that irritate you, all the problems you have, are left behind on Earth.

You fly away from the negative, taking only your positive thoughts with you. Everything around you is completely calm. Now and then, you see a planet that has never been discovered. Meanwhile, you are far from Earth.

ATTACHMENT II: RELAXATION STORY 'IN SPACE'

You decide to land on one of these unknown planets. You choose a planet that gives you a warm feeling. It's a planet in the color you love the most. You steer your rocket towards this planet and make a smooth, gentle landing. You step out of the rocket. The planet you've chosen has just the perfect temperature—pleasantly warm, or maybe there's a cool breeze... The planet is completely deserted. The landscape is very beautiful, just the kind of place where you'd want to buy a postcard from. Maybe you see a forest, a lake, or you're in the mountains. This place has the kind of landscape that you can truly enjoy.

You decide to sit for a while on this planet and enjoy the pleasant temperature and the calm. You feel safe. No one else knows about this planet. It's your special spot in the vast universe. Your place where you can relax.

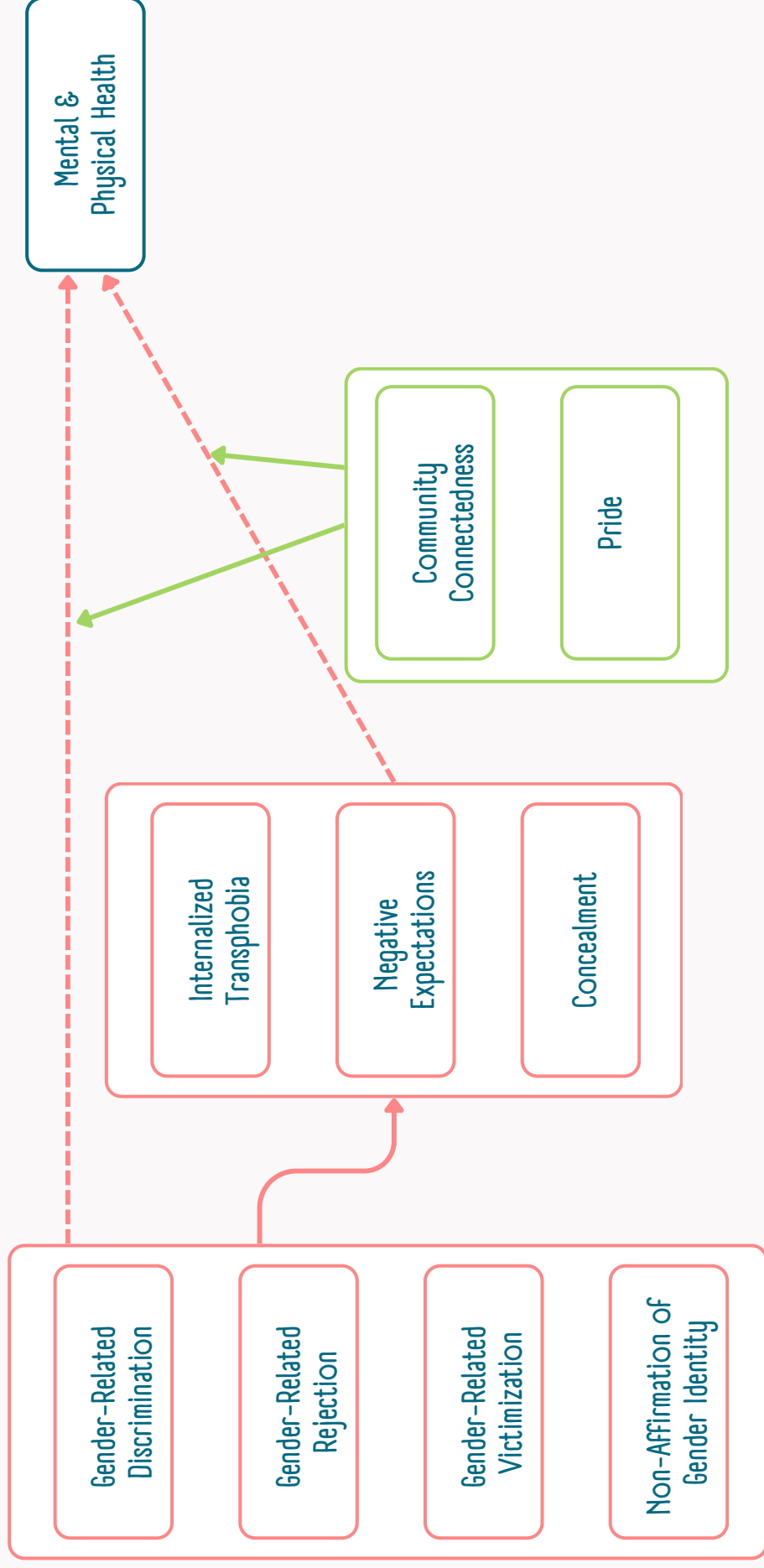
After a while, you begin to think about Earth. There is something you miss on Earth. Something or someone you'd like to return to. Now that you've discovered this planet, you can always come back here to experience that sense of calm and relaxation again. Perhaps you're even longing for the fries with stew tomorrow? You decide to climb back into the rocket and fly back to Earth. The positive feeling you have, you take with you. As you get closer to Earth, it becomes bigger and bigger. Your longing grows too.

You see the blue and green of Earth. A little later, you see cities and rivers. You see the place where you started your journey. And finally, you see the little grassy field where the rocket took off. The grass is scorched black from the flame released during the launch. You land at exactly the same spot and step out of the rocket, feeling content. You've had a great journey, but now it's time to walk around on Earth again. You feel proud of yourself for making that long journey, and with the thought of your planet, you feel calm and relaxed. It's a feeling you will carry with you when you open your eyes.

I will now count to three. On the first count, take a deep breath in and out. On the second count, open your eyes. And on the third count, shake your hands and feet loose.

1... 2... 3!

ATTACHMENT III: MINORITY STRESS MODEL



ATTACHMENT IV: SORTING EXERCISE

A. June, an older trans woman, no longer attends snooker matches, a hobby she once enjoyed greatly. The people in her snooker team are unaware of her transition. She began her social transition at work and now doesn't want to play snooker in men's clothing. She feels much better now that she can express herself. At work, in a male-dominated sector, she feels that some men have become more distant towards her since her coming out. She is also afraid that the men in her snooker team will not accept her.

This is an example of:

- **Gender-related rejection (at work)**
- **Negative expectations**

As a result of negative experiences, hypervigilance burdens executive functioning and threatens mental health. Growing up in a stigmatizing environment is associated with traumatic stress.

B. Jim, a young trans man, has been working for a few months as a temp at a window cleaning company. He enjoys the job and likes being outside. Jim tells his boss that he plans to undergo chest removal surgery. The following week, his boss does not offer him a new contract, and Jim loses his income. His boss says he needs strong men he can rely on.

This is an example of **gender-related discrimination**.

C. Tomas is chatting with another man who messaged him saying he liked his photo on the dating app Grindr. They start chatting, and Tomas tells him that he is a trans man. The man asks some questions about his transition, and Tomas tells him that he has undergone metoidioplasty and therefore has a smaller penis. He sends him a photo of it. The other man responds, "How can you have sex with that? That's nothing," and immediately blocks him.

This is an example of **gender-related rejection**.

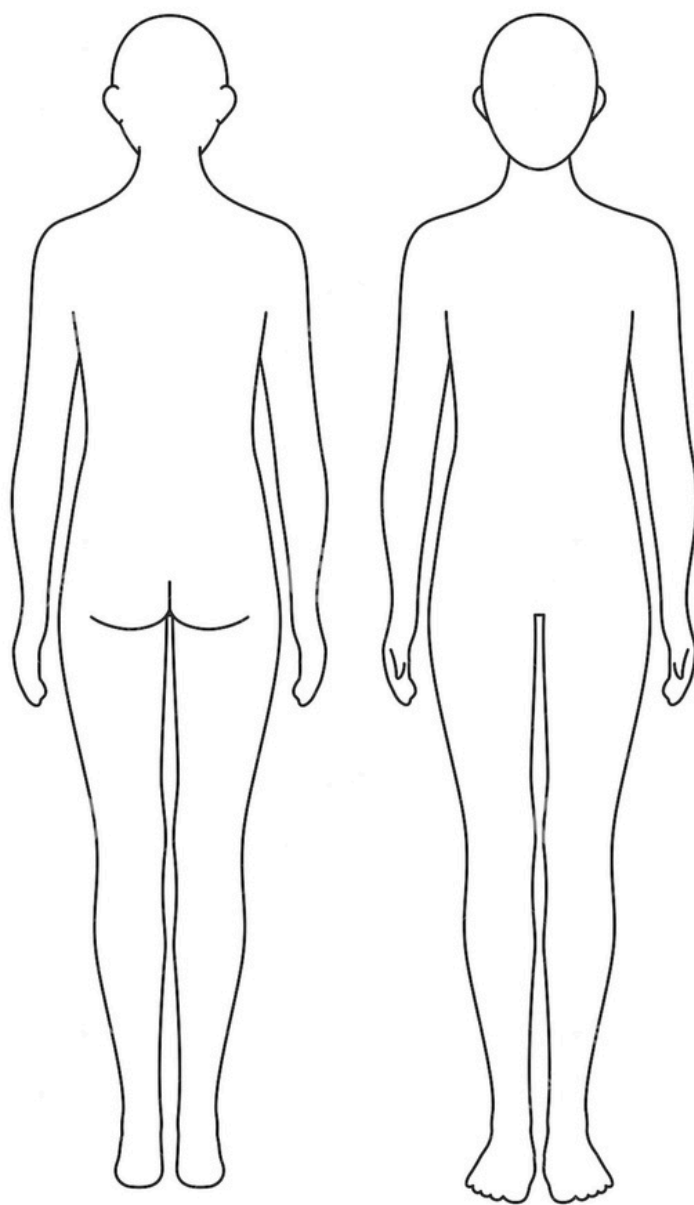
D. Tine goes to school as a girl, and all her friends and teachers use the pronouns she prefers. At home, however, her parents continue to use her old name and pronouns. According to them, she is still too young to take irreversible medical steps. Tine tries to explain to them what it means for her to be addressed with the correct pronouns, but even though her parents say they will try, she notices no change in their behavior.

This is an example of **non-affirmation of gender identity**.

E. Tonie identifies as non-binary and prefers they/them pronouns. Their colleagues don't know this and refer to them as female with she/her pronouns. Tonie is planning a mastectomy over the summer and will need to stay home for six weeks to recover. Tonie tells their colleagues they will be having surgery but not why. After the surgery, Tonie is unsure if they want to return to work. It is frustrating to be misgendered constantly, and Tonie also doesn't want to answer questions about the surgery. All of this causes them a lot of stress.

This is an example of **concealment**. People sometimes do this as a form of self-protection when they feel unsafe, but it can be harmful, for example, because you cannot be yourself or start isolating yourself.

ATTACHMENT V: EXERCISE ON BODY IMAGE



ATTACHMENT VI: (SELF)PORTRAITS

