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Supporting trans staff and students: Emma's story

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Background

I realised around puberty that I was really female but I didn't tell anybody. This pre-dated the internet, so I didn't have much access to information and didn't know what I was experiencing. There was no label for what I felt. I had a lot of difficult feelings around that time – I was confused and in a lot of emotional pain and struggling with shame and guilt. I even wondered if I would grow out of it?

I first learned about gender variations on TV – there were programmes about X and Y-chromosomes and I wondered if that was why I felt different? I also had some feminine physical characteristics, like small hands and feet.

I met my wife when we were teenagers and when we got married, I wondered if it would 'straighten me out'? I had a family and was a model 'new age' father who got involved in changing nappies, bottle feeding and was very nurturing, which was unusual in the early 80s. I wanted to provide for my wife and family, so to cope I internalised my pain.

When the children had left home, I talked to my GP who was quite supportive and I was prescribed hormones, which helped to take the edge off things. I had told my wife bits and pieces over the years, but I finally told her that I couldn't carry on living if I remained a man and I had to change gender.

Support from the university

I got a good job at a university, which would help pay for my surgery and voice training costs. As I was a permanent member of staff, I knew I was going to need to tell them when I transitioned. By this time I had partially transitioned at home, but not at work.

I approached someone in HR, as I had found the trans guidance on the university website, which was easy to locate and such a relief to read. I wanted to know what the next steps were and if there was a 'best' way to approach things – any guidance or advice basically. I met with an equality adviser to plan how to communicate the transition to my manager and department, which is a traditionally male-dominated area. My manager was quite nervous about doing the right thing and he was pleased to be able to meet with the equality adviser too. She offered to organise trans awareness training, which was accepted and paid for by the department.

I transitioned after having private facial feminisation surgery, working from home immediately afterwards and then on a phased return after three weeks, as I was still recuperating, physically and emotionally.

Responses from colleagues

I was delighted that my colleagues were really good about everything. I was worried about them getting my new name and title right and the change in pronouns, but they were really good – only a couple of mistakes, which were accidents. The only difficulty at work now is managing the large project I am working on! In society at large, I'd say ignorance and confusion between transvestites and transgender people is a bigger problem, as they really are distinctly different. Other than that I can't complain – things have worked out really well