

Family Functioning and Mental Health of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Youth

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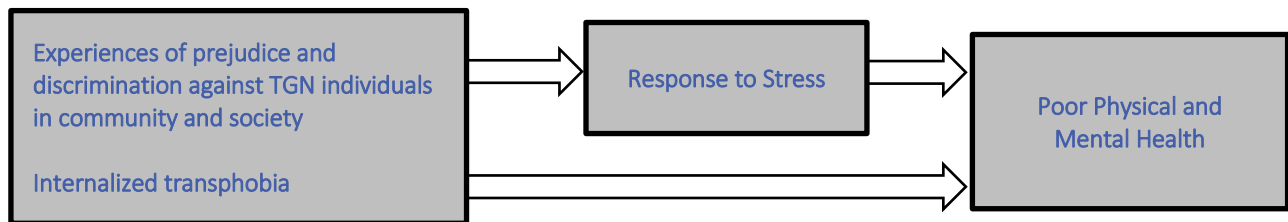
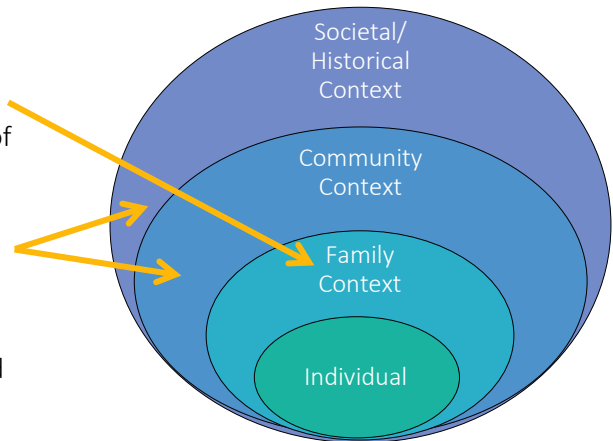
Trans Teen
Family Narratives Project

Background

Some studies have found that **transgender and gender non-conforming (TGN) youth** are at a higher risk of mental health concerns. We wanted to find out if **family dynamics might protect youth against these risks**.

Our study is based on two theories:

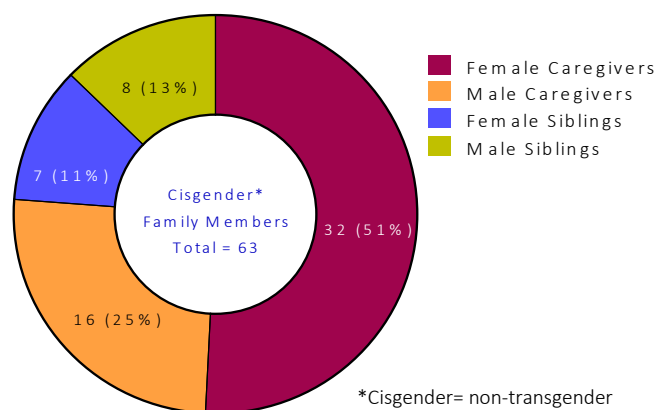
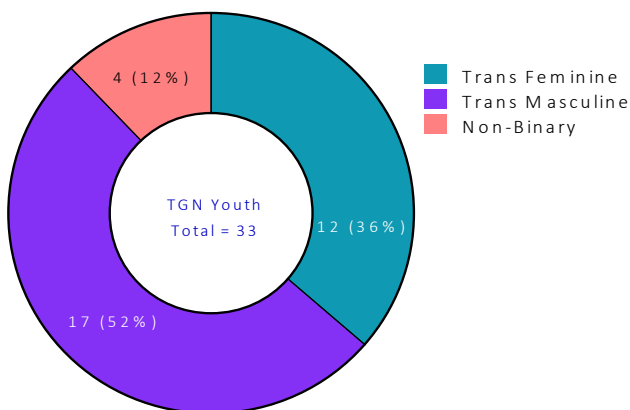
- Family Systems Theory:** This theory says that family members depend on and are affected by each other. So when one member experiences some change, the rest of the family feels it too.
- Minority Stress Theory:** This theory suggests that someone who holds a stigmatized “minority status” in society, such as a TGN youth, may experience worse health outcomes than someone in the “majority.” This difference in health is due to experiencing prejudice and discrimination because they are a minority in the community and in society.



Participants

Our study included **96 family members** from 33 families with TGN youth ages 13-17 years from **throughout New England**. Family members included parents/caregivers ages 37+ and siblings ages 14-24 years. Each family member completed a survey at Wave 1 of a longitudinal study to help us understand their family dynamics (such as quality of communication and satisfaction with family) and assess the mental health status of the TGN youth.

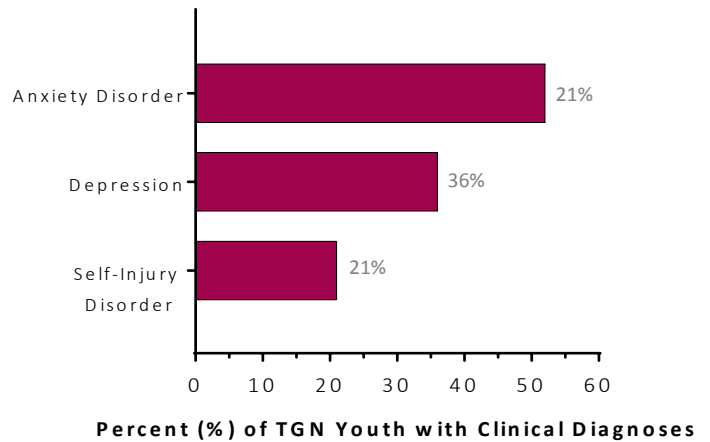
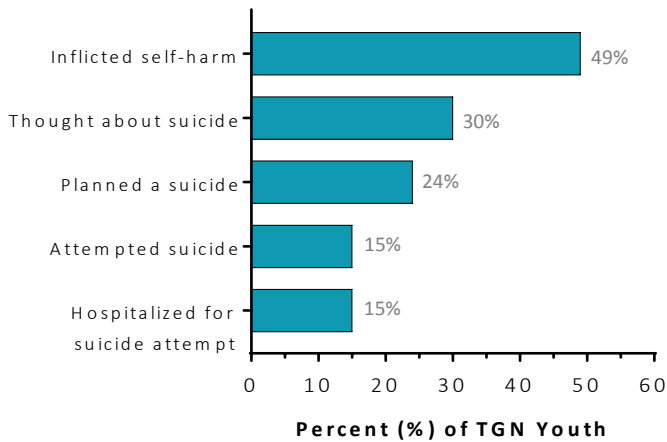
- 85% of participants live in metropolitan areas (including cities and suburbs).
- 40% of parents/caregivers have a master’s degree or higher.
- 73% of TGN youth identified as White, and 92% of parents/caregivers identified as White.



*Cisgender= non-transgender

TGN youth had poor mental health outcomes...

TGN youth in our study expressed high rates of mental health concerns. Many had inflicted harm on themselves, had thoughts of committing suicide, and/or had acted on their suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives. Many had also been clinically diagnosed with mental health disorders. **40% of TGN youth had been diagnosed** with a depressive disorder and **61% had a high depressive symptom score**.



...but TGN youth had a strong sense of self...

Despite the serious mental health concerns, TGN youth had **higher self-esteem and resilience** than expected. The average self-esteem score was 27.6 on a scale from 10 to 40, and the average resilience score was 3.7 on a scale from 1 to 5.



...and perception of better family functioning helped.

TGN youth who perceived **better quality communication** within the family experienced **less self-harm, fewer depressive symptoms, fewer anxious symptoms, and more self-esteem and resiliency**. We found the **same trend** in TGN youth's **reported family satisfaction**, a measure we determined from multiple factors, such as the degree of closeness with family members.

Interestingly, **how parents and siblings perceived family functioning did not seem to be related to the mental health of TGN youth**. This suggests that TGN youth may perceive their family communication and relationships differently than their family members do.

Clinical Implications and Future Steps

These results show that it is important for healthcare providers and researchers to talk to TGN youth about their experiences separately from other family members, as it is their perspectives that appear to matter most for their mental health.

Family support on its own may not be strong enough to protect TGN youth from poor mental health outcomes.

Though the youth we talked to had families that were supportive enough to participate in a study together, TGN youth still had substantial suicidality, depression, anxiety, and self-harm.

Additional support from the community and society is needed, such as improved school policies against discrimination and bullying, and anti-discrimination laws to protect TGN youth and adults. **Clinicians and community partners can play a vital role as advocates for TGN youth!**