How to Spot a Gender Affirming Therapist

according to Lida N. Vala, LMFT

*INSTRUCTIONS: Read this thoroughly a few times to become familiar with some of the habits you can expect from a Gender Affirming Therapist who is proficient in working with TGNC folks. Place a checkmark next to items that are most important so that you can feel more prepared as you search for a best fit.*

Gender specialists:

\*Know the distinct differences between 1) gender identity 2) sex designated at birth 3) gender expression 4) romantic attraction 5) sexual attraction

\*Know that there is no defining age when a person “knows their gender,” rather an individual is constantly evolving to better understand their gender identity and gender expression once they are given the freedom to safely explore their own personal narrative against the backdrop of their environment.

\*Will not ask you what your birth name/dead-name/former name is. (BE AWARE THOUGH, sometimes insurance companies require this from the therapist in order to align the therapist’s information with the records on file with the insurance company).

\*Will recognize that every individual’s gender journey is as unique as the person themselves, and not necessarily binary.

\*Recognize that not every Transgender and Non-Binary person will choose a social or medical transition.

\*Will offer forms that allow you to write in their name and pronouns.

\*Will acknowledge that you may use different names/pronouns based on the setting as well as who else is within the vicinity of a conversation (i.e. waiting area, with family members), and will give you the opportunity to use various names and pronouns throughout the course of therapy.

\*Will ask you during the initial assessment what gender you identify as rather than presuming it based on stereotypical features or gender expression (voice pitch, clothing, etc.).

\*Will ask your gender identity/name/pronouns and will NOT refer to them as “preferred gender identity/name/pronouns”.

\*Will also honor you if you’re questioning gender identity/name/pronouns and allow you to label them as preferences if you’re in the process of questioning which ones you’d like to be known as.

\*Recognizes that past severe trauma does NOT mean that your gender identity is invalid, and that healing from severe trauma is NOT a prerequisite for gender affirming treatment.

\*Will remember that language is in constant transition and it is the RESPONSIBILITY of the therapist to stay updated on language through continual training.

\*Will use affirming language when discussing your body. (E.g. Chest Reconstruction rather than. Mastectomy)

\*Recognize that “not being read as your identified gender” is not a problem, unless you state that it’s a problem.

\*Will not presume you are a binary transgender individual unless you state that you are.

\*Will not have an agenda or predisposed path for you, and allow you to discover your own path.

\*Will admit what they don’t know and refer to other providers who do.

\*Will think beyond the binary gender system we have all been steeped in all these years through ongoing training and consultation with other gender specialists.

\*Will explore their own biases, prejudices, value judgments, assumptions, and emotional reactions when working with transgender and non-binary folks, and gender expansive children. This process takes on-going hard work and a willingness to learn and grow.

\*Will remain committed to the truth of human complexity and the multifaceted nature of the self. They will remember that sometimes the focus of therapy *isn't* about gender.

\*Are familiar with the intricacies of gender identity and gender expression at different stages of child development and that the specialist is willing and able to work with the family and support systems in a culturally appropriate manner as a part of the therapy.

\*Can refer to local doctors, psychiatrists, support groups, surgeons, etc. to call upon when needed to support the child and family.

\*Know how to discuss and support a child/family with transition related activities including coming out to extended family, family, school staff, family & friends.

\*Are aware of the history of the mental health providers' roles over the course of transgender health care provision in the United States, including the ways that transgender and gender nonconforming people have been pathologized, restricted from accessing treatment, and exploited. Gender specialists are conscious of this as they interact with transgender and gender nonconforming clients, and of the positionality and power they hold, especially if they are cisgender or not members of transgender communities.

\*Are aware of the complex ways that gender identity intersects with not only sexual orientation, but with race, class, religion, ability, and other markers. Culturally responsive gender specialists are cautious about making assumptions that are based on dominant culture norms and knowledgeable of how gender expression varies per culture.

\*Are aware of the ways that transgender and gender nonconforming people face anti-trans bias and discrimination, as well as health disparities, when seeking housing, employment, and health care.