

**GENDER TRAUMA** - by Robert Ben Mitchell, 2021  
from: <https://childrenofpain.com/materials.html>

**When was gender trauma first identified?** I first coined the phrase "gender traumatized" in 2019 to describe myself in the following email to Dr. Joy Ladin of Yeshiva University:

*Hi Dr. Ladin,*

*I just heard your interview with Krista Tippett this morning and was profoundly moved by your story and words. Finding and becoming oneself in such a harsh and punishing world is an immeasurable accomplishment.*

*I, too, have struggled for decades with who I am. I am a survivor of extreme sexual and physical violence perpetrated by my family upon me from my earliest memories until my latter teenage years. This abuse was, in fact, so extreme that in one episode - a beating - the initial reaction of the responding police officer was to shoot me because he mistakenly thought I was a rabid dog.*

*I am now in my early sixties and a physician who works with people who are addicted to opioids. In 2014, I performed a five question childhood abuse survey with my patients in which nearly half of them responded that childhood abuse had played a significant role in the development of their drug addictions. To my surprise, I also finally admitted that I could personally answer yes to every one of those questions. This was a major turning point for me, as by then I had done decades of therapy but had yet to put all the repressed pieces of my personal puzzle together.*

*With that survey as a new starting point, and after much more focused counseling, I wrote a book about my early experiences titled "Speechless: an autobiography of child murder and rape." By that time, I had already written several books, but this was by far the hardest one, and I cried a lot while preparing it.*

*I published my story in 2018 so that I could give copies to my patients in an effort to make it easier for them to share their stories of trauma with me. It was very successful in this regard, however, I will tell you it is not an easy book to read. One person even asked Amazon's Audible to take it down until I could prove that it was not a work of fiction.*

*The reason I'm writing to you is that, since authoring this book, I have had a profound, personal revelation. Unlike today's world, when I was growing up there wasn't an alphabet soup of gender options to choose from: you were either straight or gay. Brutalized the way I was by my nuclear family, I never wanted to have children of my own. So, well before puberty, I concluded that I was not straight. Thus, in my mind, this left only one option: I must be gay.*

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*I struggled with my supposed sexual identity for many years before finally coming out in my early 20's. I was so committed to this process of self realization that I went on to become a community leader, opening the first store-front Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Miami in the late 1980's and authoring two books on AIDS. However, something was always missing. I never enjoyed sex.*

*Before I came out, I had two relationships with women, both of which lasted about 6 months. Then, after becoming me, I had about a dozen one night stands and three longer-term relationships (9 months to 2 years) with men. But I never enjoyed any of them: men or women. Physically I could perform, yet I derived no pleasure from it. However, I kept at it as if I was trying to "pull it off" in the hopes that, like learning to ride a bike, with practice I would come to love what I was doing and who I was doing it with.*

*This never worked and, by my late forties, I realized that everyone brings baggage to a relationship, but I bring a warehouse. Now, I have come to understand that that warehouse is the reason that I am neither straight nor gay. After writing *Speechless*, I was able to finally see that I don't like sex: neither LGBTQ or in any other way. Given that my earliest childhood memory is of my father forcing me to perform oral sex on him in the presence of my mother when I was two years old, close physical contact with another person has always been psychologically and emotionally traumatic for me.*

*When I have discussed this epiphany with others, I usually get the same reaction: why don't you just do some more therapy? As we live in a hypersexualized society, I can understand this advice. After all, how could anyone not like sex? For me, however, having survived years of beatings and rapes, including witnessing a murder during one of those episodes, I have intimacy and trust issues which far outstrip my drive or desire for human companionship.*

***Now, in my latter years, I have one question: what am I? I'm not gay, or straight, or any of the other letters of the sexual alphabet. I'm not even asexual, as that implies a person who stands on neutral ground without being drawn in any particular direction. For me, it is like being in a bottomless pit of gender horror, with happiness waiting on the other side of a swim across an infinitely long lake of acid. This is why, so far, the best words I can come up to describe myself is gender traumatized.***

*Given your experiences and wisdom, I was wondering what you would call me. I know they're just words, yet somehow, they do give us meaning, hope, and understanding.*

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Sincerely,  
Robert Ben Mitchell  
trafn@yahoo.com

Dr. Ladin graciously replied by email that same day:

*Dear Robert,*

*Thank you so much for writing. I'm so, so sorry about the horrors you have experienced, and inspired by all the good you have brought out of and despite the evil you endured.*

*I would never presume to name someone else's most intimate feelings or experiences. But because you have asked me, I will respond, with the caveat that the best words - really, the only words - are the words that ring truest to you, and help you understand, communicate, and move forward. I think that many people who have gone through a lot less also struggle with placing themselves into the recognized identity boxes. There are comparatively so many now that it seems like there must be a term for each of us, but the truth is that no terms can ever completely name or express the richness and complexity of human beings. They are always compromises, simplifications we adopt because they help us understand and express ourselves to others. When they don't work for us, those compromises feel like betrayals or erasures, which is what I am hearing you say about the term "asexual."*

*I am really struck by the term "gender traumatized," and I think that would resonate for a lot of trans people. In your story, I hear more trauma around sex and sexuality than around gender, but again, the question is what terms work best for you. I don't think that all damage can be healed; a lot of therapy is about coping with aftermath and harm, about finding better coping strategies and leaving ones we have outgrown behind. So I don't think you should feel pressure to "do something" about your relation to sex. It sounds like not having sex and being able to honestly name why sex is not good for you are coping strategies that work for you. I think sex is one of many forms of intimacy, and honestly, for many people our age, far from the most important one. Whatever your relation to sex, the important thing is that you are being true and honest about your own experience, and coping with the scars you bear in ways that are compassionate to yourself. You are not only surviving, but thriving despite terrible trauma. To me, those are the most important terms for naming what you have told me about your identity.*

Best,  
Joy

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**What is gender trauma?** Gender trauma is a strong, even overwhelming, aversion to gender-based behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs due to trauma from past events such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse suffered during one's formative years. It often manifests as a discomfort with intimacy, sexuality, and social norms which mandate gender conformity. This discomfort can, at times, elevate to the level of pain and fear, negatively impacting the gender traumatized person's social, occupational and personal life.

Gender trauma is not a form of sexual identity, but rather a roadblock to forming a functional and fulfilling sexuality. Also, being trauma-based, it is not the same as asexuality which is non-traumatic indifference toward sexual identities and activities.

Gender trauma, like all forms of trauma, is unique to each affected individual, and left unaddressed it can have a disabling and destructive impact on one's life. However, with time, perseverance and support, it is possible to learn to live with and heal from gender trauma.

**How can you identify gender trauma?** Here are the key things to remember:

1. It is trauma-based.
2. It forms secondary to abuse, often in childhood.
3. It is a complex form of PTSD, due to multiple abuse episodes.
4. It is NOT asexuality as it is from trauma and, therefore, not formed from a neutral basis.
5. It is a diagnosis of exclusion that is made after all other relevant diagnosis' have been ruled out.

**An example of gender trauma:** TL is a 44 year old female who was sexually and physically abused by her father and uncle from the ages of 7 to 11 years old (complex PTSD). They threatened to harm her and her mother (verbal and emotional abuse) if she ever spoke about this to anyone, so she never did.

After the abuse had stopped, TL did see a counselor in high school because of problems she was having socializing with others her age, but they did not talk about her history of abuse. She had one boyfriend her senior year of high school. They were physically intimate - kissing and holding hands - but did not have intercourse. In her junior year at college TL met her second boyfriend with whom she married after dating for six months. They had one child together, but divorced a year after graduation.

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After the divorce, TL found employment and raised her baby as a single mother. She did not date again. In her mid-thirties, she had a routine exam with blood work by a gynecologist, and the results were normal. In her early forties, a few years after her child moved out, she sought counseling over concerns that she had no interesting in dating or being sexually involved with anyone, male or female. Through counseling she became consciously aware again of the childhood abuse she had repressed for decades and realized that intimacy and sexual activity brought back painful memories and feelings of that abuse. No other causes for her concerns were identified (diagnosis of exclusion)

**Can you recover from gender trauma?** Survivors of gender trauma have additional challenges in their everyday lives that others never see, hear or feel. The scars from gender trauma are deep and crippling physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Left untreated, this can turn a great day into an okay day, an okay day into a bad day, and a bad day into a nightmare.

Though this may sound redundant, the first step in healing from gender trauma is to simply take the first step. There are many options to try such as talking to a trusted friend or family member, participating in a support group, or seeking help from a counselor or coach. So choose the option that is most comfortable for you when the time is right for you.

Gender trauma is complex, and the healing process can be lifelong. But that doesn't mean the suffering has to be lifelong, too. Though we cannot go back and change the past, once you take that first step, you will find that change is possible, that you can come to terms with your gender trauma, and that you can limit its impact on your future. And when you re-take control of your life, living conscious of where you were and where you are headed, so that you are making the best possible decisions for yourself, that is when you will achieve recovery.

As a survivor of gender trauma with over 25 years in stable recovery, I can honestly tell you that this process is not easy. I have cried many times along the way, and I'll cry many more times yet to come. But I can also now laugh and enjoy myself in ways that were never possible while gender trauma controlled my life and the choices I made. Now, I work every day to maintain my stable recovery, and I never take it for granted.