PREVENT RESIST SUPPORT Episode 7: Questioning Your Gender



Prevent Resist Support Podcast Episode 7: Questioning Your Gender with Alexander Reid

Anne Rudzinski: Hey everyone you're listening to Prevent Resist Support, a podcast by the Sexual Misconduct Office at the University of Windsor.

(Introduction Music)

Anne: Hey everyone! We've got a really exciting episode today for trans day of visibility or TDOV. We are chatting with Alex Reid who is the executive director of W.E Trans Support here in Windsor. Alex holds a BA Honours in French and a Bachelor of Education and is an alumnus of our Bystander program here at UWindsor. Alex has also worked as a supply teacher in Windsor-Essex county and has helped with Public Education work with our office. So we have an awesome two-part episode for you today. Part one is about questioning your gender and Part 2 is how to support a trans loved one so a two-part episode in celebration of TDOV which I think is excellent I'm really excited to chat with Alex he's always so lovely and I think you're really gonna enjoy our episode today. If you would like support in our in Windsor Essex County you can check out W.E Trans Support ad their website is wetransport.ca I'll put that in our episode description for you and if you're a member of our UWindsor campus community you can check out our office at uwindsor.ca/sexual-assault or you can get in touch with Dusty for direct support at SV support@uwindsor.ca If you're not in Windsor and are in Ontario, you check out the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres. Their website is sexualassaultsupport.ca and they have a list of support services across Ontario. Let's get into our interview

(Transition Music)

Anne: Amazing, so welcome Alex. Thank you so much for hanging out with me today.

Alexander Reid: Absolutely thank you for having me.

Anne: So one of the things that I want to start out with is W.E Trans Support is undergoing a rebranding process and you are announcing the new name for W.E Trans Support today so can you share that new name with us?

Alex: Absolutely I feel like I've been holding on to this for so long, it's no longer a secret, which is super exciting. We are rebranding to the name Trans Wellness Ontario and the subheading or descriptor is going to be Trans and Queer Community Health and Support Centre.

Anne: Amazing, I love that name so much. And then another thing I would love to hear about is, can you tell me a little bit about the work that you are currently doing and how you got into that work 'cause I think when we have student listeners they always wanna know how people with, like, super cool jobs got their super cool jobs.

Alex: Absolutely thank you for calling my job a super cool job. I also think it's a super cool job. So essentially I did go to school to become a French teacher and honestly, when I was in teachers college I did a concurrent Bachelor of Ed and Bachelor of Arts in French at the same time. So when I was in my third year and I took the 350 bystander course I started, like, realizing that I wanted to do community education, and so I did end up finishing my degree and becoming a French teacher, but basically what happened was I started teaching for the school board as a substitute teacher. I didn't like it as much as I thought I would but I did, having some community education experience through Bystander. And then also when I met Jayce Carver who was the founder of Trans Wellness Ontario, formerly known as W.E. Trans Support, I had the opportunity to do community education with her and teach about trans activism, trans health, trans wellness, and I realized that that was really my passion. So I was super lucky that when I took the bystander

course it opened my eyes to kind of different experiences of education. I always wanted to be an educator, I've always loved educating folks, but I didn't really see opportunities for that outside of the classroom until I took the bystander course and I was teaching my peers about sexual violence prevention and the bystander effect. So it was really cool to transition into that. So essentially what happened was I became vice president of the board of directors at Trans Wellness Ontario and then I resigned from that position so that I could have a paid position as a peer mentor. Then I was a peer mentor for about two years and just recently in November, I got promoted to be executive director. So yeah that's what I'm doing now. I took a one year leave from the school board so that I could kind of feel this out and see how I like it and so far so good it's been really really fun, a really big change to be you know in a position of management from before when I was kind of like a small kid in a big world as a substitute teacher but it's been really fun and I've been really enjoying the process of doing community education, but also being part of this whole rebranding process and doing, you know, some things that I didn't think I would be so interested in, like designing merchandise and kind of managing staff and fun stuff like that.

Anne: I love that so much because my passion is also community education and I went like a different route through community psychology, and so I think one of the cool things is that you can arrive in these types of careers through many different routes.

Alex: Yeah it's really cool that you can go to school for something and enjoy it, but then still end up in a career that's different from that and that's totally fine, or if you decide to like switch your degree midway because you realize that it's not something you're super passionate about. Like I think it's really important for us to normalize that.

Anne: yeah absolutely. So I'm super excited for a chat today. We decided to have a two-part conversation. The first part is going to be about questioning your gender and kind of like thinking through that process and what are some of the things that folks might want to know about that process, and then the second part will be about how to support a trans person in your life if you have a loved one who comes out as trans

and how to be you know supporting and affirming to them. So let's start out with part one questioning your gender. So one of the gaps I think that we have in our education right now is about that process of questioning your gender and I know that that looks really different for everyone, it's not like a one size fits all process, but can you talk a little bit about what question you're questioning your gender can look like?

Alex: Well first of all thank you for acknowledging that this looks different for everyone because that's really like the most important part about being trans is understanding that your transition will look so much different from everyone else's transition and it's still valid, you know, whether or not you decide to undertake a lot of steps of transition which will kind of cover like the different options that are available and, you know, there are other people who don't do anything to medically, physically, legally, transition and that super valid too. so the first step usually in realizing that you're trans is questioning your gender. So questioning your gender can look like experimenting with different names, experimenting with different pronouns, whether that be with like certain groups of people. So for example when I started to realize that I was trans, I had my friends, my close friends, call me he him pronouns first before I told anyone else. So my family, at work, at school, they didn't know yet that I was questioning my gender. But, so, my first step was cutting my hair. That was the first thing that I did. I went from long hair to short hair that was kind of my first experimentation. Then I started with new pronouns and I actually didn't really change my name, my name was just a different form of Alexander before so I didn't super change my name everyone was already really calling me Alex. So first was hair, then was pronouns. I was already really wearing like the more masculine clothes that I wear now, but I would say usually like grooming, so whether it's like facial hair, body hair, changing the way that you dress, or the way that you cut your hair, or the way that you style your hair, whether you wear makeup or not. Those are some of the most common gender-questioning things and then a lot of it is really internal as well so a lot of it is thinking about how you want to be seen by others, brainstorming what name and pronouns work for you. So really the possibilities are endless but those are some of the options that people use most often I would say to question their gender.

Anne: Amazing I think that such a wonderful answer. And then another question that I have is you know what is the difference between questioning how you represent your gender, so for example being a woman who presents in a more masculine way or a man who presents in a more feminine way, and questioning whether your assigned gender at birth is accurate to you? Like, how do you know when you crush that threshold of identifying as a different gender?

Alex: That's a super important question. So this is something that people often consider is the same thing. So what they'll think of is you know trans man or trans masculine people and more like Butch or masculine women are the same, which is not true. So we want to make a distinction, between gender identity and gender expression. So, gender identity is the way that you feel about yourself and your gender in your mind in your heart whether you feel like a man like a woman like a non-binary person, agender, genderqueer, whatever those titles are that feel comfortable to you in terms of the way that you feel about yourself and the way you want to be perceived by others. So gender identity is that. Then gender expression that gender expression is the way that you express your gender through grooming, social demeanour, clothing you know like different ways that you behave or act or dress that express your gender identity to the world. So the difference there is that your gender expression does not need to match your gender identity. So if you are a man, for example, that's your gender identity, you identify as a man whether you're cis man whether you're a trans man, whatever it may be then if your gender expression is masculine it would be those stereotypical masculine things that we see like facial hair, body here you know having maybe having short hair, wearing suits or pants, those stereotypical masculine things. So that would be a man with a masculine gender expression. But if you were a man with a feminine gender expression, so maybe, for example, you like to paint your nails or wear makeup, maybe you just like wearing, you know, like lighter colour clothing that sometimes associated with femininity like, pinks or pastels or whatever, or maybe you like to wear dresses and skirts and things like that you, can still be a man whether you are cisgender or transgender and be feminine at the same time. So those are the two distinctions. With gender expression, it does not need to be on the same side as your gender identity in the spectrum of

masculinity, femininity, androgyny. So the difference here when you're thinking about it for yourself, so say you're thinking about questioning your gender and you're not sure whether you're just, you know a masculine woman or whether you're a trans man or a non-binary person the, the distinction here is that you want to think about, you know, am I comfortable with my identity, with the way people perceive me, am I comfortable with, with my body and my pronouns, and things like that, as long as I get to dress and act the way that matches my gender expression or is it kind of a deeper-rooted issue with the way people are perceiving you, do you feel uncomfortable like you're being misgendered, do you have any body dysphoria? Those are some of the negative things that we use to kind of categorize trans folks, but also do you experience gender euphoria? So, Anne, I know and we talk about this a lot when we do our Sex Ed 101 class, but it's important to note that if you're experiencing gender euphoria, for example, if someone calls you he him and it brings you a little flutter of joy in your heart, or when someone calls you Sir or Mr or whatever it may be, if that brings you joy, you know, then you can consider maybe I do have more of a masculine gender identity. But the important thing here honestly is that you're being true to yourself, and you're listening to your heart and your feelings, and the way that makes you feel comfortable and confident in yourself. So being a masculine woman or being a trans man, maybe it doesn't look super different to the outside world but it definitely feels different if you need that validation from yourself about your gender identity. So what's important here is that we know that, you know, looking a certain way and feeling a certain way don't necessarily have to match, but feeling validated in yourself and you know comfortable with your gender and experiencing that gender euphoria that's what we're striving for.

Anne: I love that. and I think it gets more complicated because like, pink and florals can be masculine and body hair can be feminine so, I think it's tricky.

Alex: Exactly, it's one of those things where it's really important how you feel about yourself and not super important how others see you. So my experience as being a man, I do often go through phases where I wear more jewelry or I paint my nails or I wear crop tops or short shorts or

whatever, and that doesn't necessarily make me less masculine or make me less of a man. So it is really nuanced and the important thing is that you're comfortable with yourself and that if you have questions about your gender identity and you're questioning whether or not you're being trans, that you listen to yourself and you follow your heart and whatever steps of transition or exploration feel right to you.

Anne: I love that and let's talk about pronouns for a minute. So what does it look like to decide which pronouns are right for you?

Alex: OK so this is a super important thing as well, and I think that determining what pronouns are right for you is all about experimentation. So the first step typically is like thinking about how you would feel if someone called you those pronouns. For me, I was really looking masculine and being perceived as a boy by strangers before I really knew that I was trans. And basically like it's OK if your first reaction isn't like wow that felt really cool. But kind of as you think more about your gender identity you'll notice that if other people are gendering you correctly it'll feel really good, you'll get that sense of gender euphoria. So what you know, deciding what pronouns are right for you really turns into asking people you trust to experiment with pronouns, you know, hearing them out loud or reading them in text messages when referred to you they'll give you that sense of like icky or that sense of gender euphoria that like comfort and joy. Pretty, pretty commonly, you know, as you're experimenting with it it might take some time but initially you'll get that sense of whether or not something feels comfortable for you. And if it doesn't, you can always keep experimenting. And something that I really loved was one of my favourite spoken word poets, Andrea Gibson, they have I spoken word poem about pronouns and it says like your pronouns haven't even been invented yet. And so I think it's really cool to think about how, you know, if you don't find pronouns immediately that feel comfortable for you, you can always explore neo pronouns you can make your own pronouns, you can do whatever you want, right like language is evolving constantly and experimenting with pronouns is a cool way to take control over language. So I think it's really just about like what feels good for you, have a little trial period, and if it doesn't work, next!

Anne: And one of the things that I found so interesting about pronouns because I am cisgender and was born as a girl, and still identify as a woman, I use she her pronouns, and one of the things I saw in a meme was the idea that they them is not a gender-neutral or like a nonbinary pronoun, like just because you're nonbinary you don't have to use they them it could be it doesn't have to be attached to a specific gender, and so there's basically no rules about which pronouns go with which genders, and I really loved that, and it was super interesting to think about. And so, it sounds like you don't have to use a specific gender just because it hypothetically like matches in quotation marks with the gender as.

Alex: Yeah. I know non binary people who use like binary pronouns, whether it's you know she her or he him, and I know like binary trans people who like to use they them too, right like it's totally cool however feels comfortable for you, right. Sometimes people get caught up in like what's correct or what's normal quote-unquote normal and they, I forgot that we can't see the quotes that I'm making, but it's really important to just like go with what feels good for you.

Anne: Absolutely. So let's talk a little bit about the process of transitioning. So I know that we've kind of already said that it's kind of as much or as little as you would like if you're thinking about going through this process, but let's talk about you know some of the things that folks might want to think about and what resources are out there to support them.

Alex: Absolutely, so super always want to reassure everyone that you can undertake as many or as few of these options as you want and you're still valid as a trans person. So you might want to do every single one of these things and that's awesome and you might also wanna do one of them or two of them or none of them and that's totally fine and cool and you are still 100% valid as a trans person just by calling yourself a trans person. So self-identification is really all that you need to be trans. But so for anyone who's interested or wants to learn about the different steps that you can undertake, we'll kind of go through them and basically like least invasive to most invasive or at least changing to most changing order. So the first thing that we talk about it like we mentioned with gender expression is changing your, the way you

present yourself. So that can be cutting your hair, growing your hair shaving or not shaving your body or facial hair, makeup not makeup things like that that you dress things that you wear whether you wear jewelry or not all those different things. So maybe experimenting with ways that you haven't presented yourself before that you're curious about where you wonder whether or not it's gonna make you feel comfortable. That's typically 1st and that would be like exploring with your gender presentation or your gender expression. And then like I mentioned with I did when I don't know what I did with my friends was socially changing your name or your pronouns. So for me, I spoke with a couple of my friends. I asked them to start calling me he him pronouns. I did that for like 8 months or like a year I think. I tried it for a really long time 'cause I was like this is going to be a big change for my family, so I want to make sure that I'm confident. Obviously, it's not necessary to do it for that long, but if you want to go for it. So yeah changing your name thinking a new name and picking new pronouns or experimenting with new pronouns and a new name those are all things that you can do inside your own head with a trusted person or a group oppressing people or you could go like all the way out 100% tell everyone at the same time making big ol' Facebook post that says these are my new name and pronouns all of those things. So any of those options or none, but those are some ways that you can kind of announce your name and gender pronouns change. And then next would be legally changing things. So you can undergo things like changing your name on your birth certificate, driver's license, health card. These are all things that you can easily change in Ontario. There is a barrier to access. It costs \$155 to change your name and \$155 to change your gender marker. I believe there by depending on, well I know this is coming out this year but I don't remember whether or not still an option, but at some point the government was allowing a rebate on the gender marker change. So they were giving you a gender marker change for free because they announced the X option on drivers licenses and such. So you can change your legal gender marker to male, female or X. Unfortunately we're still at a process where your gender marker is on your identity documents. So hopefully someday they won't be there at all, but for now you can choose between those three. And then there are some medical transition options as well, so hormone replacement therapy or HRT. So for transmasculine folks, so someone who was assigned female

at birth, you can go on puberty blockers from you know like the prime age of puberty until you decided whether you wanna go on hormones or not and then that option would be testosterone. So you can get testosterone injections, there's a patch you can have, there's a pump that you can put gel on your shoulders. There's unfortunately no option to take a pill, but that's because they had discovered that testosterone levels were not good for your liver. And then for transfeminine people, anyone who was assigned male at birth, there are also hormone blockers that you could go on through puberty and then there's also testosterone blockers. So some trans folks, transfeminine folks have to take testosterone blockers with estrogen or progesterone because their testosterone is super strong, so they've got that for an option. And then there are also surgeries that are available, so there's a vast vast variety of different types of surgeries people always ask have you had "the surgery" when referring to trans folk, but we want to make sure that we, first of all, that's a super invasive question so we're not asking that, but also that we know there's more than one surgery that you can have. So there are chest surgeries for trans masculine, transfeminine folks, and non binary people. There are also genital surgeries, there are facial feminization surgeries. You can get procedures on your vocal cords to make them thinner. There are lots of different options to go through but basically, that's kind of a TedTalk about the different physical transition things you can do, social transition things you can do, medical transition things and legal. So in terms of support systems, so obviously all of us at Trans Wellness Ontario our goal is to make sure that trans people are experiencing holistic wellness and taking care of themselves. So we do have support in terms of peer mentorship. We have a transmasculine transfeminine and nonbinary peer mentors. We also have a peer mentor for any parents or guardians who are going through the transition process with their child, and then we also have obviously mental health counselling. All of these services are free, so mental health counselling so if you're needing help with kind of going through the emotional process of this with a professional. We also have the PBSC clinic, so pro bono students Canada, they help us with our legal name and gender marker change clinic. So they provide funding so that means the access to changing your name and gender record has been removed, that barrier has been removed and they help you fill out the name and gender marker process other paperwork and then

they submit it for you which is wonderful. And then we also have a connection with, in Windsor, doctor Wilson, and so he provides prescriptions for hormone replacement therapy and as well as medical referrals for surgeries. And so instead of having to you know before Trans Wellness Ontario or W.E. trans existed; they did have to have a letter from a psychologist that would give them a referral to doctor Wilson to make sure that they were basically, it was a way of them trying to make sure that people were like quote-unquote trans enough to access HRT. So now we have removed that barrier, so now us at Trans Wellness Ontario, once you get a letter from your general practitioner to go see Dr. Wilson, we provide a letter of support saying that we are supporting you through the transition process and that you are ready to be on months, so that we are no longer providing that barrier to access by you having to go see someone, pay for them to do kind of like a psych evaluation to prove that your trans enough because we know that super triggering for people and you know mental health therapy in terms of like psychiatrists psychologists, they're not always the most trans-friendly. So we're still trying to figure that out in terms of you know referrals for diagnosis because social workers don't do diagnosis, but for now, in terms of accessing foremost in surgeries we also provide letters of support for that too. That was a lot of words.

Anne: No that was amazing. I feel like this is so helpful. And then I know the next bit we wanted to talk about with barriers to accessing medical care around transitioning and I think you touched on that already are there any other pieces that are worth mentioning?

Alex: Yeah so I think that significant barriers that trans folks face when accessing medical care. So what this looks like is not just access to hormones and surgeries, right, because hormones and surgeries are part of being trans if that's those are the steps that you're undertaking, but it also means like gynecological care it also means like STI testing it also means like mental health counseling. All of those things are unfortunately more difficult to access adequate care as trans individuals. And so I'll tell you why you know from my non medical perspective you know as an activist. It's important to note that like trans people's bodies change as they go through hormone replacement therapy or if they get surgeries. So trans people's bodies aren't

inherently different, but if we go through hormone replacement therapy for certain amounts of time or if we get different surgeries, like our bodies are now different. So we need doctors that are educated who have adequate information about trans bodies and those are few and far in between. So what that looks like is people who have surgeries or people who've had one on replacement therapy for a long time, they don't feel comfortable getting like pap smears or you know like screenings for HIV or screenings for different STIs because they don't feel as though the doctors are going to be educated on what their bodies look like. And from my personal experience and, you know, content warning for anyone who's also trans who might be listening, it's difficult because you feel as though if you're going to a physician that's not educated it's like you're a medical experiment for them to learn through you know. So it's really challenging to find physicians who are educated about things like post-op trans folks or hormone replacement therapy. And so when you're going to get like a regular gynecological checkup or you're going to get like some sort of cancer screenings and stuff you don't wanna be someone that they ask all their curious questions too, so that can be really challenging. And that's another one of the barriers that trans people folk face when they're when they're going with medical care is just like inadequate education for physicians, but also disrespect for our personal boundaries in terms of the information that should be asked by a medical professional and the information that like they're curious about when they should really be learning about it in school.

Anne: Absolutely that's so awful. And you know that's not the first time that I've heard a story like that about a doctor asking really intrusive questions. And I think that goes for both doctors and also like the psychologists who are supposed to provide that letter. And so, I think that unfortunately it sounds like trans folks are just like in the line of potentially being asked some really inappropriate questions. So how do you know which questions are appropriate or not appropriate and what should you expect as a normal part of that process and what is not normal?

Alex: OK so I saw something online the other day which I thought was really interesting. I learn a lot of information from Instagram, so for anyone

who like, it seems strange, but for anyone who's like an activist or outlet or is questioning your gender you follow certain accounts on Instagram. They really talk to you about like activism surrounding gender identity and gender expression. So something I learned was trans broken arm syndrome. And they also you know this is a similar experience as well with people who identify themselves as fat. So what they'll do is, you know, trans folks will go to the doctor and they'll say something like, you know, I'm having insomnia or my blood pressure is high or something and immediately the doctor says well it's because you're on hormone replacement therapy or it's because you're trans. And so what happens is you like you go to the doctor to access some services and they always make it about your transition and about how, you know, if you weren't taking hormones you wouldn't be experiencing these negative side effects or if you weren't trans your mental health would be better or things like that. So one of the things that you can kind of figure out as part of the medical process as a trans person is do you feel like the doctors making everything you say about your transition? So if you went in there with a sinus infection, is he saying it's because you're on hormones or is he asking you questions about like genital surgeries or what surgeries you had or how long you've been on hormones? Is that really what you went in there for or are they trying to make everything about you being trans? So that's one of the things that I notice is that there's a really common thread between people going to the doctor for one thing and it turning into something else that's something that you should be like cognizant of is to make sure that if you go in there to talk about how you have a broken arm, why is he asking you whether or not you've had bottom surgery? You know what I mean. That's one of the things that we can look out for. But typically like intrusive questions or are easy to spot for allies. So one of the things that I recommend is like bring someone with you, particularly someone who cisgender, so that you know we're not offloading any of that trauma or any of those difficult conversations on other trans folks. I mean obviously other trans folks can support you, but it's nice to have an ally with you with like a second perspective. But you can tell if you really listen to the conversation. You can usually tell when someone is curious about something and that's why they're asking or whether it's medically necessary and medically appropriate. So if I come in there to talk about having a sinus infection and then he starts asking about like hormone

replacement therapy effects or how long it has been on hormones or is talking to me about what plans I have for future surgeries like you can tell that those aren't related. It's not always as clear cut as that but it is definitely recommended from my perspective like if you're seeing a new doctor or you're not quite sure about a doctor yet if you want to bring an ally with you that will typically give you a better perspective on whether or not what you're experiencing with that doctor is normal or whether they're being invasive.

Anne: That is so helpful. And then what can folks do if a doctor isn't being supportive or is being discriminatory or intrusive or inappropriate?

Alex: OK so there's a couple different routes. Obviously like doctors are held to medical standards and it's difficult because as trans folks we're oftentimes not taken seriously when we complain about things in relation to our care. So like, really you could file a complaint for this doctor you know for malpractice for treating you poorly. If you can prove if you have documentation that this doctor has been abusive, discriminatory, inappropriate, whatever, it may be, report them to their regulatory body because they'll get in trouble for that. If you're not interested in all of that like bureaucratic process, the best thing you can do other than that is finding the doctor. So we do have a pretty short list of doctors that we trust that we have on file at Trans Wellness Ontario, so if you are struggling to find a General practitioner that is supportive of your transition or even just like doesn't ask you about your transition every time you go in who's been invasive or asking inappropriate questions, please do reach out to us and we'll see if we can find someone who's accepting new clients. But just it's just really important to note that you don't need to put yourself in a position where people are treating you disrespectfully discriminatorily, whether they're being inappropriate or abusive, especially in a space where you're going because you're sick because if you're vulnerable because you're injured or whatever and you need help. You definitely don't deserve that and it's just important to know that they are that's not the standard for doctors, right, there should be no place in society for doctors who treat trans people you know like medical experiments and unfortunately, there still are but you don't need to accept that as a standard of care.

Anne: Amazing so this kind of brings us to the end of our part one of our chat and so I just want to thank you for sharing all your thoughts with us and I would like to know are there any like last thoughts you would like to give us on exploring your gender and thinking about your gender?

Alex: Honestly the last note that I'd like to leave it on is gender exploration and like realizing whether or not you're trans should be a joyful process and it's difficult because sometimes we're concerned about whether our family or friends or partners are going to be accepting and loving of us, but really do try to embrace like every aspect of your journey because at some point you're gonna wish you had taken more pictures or more videos of maybe your voice changing or, you know, before you started getting different surgeries or, you know, before you change your name, you might want to see you like pictures of your old self or you might want to have parties to celebrate your transition, well now it's COVID times, but social distance virtual parties. It's really important to remember that being trans doesn't have to be a tragic sob story and it is difficult sometimes and there are struggles and there are things that we need to overcome but trans joy is resistance and I think that trans joy is revolutionary.

(Transition Music)

Anne: So that is part one of our chat with Alexander Reid from W.E Trans Support or as it's now called Trans Wellness Ontario. remember that if you need support you can reach out to us at svsupport@uwindsor.ca or you can check out Trans Wellness Ontario at their website which we'll include in the episode description for you. So remember to like and subscribe. That's always super helpful for us and thank you for joining us and check out Part 2 up tomorrow!