

loss processing  
for mothers of  
transgender  
children

**5 tips that provide guidance**



Kirsten Visser

FROM ONE MOTHER TO ANOTHER

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## Introduction

It doesn't matter how old your child is. If it turns out that your child is transgender, a lot will come at you. Many questions and concerns, but many mothers experience grief. You are probably one of them.

With this e-book I would like to give you tools on how to deal with your grief. Many mothers feel lonely in this, because the outside world doesn't really understand. Often others think that you don't accept your child's transition because you feel sadness. As if one excludes the other. My daughter turned out to be my son, and I still remember how I told her, almost apologetically, that I really loved my son, but still felt like I had lost my daughter. But then, what exactly did you lose? After all, your child is still there and when you were pregnant, it does not matter what gender your child would be. Why not if your child is in transition? Questions that could drive me crazy at the time. What made me so sad? Not only did I want to understand; I also felt strongly that I should be able to explain my grief.

After analysing my own emotions for a long time, I finally understood where my sadness came from. It gave me peace of mind and even took away the discomfort I felt with my grief.

I am now years later. The real hard sadness is long gone, but yes, sometimes it can still make me a bit emotional. Not nearly as intense it was and not that long either. I have found my way in processing my grief and I have been able to help many other mothers with this. I summarize the core in this e-book so that you too can continue. I'll tell you my story, but also use examples from other mothers. Most important to me is that it helps you with the processing so that you can fully enjoy your transgender child again!

I wish you the best of luck with the tips in this book.

Kirsten Visser

PS. When I speak of mothers I certainly do not mean only the women who have given birth to a child. To me, anyone who identifies as a mother, is one.



## My story

Although our daughter had already asked why she didn't have a penis when she was three, as a mother I always thought it was a phase that would pass into puberty. I was convinced that when she hit puberty, one day she would come down the stairs in an ultra-short skirt and I would fondly remember her time in boys' clothes. Because yes, although I thought it was a phase. I soon let her choose the clothes she liked. All from the idea that she should feel good and accepted for who she was. Not because of what she looked like.

Things went differently. It is autumn 2011 and my daughter is then 9 years old. Almost 10. And she's been unenjoyable for weeks! She argued with everyone all day long. I knew she was on to something, but no matter what I tried, she wouldn't tell me what was wrong.

Until that one Tuesday morning after the autumn break. It was 5 minutes before she and her brother had to go to school when she had another big fight with her brother. I was sick of it and roared in her face: "And now I want to know what's up!". The answer came without hesitation: "I'M A BOY!". Then I knew it wasn't a phase.

It became July 1, 2014. That day a new law came into effect in the Netherlands that, among other things, regulated that children aged 16 may officially change their name and gender, and that in a fairly simple way. Four months later, our daughter turned 13. She had been asking for a boy's name for a long time and I knew that as a parent I had two options. Option 1 was to stop the name change. Then when she was 16 she would arrange it herself and it would probably become a name that I hated. Not to mention the dent our bank would incur. My other option was to go with it and start planning where he would live as a boy. And so we chose the 13th anniversary as a turning point. I hated the months between decision and birthday! I had my sadness, thought I should be able to explain my sadness. Felt like losing my daughter. Shame on me. Like I didn't love and support my son. And where mothers of children who physically die can keep their child with them in a way with photos and conversations with others, I foresaw -or feared- a future in which old photos on the wall were no longer wanted and I could never tell about birthdays again. the daughter I had. And why did I think that was important? Gender didn't matter, did it?

What followed was a special journey. For several years I learned the lessons I now share with you in this book. Now don't think I'm some kind of supermom. I learned it by trial and error. Lots of trial and error. I even went to see a psychologist once. The reason was that I felt I was stuck in my grief. Do you hear the judgment in that reason? The psychologist only asked me 1 question when I said it: "Who says that you have to be done with it now?". That one question was liberating for me. I could take as long as I wanted. That realization alone helped.

I once dreaded the moment my son's breasts would be removed, but when the surgeon called with a date, I couldn't help but be thrilled for him. His dream came true and I could be completely there for him and enjoy it with him. I won't say I never get emotional when I think about Emma. Sometimes when I tell about the sadness, because it will rise again for a while. But it's never as overpowering and intense as it used to be. That is over. But I immediately say that it is also possible, because Sietse is so loving and involved in letting me tell our story.

I learned that within the context, the transgender child is not the only one who goes into transition. In fact, the whole family develops with it. Everyone at their own pace.

For example, I have become much more open-minded and have learned a lot about emotions. Lessons I'm thankful for!

Sietse is now a young adult man who goes through life quite contentedly. Is he satisfied with everything about his body? No, certainly not, but let's not forget that this applies to almost everyone. In the meantime, he does have friends, girlfriends and work that makes him happy. And a mother overflowing with pride in the beautiful man and person he has become!



Emma – 3 years old



Emma – 5 years old



Sietse – 13 years old



Sietse – 18 years old

## Sadness & mourning

We usually associate grief with a loved one who dies. We then feel a great sadness and need time to process this sadness and loss. It is precisely this processing of grief and loss that we call grief.

In life you can lose much more than a loved one. Think of a friendship that ends, a pet that dies, the job you lose, or – as we all know – heartbreak because of a relationship that ends. It's a bad feeling that can be very overwhelming at times.

But there is also something called ambiguous loss, or in Dutch “living loss”. That is a loss where there is no obvious loss or obvious closing. The American Pauline Boss describes it as the eerie situation of traumatic anxiety, caused by a combination of the known and the unknown. That can be in two ways.

① A physical presence, but psychic absence.

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*A well-known example is when a parent or loved one has dementia. Because the memory of this person starts to show bigger and bigger gaps, it becomes less and less the person it was. But while the personality disappears bit by bit, the person himself remains present and alive.*

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② A physical absence, but psychic presence.

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*When someone you love goes missing, they are no longer physically present, but they are still very much present in you and often in other things around you. Often the hope remains that the person is still alive for a long time.*

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But you can also experience living loss for something that will not come. Many a mother of a transgender child feels grief that her child will never have a child naturally.

Although mothers of transgender children can experience living loss in several ways, the greatest hindrance for the emotional loss of a child is the grief of the emotional loss of a child. It doesn't really matter how old the child is.

There are many forms of loss and all of them can be accompanied by great grief. Mourning is a verb for a reason. It is certainly not something that will blow over if you just wait quietly. If only it were that easy!

Grieving is hard work. In addition to the tools I will give you in a moment, I especially want to urge you to take the time. It's no contest. And as difficult as it is now, trust that this great feeling of sadness will not last!

## Five tips

### 1. Allow your sorrow

Sadness is that intensely bad feeling that hurts and is sometimes so great that you can feel like you are drowning in it. That's why we prefer to keep it at a distance. Usually by seeking distraction and that's totally okay.

Still, you're probably reading this right now, because it's getting in your way. You want to get rid of it. That starts with giving your grief space. If you can, choose a moment and place that feels right and then let your sadness go. Cry when you feel that need. Crying air. Of course, admitting your grief is not always something you can plan for. Some mothers are very good at holding back their sadness and tears so that no one sees them. Then it is important to really give yourself the space to allow the emotions in a place and moment that you feel safe.

But besides being a relief, it can also cost a lot of energy. So take care of yourself afterwards too. Go do something that relaxes and recharges you. Going for a walk is often very good!

### 2. Distance yourself

Often we consciously identify with our emotion. If you say, "I'm sad," you totally are. But you say, "I feel sad." then you almost automatically feel a distance from that emotion. It didn't take you over. You are still who you are, but the emotion hangs on you for a moment like a whining child can hang on your leg.

When you see that distance, you can investigate further. What exactly do you feel? Where do you feel it in your body? And why do you actually feel that? Do this with the necessary self-compassion. Don't judge your feelings.

By distancing yourself and examining your grief, you make room for it in a pleasant way and this again helps with grieving. A good way to do this is to write it all down, but if you don't like that, you can also tell your story out loud and record it. That works just as well!

### 3. Be open about your sadness

Grief is very heavy when you carry it alone, but when you discuss it with someone who takes you seriously and supports you, it eases it. So it is important to share your grief with others. Be selective about this. Choose people you know will be there for you.

It is also important to discuss this grief with your child(ren). Of course, how much you share and in which words depends on the age of your child. But make no mistake, they also understand a lot when they are young. Children notice it flawlessly when their mother is not feeling well. You really only need to share 3 things:

- ① That you feel sadness.
- ② That's because you love your child.
- ③ That you will always support your child despite your grief.

This is sufficient for children. This is what they want to hear. And in between you show that mothers can be sad too. That the world will not end then, but that that is part of life and will also pass.

## 4. Keep communicating

Especially when emotions are high, it can be difficult to talk to each other. You will soon find yourself out of words and your child may take what you say negatively. This often results in friction and misunderstandings. It happens that mothers do not know how to communicate because of the emotions, which can come across as rejecting your transgender child. A situation no one wants.

When we think of communication, we often think of talking, but it can also be done in writing. This can be done by mail, WhatsApp or old-fashioned by writing notes for each other. We also had a period when the contact between us did not go well. I struggled with my emotions and Sietse struggled with the puberty he saw progressing without inhibitors. At that time, I started by writing him a note and putting it on his pillow when he was at school. He always wrote back. The advantage is that you can choose your words carefully and take your time. Your child can read your letter quietly and alone and let the text sink in before he or she writes an answer. Try it! You will see that it helps to keep in touch with each other through the emotions in a pleasant way.

I also often share this tip with mothers who notice that their child is not happy, but does not want to talk about it. Write your child a letter in which you describe what you see and that you find it difficult, because you want to see your child happy and want to help. This has restarted the conversation in many families!

Talking to each other is also much easier if you go for a walk together. Silences that might otherwise be uncomfortable are often less - or not at all - uncomfortable during a walk. Plus, you don't have to look at each other. I know of several families where difficult matters, whatever, are discussed while walking.

## 5. Hold differently

Ultimately, it helps to hold your child differently. How is completely different per person and very much depends on what you need.

I'll give you two examples of myself. The first is that I found it very difficult that the name Emma would disappear. From the moment I was pregnant I knew that if it was a girl I would name her Emma. Even though I knew that the name would not be erased from the birth certificate, I still found it difficult. Until one day I thought I could ask Sietse if he wanted to keep Emma as a middle name. I discussed it with him and explained why this was important to me. He understood and now he has two first names: Sietse Emma.

The other example concerns photos. I like to hang pictures of the children, but Sietse became very critical about pictures from the time he was still Emma. That is why we have agreed that downstairs, wherever people outside our family come, only Emma photos with approval will be hung. On the other hand, I can hang whatever I want in my bedroom.

It is looking for what your needs are, what you like and what your child can agree with. That is not always easy, because there are also transgender children who find it horrible to be confronted with the past. In any form. It may therefore take a while before you have found your way around here.

## To conclude

How easy it would be if we could conjure our sorrows away. Nobody wants that bad feeling.

Unfortunately, magic is still not an option, but I hope I showed you that you can do a lot in it yourself. That you achieve much more by allowing it than by fighting it.

Be kind to yourself throughout the process. Don't expect perfection and don't make any demands on yourself. Allow yourself to be on it for as long as you need. In a way that feels right to you. Grief is so personal!

But like I said, it's not easy. If you just can't do it or if you don't like it, I'll help you through it with love. You will find all the information on my website [www.kirsten-visser.com](http://www.kirsten-visser.com). If you have any other questions, feel free to email me! My email address is [kirsten@kirsten-visser.com](mailto:kirsten@kirsten-visser.com).

If you prefer to ask your questions in a free session, that is also possible. Click on this link and you can book a free session on a day and time that suits you. Without charge. You're not tied to anything.

“From one mother to another”

Best wishes,



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