

## CISGENDER – LIVING IN THE GENDER ASSIGNED AT BIRTH

# 4

Paul is a middle-class, heterosexual cisgender man in his thirties. He comes to you concerned that he is not sleeping properly. Upon discussing the problem with him you discover that he is dissatisfied with a number of areas of his life which he finds himself mulling over in the early hours. He explains that he had always wished that he could be a cabinet maker but had found himself employed as a clerk in an office, which he finds unsatisfactory. He continues that much of his life is like this, as he had had a series of unsatisfying relationships with women who seemed “on paper” to be the perfect partner but who he found he had little in common with after the initial sexual frisson had reduced, particularly in relation to their goals of marriage, mortgage and children, and his desire to spend a lot of time with his group of male friends.

Think about:

- What is your formulation/understanding of the key issues for Paul?
- How might Paul’s considered and unconsidered ideas about gender play a part in his issues?
- What assumptions might you have about Paul on the basis of this information?
- What general assumptions about gender might you bring to your consideration of Paul’s situation?
- How would you proceed?

The two key arenas for Paul are work and relationships. In working with him it would be useful to start by examining your own assumptions about masculinity in these areas. For example, men are often expected to be providers and to earn money which may prevent a leap into a potentially risky new occupation. However, there may also be expectations around being a success and leaving a mark on the world which may lead to dissatisfaction in a less obviously meaningful job.

Similar tensions may be in place with regard to relationships, as Paul may retain an older set of values about the need to settle down with a female partner and start a family, at the same time as questioning these – and his potential role as a partner – to some extent, but perhaps not enough to begin seeking out partners who hold different views about

relationships and who may therefore possibly be outside of conventional cisgender femininity in other ways.

Becoming stuck within shifting societal gender norms is not uncommon for many people, and may be particularly prevalent in young men at the moment given radical changes in work, family and relationship roles, and expectations in recent years. As a practitioner it may be useful to help Paul to clearly see the tensions which he is negotiating, normalising the fact that this can be challenging, and particularly illuminating the kinds of losses and gains which will come from choosing in either direction (e.g. a more or less mainstream relationship, a more or less meaningful (to him) career, having a family or not, focusing on friendship and/or romantic relationships, etc.)

In working with Paul, as with many cisgender people, practitioners will need to carefully negotiate between exploring and possibly challenging rigidly held ideas about gender (often identified when people say “of course everyone ...”) and reassuring Paul that he is still ‘normal’, as for many cisgender people the notion that they would be outside the norm or in some way ‘different’ can be so troubling as to severely damage rapport.