

“I WISH THAT WHEN I STARTED, SOMEONE TOLD ME HOW JOYFUL AND REWARDING THIS WORK WOULD BE”: MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS PERSPECTIVES ON THE JOYS OF SUPPORTING TRANS YOUTH

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Background:

A growing body of research is exploring the experiences of mental health practitioners (MHPs) who work with transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth. However, much of this literature overemphasises the challenges, emotional burden, and ethical complexities of practice, overlooking the rewarding, fulfilling, and joyful dimensions of this work. Informed by calls for desire-based inquiry, this study takes a joy-focused approach to mental health practice with TGD young people and offers new insight into the affective dimensions of care.

Methods:

Twelve Australian mental health practitioners (MHPs) participated in one-on-one interviews between May and August 2025 about the joy they experience in their work with TGD youth. MHPs, aged 26–58 years, represented the fields of psychology, psychiatry, social work, counselling, and occupational therapy, and worked across public and private settings. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results:

MHPs described profound joy, reward, and fulfilment in their work, expressed across five themes: (i) affirmation and authenticity of trans youth in practice; (ii) transformation and hope; (iii) familial love, bonds, and support; (iv) professional collegiality and co-learning; and (v) personal and professional growth and impact. Practitioners described trans joy as “contagious,” offering a sense of hope, connection, and shared humanity within a politicised field.

Conclusion:

This study reframes trans-affirming mental health practice through the lens of joy, revealing how this work is a powerful source of meaning, fulfilment, and growth. By foregrounding the emotional and relational rewards of practice, the findings demonstrate how joy can function as a protective factor against burnout, supporting practitioner wellbeing and retention. Understanding these affective dimensions of practice provides a more balanced account of gender-affirming care and underscores the importance of sustaining those who deliver it within an increasingly politicised context. These findings also have relevance across the broader field of TGD health.

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