

OPINION

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about the moment.



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**The Courage to Admit You Don't Know**

My column on Friday [about detransitioners](#), people who no longer believe they are transgender, was a way to explore some of the problems in how we treat gender-dysphoric youth. One common response from those who favor the current treatment model, which proponents call gender-affirming care, is that very few people detransition.

Are they right?

It would be great to have a definitive answer either way. But the truth is [we don't know](#). While a number of outspoken transgender activists — [several of whom](#) wrote about [their reactions](#) to the reporting in my column — say the rates are low, studies often cited to make this claim are [demonstrably unreliable](#).

As I wrote in my column, “Nobody knows how many young people desist after social, medical or surgical transitions.” Admitting you don’t have an answer is hard, but it’s especially important for journalists to do so.

Here is some context for readers to weigh assertions to the contrary.

First, consider human nature: People change their minds all the time. Second, admitting to a mistake is hard for anyone — and for many detransitioners, it can feel like a very public reversal. Third, it can take a long time for transition regret to manifest, and for patients to make the decision to detransition.

It is especially hard for kids who are making decisions about their identities when those identities are still evolving. Many construct their lives around this new identity. To admit they have changed their minds, especially during the excruciatingly self-conscious period of adolescence, when they are deeply susceptible to peer judgment, is that much harder. The effects of medical transition — facial hair growth, breast growth or removal, vocal changes — are often irreversible. For some, it can feel like there's no going back.

We do have [some reliable data](#) that indicate [detransition rates are higher](#) than transgender advocacy groups suggest. (The Society for Evidence-Based Gender Medicine, one of the most reliable nonpartisan organizations dedicated to the field, has [a full explainer](#) of the methodological problems with the studies that insist otherwise.)

We also know that more detransitioners are going public with their decisions. They deserve our compassion. There will likely be a rocky road ahead for them and everyone involved in their care. Some are currently engaged in high-profile [malpractice](#) lawsuits against those who medicalized them as minors.

[As awareness](#) grows, my hope is that more, and better, independent research on this complex issue will move forward.

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