

An uplifting guide to **LGBTQ+**
Love, Life and Mental Health

queer ↑ up

alexis caught

Chapter One

Questioning

Breathe.

Just breathe.

There's a high chance that there are a lot of questions in your head right now, such as:

"Why do I feel like this?"

"Is this normal?"

"Is it OK to feel like this?"

"What exactly do I feel anyway?"

"How do I make sense of this?"

"Does anybody else feel like this?"

"Will this feeling go away?"

"Am I supposed to feel this way?"

Phew! That's a lot of questions, and there's possibly even a whole load more. Even maybe, "Oh god, what will they think of me if they see me reading this book?" So, for now, just breathe. You're gonna be OK.

In this book, we're not always going to be giving you straight answers, or even gay answers. We're here (and I really do mean we, because I've enlisted a fantastic group of glittering people from all along the queer spectrum to help give us their views and share their own life experiences, too) to help you find some of your own answers and navigate you through when it all gets confusing. Sure, there will be pearls of wisdom, we'll share embarrassing mistakes and things we wish we'd not gone through – so that hopefully you don't have to make the same cringe mistakes (you're welcome, BTW) – and there will be tips and tricks along the way.

So, who am I, anyway, and how can I help? Well, one of the things I do with my time is work in the field of mental health. I talk a lot about feelings and help people figure out why we're here and what we're doing. This book is NOT therapy, and don't worry, it's also not going to be filled with unrealistic suggestions for wellness, like wafting your nether regions with sage. What I will be sharing, though, is some practical tips for how to hack your head and check in on your emotions (a bit like when I reminded you to breathe just now) all taken from my experiences as a therapist and doing crisis intervention – keep an eye out for those Looking After You boxes.

In the beginning there was ... confusion?

Questions can be confusing, they can feel overwhelming, they can feel so numerous that the weight of them all stops us from thinking of anything else. But questions are also powerful. They're the ignition spark or the key in the engine for a journey of self-discovery. Having questions shows you are smart; you are in tune with yourself; and have not just accepted the cookie cutter template of "how to be" that is pressured onto us all from society and tradition. So that's your first answer – no, you are not alone, it is "normal" to have questions and it's "normal" to be confused. You are not the first person to have questions about how they feel, about their body, about how they identify or who they are.

But let's get to a really big question ... Are you queer? Are you a lesbian? Trans? Gay? Bisexual? Perhaps none of those, but something else not quite straight? I don't know. I can't tell you the answer to that. There's a chance that you might be, if so – firstly ... CONGRATULATIONS! (Caps lock intended, I mean that to be read as though I am shouting my excitement and congratulations to you.)

Welcome to the club, or rather, welcome to the family. I'm queer, too, loads of us are. In fact more and more people than ever before are openly identifying as "other than the heterosexual-cisgender norm" (a really academic, boring phrase which we'll explain in just a moment) and

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more people are finding themselves somewhere under the rainbow in the LGBTQ+ family – or, queer, for short (that’s how I’m going to be using it in this book).

But who and WHAT is the “LGBTQ+ community”?!

Sometimes known simply as LGBT, or LGBT+, LGBTQIA+, queer people or smaller groups, such as the gay community and the trans community – we’re a proud, diverse and varied group of people, and all of us (in one way or another) identify as not entirely heterosexual (“straight”) or cisgender. And together, we stand as a ragtag bunch under our rainbow banner, known as “the pride flag”.

Now, the name of the community is ever-changing and evolving as we broaden out our understanding of gender and sexual identities. No one name is right; no one name is wrong. Use what is best for you.

The “L” to the “+” of the queer alphabet...

Lesbian: a woman, who is attracted to other women

Gay: a man, who is attracted to other men

Bisexual: someone of any gender, attracted to both male and female genders

Transgender: people whose gender identity and expression differs from the gender that they were assigned at birth. Note: transgender does not imply anything on attraction, so trans people can identify as any sexuality.

Transsexual: a word similar to transgender, but this implies medical changes to one’s gender, such as surgery or hormones. It is best left for someone to identify themselves by this term, if they so choose.

Queer: anyone who isn’t either straight or cisgender

Questioning: someone who isn’t yet sure of their sexuality or gender and is taking some time to find themselves

Intersex: people who naturally (not through medical intervention) have biological gender traits which do not match with what is stereotypically understood as being male or female

Asexual: also known as “ace”, this is an umbrella term for people who either don’t experience any or experience little sexual attraction

Ally: people who identify as cisgender and heterosexual, and believe in the total social and legal equality for all queer people. Our most supportive friends and family can often sit here!

So, what about the “+”s?

Pansexual: a.k.a. “Pan” – people who are attracted to others regardless of their sex or gender identity. Is this the same as bisexuality? Some say yes, some say no, some say it specifically includes attraction to people with non-traditional gender expression. What matters is how people who identify as pansexual feel about it – that’s all!

Demisexual: “demi” is when someone can only experience sexual attraction after an emotional bond. Like asexuality, anybody of any sexual orientation can experience this

Sapiosexual: the attraction to intelligence and the mind over gender

Agender: sometimes referred to as “genderless” or “ungendered” – it’s exactly as it sounds! It’s for people who identify as having no gender identity

Gender Queer: there are a whole host of non-conforming gender identities and names like gender queer, gender fluid, pangender, which includes people whose gender feels moveable, flexible and unfixed to them

This list is not definitive, these are not the only ways people do/can/should identify, and there are many more identities than those stated here – but that’s one of the wonders of life and the spectrum we live in. With SO many different colours and shades out there, colour your life as best suits you.

What is the spectrum?

One of the ways that we can take the pressure off ourselves and make the big, scary questions of “What am I?”, “Am I?”, “How will I know” all a lot less heavy is by thinking in terms of spectrums, rather than binaries. A binary, like in computers, is a choice between two things, such as black and white or one and zero. Traditional (outdated and old-fashioned) thinking would have us believe that we are faced with a binary choice of being heterosexual or homosexual ... and that’s it. One or the other. Of course, human sexuality and identity is waaaaaaaaay more complicated than that. That’s why we like to think of sexuality (and gender!) as a spectrum. Rather than thinking of it as either black or white, a spectrum would have the brightest shade of white at one end and the deepest darkest shade of black at the other, with a multitude of shades and variants in the middle.

Don’t worry if this still sounds confusing – that’s precisely what this book is here to help, and exactly why we’ve started it with this chapter on questions.

Years of Queers

Did you know that there is evidence of same sex attraction, desire and marriage from the ancient world? A diary entry of a priestess and small statues of a same-sex couple have shown same sex unions existed in older civilisations. The skeletons of two men, known as the Lovers of Modena, were found holding hands and are almost 3,000 years old. Similarly, trans people have been present in ancient cultures across the world. In the Czech Republic in 2011, the grave of what could well be the oldest example of a trans person was discovered – archaeologists found a 5,000-year-old burial site, where the skeleton had been buried as a woman, with burial gifts and commemorations typically associated with women’s graves, yet the skeleton was male.

We’ve gone by many different names, including sometimes with no names at all, but what we now broadly describe as the LGBTQ+ community has always been here.

But what do these labels mean to me?

It’s helpful to have an understanding of what these terms mean, because it is an important thing to many people, and it helps us better understand where we’re each coming from so that we can understand each other better. But the terms we use to identify ourselves, the pronouns we use, the labels we choose to use (or not) are not the entire story and do not define who we are – they’re just the blurb. All that fun and fascinating narrative and character development happens in the pages as we write our own story. So yes, it is important to know what these things mean, but it’s also really important to not feel weighed down heavily by them, or like you have to force yourself into an exact box. You are entirely free to choose not to label yourself. Rather than see each other through defined labels, we should see it as a rough guide and allow all of us to determine what that means for us, and express it however we feel.

For me, personally, I refer to myself as “LGBTQ+” or “queer”. Some people don’t like the term queer, because it did get co-opted and used as a slur against us, but it’s actually a very old term for our community and as it’s been reclaimed many of us have grown to love it again. This is why I really like the term queer; it gives us all some flexibility and freedom. But that is my preference!

In terms of understanding my own identity, I shape it

for myself. For me, what that looks like is this: I identify as a gay man, who sits within the queer spectrum. On paper, if we take the “box ticking” approach, that means I am exclusively male, and exclusively attracted to other males. But the reality is I’ve had romantic, emotional and sexual relationships and encounters with both men and women, and people who are trans and genderqueer. My own gender remains fluid – I’ve been incredibly androgynous in my time, presenting myself with characteristics stereotypically male and female, where people haven’t been able to “gender” me by appearance. These days, I’ve got muscles and a beard because I enjoy the presentation of this “man drag”, yet feel happily more feminine inside. I know my insides – my spirit, heart, head and essence – are pretty fluid and would fall into the “non-binary” camp. My mum can remember when I was five or six and would rush home from school to put on a dress and suddenly relax – it’s just an innate part of me, even though now I predominantly wear “male assigned” clothing and look more masculine, because (despite the old saying) the clothes *don’t* make the man.

The important thing is that you go at your own pace, and work out who you are inside and how you want to live, moving towards creating peace between the two. As I said before, what you are matters less than who you are. You are YOU, loveable and special regardless of how you identify.

Of course, you might not be queer – perhaps you’ve picked up this book because you’ve seen it on a bookshelf and all your questions are about the lives and experiences of other people. That’s cool, too – in fact, having interest in other people and wanting to learn how you can better support those people is the coolest thing. Straight people who are like this are known as “allies” and throughout this book you’ll find little Allyship boxes. Now, of course – queer people can also be allies. For example, a lesbian cisgender woman can be an ally to a heterosexual trans woman – that’s like backing up your sibling and looking out for your family members or best mates.

Then there’s another option – what if you just don’t know? What if you don’t know where you fit in; you’re not quite sure what’s going on with your emotions, thoughts and feelings? That, too, is absolutely OK. For some people (like me) their queerness was just an ever-present part of them. Like a lot of 9-year-old boys, I loved the Power Rangers, except ... ya know ... I *really* loved the Power Rangers. For others, it’s a slower, more gradual experience, or for some it was like a lightning bolt out of nowhere. We’re all unique and because we’re all different the way that we grow into ourselves is different for everyone. Because our sexuality and our identity is not just a spectrum, it is a limitless cosmos of opportunity to express how you feel – and shine brightly for it.

Looking After You: How to handle overwhelming questions

When we have a million questions running around our head, particularly when they feel heavy and important, it can feel overwhelming. The following advice will help you cope when you are feeling overwhelmed, whether it's stress about the questions in this book or even exams at school.

- **Acknowledge and accept the feelings:** Take a second to pause and just think – how are you feeling? Anxious? Stressed? Nervous? Scared? That is OK. These aren't particularly nice feelings, but they are a reality of life and an inescapable part of being human. Stop exhausting yourself by fighting off these emotions or making yourself feel guilty for how you feel. Acknowledge how you feel and remind yourself that it's OK – it's just part of being human.

“I feel pretty stressed right now. That's understandable. I haven't been through this before – it's normal to feel nervous about something you don't know”.

- **Reframe your thoughts:** It can sometimes be a little tough to think of a way to reframe things that feel bad or scary, and it's not as simple as “cancelling out”, but think of it as consciously choosing to change the channel. Whenever a show you don't like is on TV you can change the channel. Sure, your favourite show might not be on either, but it's better than before. We can try to change how we view the thoughts that are worrying us and move towards feeling better and more positive.

“OK, I don't have all of the answers right now. That's confusing. But I'm going to get them, and I'll know so much more about myself. I can't wait to see how I grow.”

- **Remember to breathe:** It can sound silly reminding people to breathe – it's something we do instinctively all the time. Except, we don't, actually. Sometimes when we're stressed, we can unconsciously hold our breath, or take shallow breaths. Breathing deeply makes your body and brain relax. When you feel stressed, try to relax your shoulders, breathing slow and deep.

“How are my shoulders feeling? How’s my breathing? I’ll feel better if I slow this down and just breathe.”

- **Live in the moment:** It’s understandable to worry about the future. When there are so many unknown answers, never ending questions and endless possibilities we can get overwhelmed with scary “What if?” questions. We can trick ourselves that thinking ahead to them will help us plan, but actually it just exhausts us. If you’re feeling emotionally overwhelmed by future events or thoughts, try to focus on the present. Look around you, remind yourself where you are.

“I’m worried about what’s ahead. It’s scary. But if I focus on where I am right now, I’ll feel more grounded. I can tackle what’s coming.”

So, now that we’ve equipped ourselves with a way to handle it when the pressure of unanswered questions can get too much, how about we look at some of those BIG questions together?

When did you first know?



It’s a question so many queer people get asked. Sometimes, it’s a glib and pithy answer, “When did I realise that I was a lesbian? When I realized the alternative was straight men.” (Courtesy of a mate of mine.) Other times it’s a more thoughtful answer, “I realized that the feelings I had for a friend went beyond wanting them to be my best friend, and suddenly realising that I was in love with another man.” (An answer from a teammate of mine.) Knowing we’re somewhere in the LGBTQ+ spectrum is one thing, and many of us do have moments where the realisation formed and we levelled up in our understanding and knowledge of ourselves. But before that there comes questioning. What if? What am I? How will I know? Is it OK to feel like this? Is feeling like this normal? And yes, even sometimes we ask ourselves, will this go away? There are, of course, lots of other questions, which we’ll come to throughout this book, but for now let’s start with these ones and have a little look one by one.

What if...



Well, what if you are? Does it change who you are as a person? Does it make you odd? Does it make you the only one? Does it mean anything bad? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding, warm and comforting no. Being anywhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum means nothing bad; it

does not make you a different person. You are still you – just in bold, bright colour.

What am I?

Well, there's no easy answer there. I can't "diagnose" you from afar. And you also shouldn't feel pressured into accepting a label that others are putting on you for their own convenience and comfort. Ultimately, it matters less about what you are and more about who you are – and however you identify, who you are doesn't change. You may fancy people of the same gender, you might fancy nobody, you might fancy both genders – and speaking of gender, you might question your own or feel as though you have none. Don't overthink, just take your time and be open to exploring your heart and mind.



How will I know?

Perhaps you've had some new feelings arise after seeing a scene in a film, which made you have some interesting thoughts about one of the characters, and that got your brain asking questions... Perhaps it was realising that hang on, you like-like a friend. Perhaps it was wearing nail varnish "as a joke" and something just feels right. This might sound odd – but you'll know when you're ready to accept yourself and it'll suddenly make sense. And speaking of acceptance...



Is it OK to feel like this?

Absolutely. That I can answer for you, yes – one hundred, ten thousand per cent – yes, it is OK. It might still feel scary, but being queer, any way that you identify, is absolutely OK. There are complications, admittedly, sometimes our background and culture can play a role in making us feel like we're bringing shame on ourselves or our family and friends. Religion can also play a part, as some religious texts were written long ago, and they can have very different views on tolerance and acceptance of others. But times do change, the Christian church has begun a journey forward to modernisation. Judaism has seen many high-profile rabbis speak in favour of LGBTQ+ equality, while Islam has seen many imams do the same. If you are struggling, there are queer religious support groups for people who are coming to terms with their faith and their heart.



Is it normal?

A recent study of census data said that the LGBTQ+ community makes up roughly one in ten of the general population – or ten per cent. That's actually the exact same percentage of the population that is left-handed. Just because people who are left-handed do things slightly differently doesn't mean they're not normal – and the same goes for us. In fact, another study has suggested that the



figure might actually be one in seven of the population – meaning there are MORE of us than left-handies!

And it's not just the human world – there are gay animals! SERIOUSLY! Google the gay penguins at Sydney Zoo in Australia or ZSL in London! Similarly, there are trans animals, non-binary animals and animals that don't match up to the narrow definition of male or female characteristics – male sea horses are the ones that give birth! So yes – we are "normal".

Will this go away?

This answer is an odd one. Our sexual and gender identity is not a phase, not something we'll "grow out of", but there is a slight caveat here, though – there are some people who, with a rush of puberty hormones, do experience momentary same-sex attraction. If we think back to the LGBTQ+ spectrum, maybe they'd be "E" for "Experimenting". For those people, a passing attraction is just that – passing. But this in no way means that our identity is "just a phase" which will go away. But nor should it, there's nothing wrong with who we are, how we feel or who we love. What will go away, and I promise you this, is any fear or concern that you may be holding. That goes away, and leaves in its place confidence, acceptance, power and pride.



Embracing Growth

As people, as we live our lives, we want to continue to grow and evolve. Personal growth and development are rooted in being open to change and (you can probably guess the next bit) in order to change we have to be open to questions. As a therapist, my most important job is helping people feel secure and supported as they ask themselves big questions about their lives – are they happy? What do they want? How would they like to be known and remembered? What will make them feel whole?

In order to find the answers to these questions, to live our lives as fully as possible, we have to stay open to new experiences and questions. Think of it like food – sure, you've got your favourite foods, which you love and you know you enjoy, but one day you asked yourself, "I wonder what that's like?" and tried something new. Asking questions about ourselves is how we find new, enjoyable flavours to bring into our lives. Some of the most interesting people I know are the people who still ask big questions about themselves well into their 50s, 60s and 70s, and even beyond. The coolest people I know are the ones who are always open to questions or new feelings and adventures. People who are more open have what's known as a growth mindset, and are often happier embracing life and its challenges. People who have a closed mindset, where they

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see themselves as being fixed at birth, often struggle to find the opportunity for development and growth. Embrace your questions and stay open to your own evolution, because getting to know ourselves is a life's work.

Allyship

How was reading all of that? Did it raise questions for you about how you “knew” you were heterosexual? Has it raised any questions for you about your own experiences of attraction or how you feel about your gender?

As you can see, there are many BIG questions which can be going through peoples' heads. Deep, existential questions which can carry a lot of weight with them. That's why it's important that as allies – as friends, as family – we give people space, time and our unconditional support. By picking up this book and engaging, you're already on your way to doing that.





Chapter Six

Happy and Gay

Did you know that the original meaning of the word “gay” wasn’t about same-sex attraction, but was a word meaning happy?

Gay

adjective: to be light-hearted and free.

Yes! So, it’s with a deep sense of cruel irony that I have to let you know some quite alarming figures. Unfortunately, mental health in our community is a big problem. Now, you don’t need to worry – categorically, there is NOTHING inherent about being queer that causes any mental health issues. It’s not a default setting; it’s not a sign that we’re wrong or defective – and certainly, being LGBTQ+ does not mean you are guaranteed to experience issues with your mental health. However, it is a difficult thing for our community. Fifty-two per cent of LGBTQ+ people experience some form of mental health issue in their lifetime

– this is compared to an estimated twenty-two per cent of the general population.

As with the rest of this book, I don't tell you these things to scare or worry you. I share this with you out of a sense of love and compassion, trusting that with this knowledge you can be forewarned and better prepared as you step out into this big world. Through this chapter, we're going to look at ways to help you feel light-hearted and gay. And, on those days where you don't feel so good, look at some ways you can support yourself.

Is how I feel normal?

In my day job, when I'm not writing books like this, I practise as a counsellor and psychotherapist. For years I've been volunteering and working in the field of mental health, and so, in my professional (and personal) opinion it is not being queer that causes us to be more at risk of mental health issues, it is society's problem with queerness that creates this risk. By that I mean the shame, stigma, aggression and marginalisation lumped upon our community for generations has side effects. One of those side effects is the impact upon our collective mental health. Think of it like this – there is nothing in the genetics of someone with red hair that predisposes them to depression or anxiety, and yet a study has shown that people with ginger hair are more likely to feel these emotions. Why? Because of the ridiculous anti-

ginger bullying that goes on in schools. As a result of this emotional pressure they get put under, they're more likely to feel anxiety and depression as a result. Sound familiar?

What is gay shame?

For generations, we've had cultural, religious and political judgement heaped upon us – and, unfortunately, that's left its mark. If we think back to those lovely left-handies – there's nothing wrong with being left-handed, but if everybody and every institution tells you that people who are left-handed are sinful and depraved, then you're gonna start to feel ashamed of being left-handed.

Gay shame is that residual inner voice, the inner homophobe, who is like a horrible playground bully that's learned its prejudice from other people. But why is that so powerful? Well, shame is one of the most toxic and dangerous emotions that people can feel, it has long-lasting effects on our self-worth and how we see and think of ourselves.

Gay shame and internalised homophobia are one reason why there's gay-on-gay judgement of people who are "too" flamboyant, effeminate and camp – this is known as femmephobia. It's not that there is anything inherently wrong with any level of campness – it's that, for some, it triggers their inner feelings of shame. In turn, we shame and judge ourselves – believing and internalising the

corrosive thoughts of us being unworthy of love and fair treatment. Often, we police ourselves and stifle our own self-expression and happiness for fear of our own judgement and the judgement of others.

So, how do we fight back against gay shame? By living with pride. By resolutely being proud of who we are, by embracing ourselves (faults and all) and trying to live as honestly and authentically and as unashamedly as we can.

Years of Queers

Even as far back as 1935 a “concerned” mother wrote to the founding father of psychology, Sigmund Freud, about her homosexual son, asking if Freud would treat him and “cure” his homosexuality. Freud’s response was a flat out no – “but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness.” Freud refused, and explained that there was nothing wrong with her son. And that’s true – there isn’t anything “wrong” with us. Aside from being one of the first health care professionals to advocate for LGBTQ+ people, Freud actually argued that everybody experiences some form of same-sex attraction, big or small. Yep, according to Freud, we’re all a little bit queer.

Help Box

If you are ever feeling alone, overwhelmed, anxious or you need to talk, Text PRIDE to 85258 for free, confidential and non-judgemental support and advice from Shout Crisis Line. I’m one of the many volunteers that help staff this service, and, no matter how big or small your problem, you deserve support and we’re there to listen if you need us.

Living with pride

A powerful way to protect yourself from shame and other negative feelings is to live with pride (whatever that means to you) and to be proud of who you are. Part of living proudly is looking after ourselves, because self-love and self-care is a revolutionary act. You matter, and you deserve to be happy and gay, and nothing will ever change that.

Connecting with your community is a great way to look after you and others, helping your mental health through positive action. For our mental and spiritual wellbeing, there are two essential things for a healthy mind and a happy life: 1. belonging and 2. purpose.

Belonging: we all need to belong somewhere, to find a place where we’re accepted, loved and valued; a place free of judgement. By “finding your tribe” and

connecting with your own fab queer family – whether that’s musical theatre gays, artsy trans people, hiking lesbians, boardgame bis or sporty queers. One of the things that I love about being LGBTQ+ is that there is (quite literally) a community group for everything you could think of, just get searching online and you’ll find one perfect for you and whatever you’re interested in.

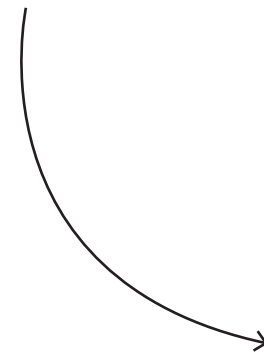
Purpose: we all need a reason for being, a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to carry on. One of the best things that you can do for yourself is to get involved in a cause you care about. Volunteering, for example, is not only scientifically proven to make you feel better about yourself, but it also connects you to likeminded people and helps you find a place you belong. Doing something good for someone else, like volunteering for an LGBTQ+ cause, gives a sense of pride, of worth and of value that can’t be bought. Getting stuck in, joining an LGBTQ+ youth group (whether IRL or online) and finding ways to help your community can really help you feel better about yourself, too. All you need to do is search online for volunteer programmes in your local area, or Young Stonewall is a fantastic place to start.

Looking After You: The Joy Diamond

The reality is that there will be down days – we’re only human. And that’s OK – sadness, moments of anxiety and depression are inevitable parts of life.

Everyone experiences them at some point, regardless of their sexuality. We can’t remove them from our lives, but we can give ourselves the best chance of facing them and managing them, and we can do that by setting ourselves up in the best way possible.

A “life hack” that I like to do is to create a tick list for myself – it’s simple, I promise! All you have to do is try to tick off a bunch of things each day from what I call “The Joy Diamond”. To help you build up your chances of having a great day, try and tick off one of the things from each box. You can use this example that I created for myself, or try making your own.



Balance

- Meditation
- Journaling
- Enjoy nature and sunshine
- Gentle exercise – give yoga a try and practise your breathing, too.

These make serotonin, which stabilizes our mood.

Reward

- Complete a task – start small, like making your bed, then build up to bigger ones.
- Practise self-care activities
- Eat nutritious food
- Celebrate those wins

These create dopamine that helps us think more clearly.

Love

- Dance to music
- Be kind to others
- Give compliments
- Hug a friend

These release oxytocin, making us feel loved.

Release

- Watch your favourite comedy and LOL
- Enjoy some dark chocolate
- Exercise – aerobic exercise, like a quick walk or gentle run
- Smell something you like – try perfume or even freshly baked bread!

These release endorphins, helping us to feel happy and positive.

Don't worry if you struggle with this activity. Sometimes when we feel low, we need to give ourselves a little reboot. It helps to go back to our basic needs and focus on making sure those are well met, allowing us to go again. If you're having a bad day and feeling down, check in with yourself:

- Have you had enough sleep?
- Have you eaten good, nutritious food?
- Have you been out into daylight and fresh air?
- Have you taken care of your body, washed and put on clean clothes?

Doing these simple things can make a big difference to our everyday lives. From here, we can then restart and slowly try again.

The power of self-love

Now, I want you to say something good about yourself – and I really mean it. Being kind to yourself is especially important when someone has said something negative or upset you. This is based on a concept we therapists call “unconditional positive regard”. This is the idea of placing zero judgement, zero condemnation and zero conditions for acceptance upon others – and we have to practise that for ourselves, too. Unconditional positive self-regard is important – we have to learn to love ourselves regardless of whether we think we're “being good” or “being bad”; whether we're “doing well” or “doing badly” at school;

or whether we're "cool" or "uncool" in the eyes of other people. We have to accept ourselves as we are, for who we are. It's not easy, it's lifelong work, but the sooner that you start practising it, the sooner you can get that work underway.

One of the reasons why it's so important to be authentic, to be genuinely yourself, and not a developed "character" that you may play to please others or to be like someone off *Drag Race* or TikTok, is that authenticity and accepting ourselves for who we are is the bedrock of self-worth. In therapy, we call this "congruence" – whether your inner self (who you are at your core) matches with your outer self (the person that you project to the world) – it's being your genuine, authentic self, without editing it for others. The closer aligned these two are the happier we tend to be, while the further apart these two are the more stress our minds and emotions come under. That's why "living in the closet" and denying who we are can place such a high emotional toll on us. Similarly, copying someone else's mannerisms, their way of presenting themselves and talking, isn't going to make us feel better, it can actually make us feel worse – as if people only like us if we're not our genuine selves. And that's wrong – your genuine, authentic self is so loveable, you just have to fall in love with that special person inside of you first.

Now, does all this mean that we're devoid of any flaws and have no bad bits about ourselves? No. The reality is, we're all human, we've all got some bits about us that aren't so great. But beating ourselves up for our shortcomings only makes us feel worse. We end up using our energy having a go at ourselves, rather than doing what we can to grow, develop and learn. By being compassionate and kind to yourself you give yourself the best chance of becoming the best you possible.

Other people and our moods

Honestly, navigating other people is often not that easy – they can be difficult, annoying and just plain ignorant. One of the most frustrating parts of it is that if we want others to be accepting of us then we have to be accepting of them. Now, to be clear, I do not mean accepting someone else's bad treatment of you – that is not something you have to accept. But we do have to accept that we can't change or control others. We can only change and control ourselves. I like to think of it as a journey:

You live your life
And others live theirs
Sometimes, you'll walk the path together
Sometimes, you'll walk it alone

Companions on our journeys can make the time pass faster

And though our paths may diverge

When you love yourself, you're never truly alone

Relationships that we hold with others do not have to be built upon obligation, expectation and demands. They should be built upon mutual acceptance – acceptance of ourselves and of others. When we find those people it's beautiful. Some people don't accept us, it can't be helped, but that is not our fight to change. Instead, we move on, knowing that we accept ourselves, and that is powerful. That is self-love.

Bullying

Sadly, bullying is still an incredibly prevalent experience, and a horrible one which can have long-term effects.

Understandably, it can also have a big impact upon how you're feeling, your mood and confidence. Here are some tips that can help you if you're being bullied.

1. Talk. Talk to somebody about how you're feeling, whether that is a favourite teacher, a supportive parent, a trusted friend or a support line, talking is a great way to release some of the pressure, find support and work through your emotions.

2. Don't get down in the mud. It's really, *really* unfair that the burden to "do the right thing" falls onto the person who has been wronged and picked on, but, as the old saying goes, "two wrongs don't make a right." You have to be happy with your own behaviour, and stooping as low as someone else will only make you feel worse. Hold your head high and know that retaliation will only make you as bad as them. It feels unfair, but it's true.

3. Disengage. When something is hot, we don't touch it – don't burn yourself by engaging when there's fire raging. Be empowered in your right to walk away from heated conversations and situations – both in real life and on social media. You don't have to read everything, turning your phone off and putting it away is a great way to set boundaries and give yourself some distance.

4. Understand. Understand that happy, confident and secure people don't bully others. Happy people don't need to tear others down. If somebody is bullying you, this is often a reflection on how they feel about themselves and what scares them. It doesn't make it right; it doesn't make it fair – but know that your confidence and authenticity is what scares them because they're jealous of you. You've done nothing wrong.

5. Find outlets for your emotions. Don't bottle up all the sad feelings, write them down, journal, cry them out, talk them through, sing along LOUDLY to a punk song.

Whatever you do, just don't leave those feelings to build up inside of you – remember, when dams let out that water in a controlled way, it creates energy and power that turns the light on. What can you do to help channel the power inside of you to help fuel you on?

6. Cherish yourself. When someone else is putting you down, it is EVEN MORE important to big yourself up, to treat yourself, to celebrate yourself and to take care of yourself. Every time they say something bad about you, immediately either write down or say something GOOD about you, and repeat it at least three times. I'm serious, this has been proven to work!

Allyship

Everybody has mental health and we all have challenges – when we're facing them that's the most important time for our allies to stand with us and help share some of the burden. So, there are a few principles I want us all to adopt into our lives:

1. Never be a bystander. Whether you are seeing someone being bullied, or think that someone may be going through a hard time emotional, never passively observe it. Not doing or saying anything leaves them alone in their moment of need. That's the most important time to step up and take a stand.

2. Ask twice. We can brush things off when someone reaches out to us, so asking twice is a great tip. "How are you?", "I'm fine", "How are you *really*? Because I noticed X/Y/Z and I wondered how you were feeling...". Give them an opportunity to reach out, show them it's a safe space.

3. Don't be scared. We can put a lot of pressure on ourselves to make sure we say the right thing, but the reality is we have to say very little – we're making space for them to talk and feel supported, the most powerful thing here is to listen.

Your power will protect you

However we identify in life, wherever we're from, whatever we look like, there will unfortunately be people who try to come for us and tear us down. In recent years (thanks in part to social media) it's begun to feel like any public dialogue is just people YELLING back and forth at one another, trying to shout the other down, name call, shame and score points.

And our phones have only thrown fuel on this fire, bringing hate from the streets and schoolground into our homes and bedrooms, carried in our pockets by smartphones. But remember, you don't have to read everything or engage – switching off, disengaging from threads and fights is an act of strength, not cowardice.

The power you have to protect yourself is to love yourself. I keep banging on about it, because it is so important, it is so special and it is so powerful. In the face of any adversity that life throws at you, cherishing, celebrating and loving yourself is the best defence.

Your worth is not defined by the clothes you wear, how you look, how many followers or likes you have. What truly matters is your opinion of yourself – we can too easily be our own worst critic, when really, we should be our own best friend and cheerleader.

Your story

One of the first things that mankind ever did was tell stories – it's something we've done for thousands of years, because stories have power. That includes the stories we tell ourselves. These stories are powerful and can have a big impact upon our hearts, minds and the way we see the world, so be careful about the story you tell yourself.

It's important to think about the story we tell ourselves and be mindful about how we label our emotions and experiences. Accidentally writing our narrative to have a negative slant is very easy to do if we don't watch our words. Good mental health is not an absence of all negative emotions (they're just a part of life), nobody is permanently one hundred per cent happy; we all have moments of sadness, anxiety and even times when we feel depressed – but they pass.

As an example, if we always tell ourselves that we "have anxiety", then that can become a limit that we put on ourselves, and actually means we're far more likely to experience anxiety because we end up becoming anxious about getting anxious! We need to tell ourselves, and remind ourselves, of the positive parts of us, too. This is where practising affirmations can come in. An affirmation is a little bit like an empowering quote or mantra that you repeat to yourself. It helps set your intention and helps you set yourself with a positive narrative. The three most

powerful things I want you to say to yourself are this:



Even if you have to start by saying them in your mind, do. Take a moment for yourself, breathe, and really focus your intention and on the meaning behind those words. Try to really feel them.

Forgiveness: Forgiving yourself is important. We can carry around guilt for all sorts of things and it will start to weigh you down. But let me be clear, nothing about your sexuality or identity is in need of forgiveness. Sure, your identity may upset somebody – but forgive yourself of any guilt that you may feel, that’s not yours to carry, and let it go.

Acceptance: Accept yourself for who you are, as you are – flaws and all! Your gender, expression or who you’re attracted to is not a flaw. All you need to do is accept yourself as you are as your authentic, true self.

Love: Loving yourself gives you power. We can get so awkward about this idea – “Oh, they love themselves!” is thrown around in a negative sense as a way of taking someone down. But we SHOULD love ourselves. Loving yourself is the work of a lifetime, and it’s never too early to start.

Forgive your imperfections; accept yourself as you are; and love yourself for you. That is how we can live happily and gayly.