

One of the worst feelings is being in a place that you do not belong in. Ever since childhood and accidentally walking into the wrong classroom, or being relegated to the "nerds" table in middle school because you don't fit in with the popular crowd, we all want to fit in our space. We reject praise until we feel "worthy" of it, because the fear of being an overambitious fraud in over their head is bigger than the fear of failing. One of the most damaging emotional states to be in, I would only wish that feeling on my very worst enemies, because I can understand more than almost anyone.

I try my best to not play any sort of "Oppression Olympics" because I know everyone struggles, but being transgender *sucks*. It feels terrible. I have just sat on the floor and cried over being born in the wrong body. At times, I figured I was better off dead than trying to deal with gender dysphoria, and I have the scars on my legs to prove my struggle. It is terrifying knowing that there is this disconnect with how you appear to everyone else and how you truly are. But I would say, throughout everything, the biggest battle I had was one with myself.

I grew up in the deep south. A little bumfuck town on the delta where the rice fields stretched out for miles and miles. It is incredibly isolating. Among the most stupid and dangerous situations a person can put themselves in, alongside classics like lathering yourself with honey in front of a brown bear or wearing a meatsuit in a tank full of hungry sharks, being openly gay in the rural south where I grew up was perhaps the most moronic things a person could do to intentionally put themselves in harms' way. So, I had no examples. For the majority of my life, the closest thing I got to representation were the rumors that Johnny was a "faggot" or a "butt pirate." I never really realized I was

bisexual until I realized my neck was covered in hickeys from my best friend.

But being trans in the south is a whole different beast. I never knew what the word transgender meant until Fox News, which was on the living room TV all day, every day because of my father, kept spewing rhetoric of these evil pedophiles who lure in children in women's bathrooms by pretending to be one of them, like folk tales of cryptid beasts like skinwalkers. Maybe, due to the rise of right-wing extremism or simple frequency illusion, I started to hear a little more about trans people but nothing serious. It was always "I met a girl at a bar last night. Turned out she was a tranny, and packing more to me" that was met with laughter, because transgender = bad. I never knew anyone who saw trans people as people. I always saw them as these freaks.

So, when junior year of high school rolled around and my egg started to crack, I struggled to even believe it. I tried to rationalize cringing every single time I heard my dead name spoken aloud. "Surely it is not all that weird, cis people dislike their names all the time. If all this Let's Go Brandon stuff never happened, you would be perfectly fine being called that. You just dislike stupid right wing memes and being associated with them. When I broke down crying one night due to the realization that everybody looked at me and saw a boy named Brandon, I assumed that it was just your run of the mill self image issues. I assumed I was sensitive. "Come on, normal teen boys definitely try for half an hour to literally rip their facial hair off due to not having a razor or shaving cream. I am normal." Even the eating disorder I developed during that time was rationalized. "Yeah, sure I'm shoving

fingers down my throat to lose some calories and I have extreme anxiety every time I eat because it will make me look less 'petite and feminine', but you have been called twink a lot. Maybe you're just leaning into the archetype."

My denial could only go so far. Eventually, I was forced to face the truth that I at least *wanted* to identify as a trans woman. And I think that was the hardest part of my journey. I had let the stereotypes and the narratives of transgender people get into my head. "Trans women are nothing but men, invading women's spaces to prey on and abuse them." It sounds silly, and it sounds ridiculous, but I couldn't get that thought out of my head "what if they are right? After all, I feel out of place in spaces for lesbians and queer women. What if it's because I am just a perverted man? Is there something wrong with me?" and these thoughts ate and ate at me. I thought that I couldn't be transgender, but just a man with mental illness. It felt like a deep secret I should keep hidden, and I felt that at any moment if I revealed this, I would be seen as some monster and a freak, and that it was something to be ashamed of.

Eventually, it started taking a massive toll on me. My mental health was declining to the point where I was fantasizing about offing myself just to make the pain and confusing yet agonizing feeling within me go away. I eventually decided that either I was going to resolve this issue within me, and talk about it. I asked people I knew who were transgender about their experiences and their struggles, and it all just started to click. As I found things in their stories that applied to me, I finally realized that I was not fully alone in this journey. That my fears, while irrational, were not something that I was experiencing by myself and

that many of my trans peers were facing the same struggles that I was going through myself. Our journeys were not identical by any means, but seeing these people who often exude confidence share that they also felt insecure, inadequate, or "wrong" gave me the confidence to attempt to live as myself.

You want to know how to get over Impostor Syndrome? Just talk to people reaching for the same goal as you are. Talk to your teammates about what they are trying to accomplish and how they are putting in the effort to accomplish it. Talk to your fellow all-conference players, talk to people on the other team who are trying to prove their worthiness on their teams. Everyone has struggles they go through, and nobody is in their struggles alone, and that when you start to communicate your problems with others, that things get a lot better for everyone else. You are enough, Mike.