

Exploring how we can master ourselves by looking at how authors and experts say it is possible with your host Suswati Basu.

Intro music

Welcome to season 3 episode (number) of How To Be...with me Suswati as your timid presenter, guiding you through life's tricky topics and skills by reading through the best books out there.

Visibility of trans and non-binary people has increased in recent years with more coverage of stories about the community by the news and media. However, all visibility is not necessarily good visibility. While many news, media and online content sources continue to produce excellent coverage that highlight the lived experiences and key issues facing transgender and non-binary people, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation's analysis suggests that some media sources may either intentionally, or inadvertently, perpetuate stigmatisation of trans and non-binary people in the stories that they cover and the way they cover them. Which is why we need a shift.

So how do we cover more positive stories about people of different genders?

Here is Bela Gaytan is a queer, neurodivergent, disabled Latina instructional designer, IDEA practitioner with NASA, agency owner, speaker, and advocate with multiple disabilities. And also Cassie Brooks, who is an accomplished author of empowering children's picture books like "Sticks and Stones" and "I See the Moon and the Moon Sees Me." She uses her strong voice to inspire readers of all ages to embrace their boldness and create their own magick in the world of children's literature.

**BELA GAYTAN:** Throughout my life, I've faced numerous challenges due to the intersection of my identities. I've seen firsthand how the lack of representation can exacerbate feelings of isolation and invisibility, especially for those of us who defy a heteronormative society. Representation is vital for our mental and emotional well being as LGBTQIA plus individuals. It helps us feel seen, understood, and valued in a world that often marginalises our experiences. When diverse gender, identities and sexual orientations are embraced and celebrated, it fosters empathy and understanding, enriching society as a whole. Inclusion demands that we amplify the voices of underrepresented LGBTQIA plus folks. We must challenge harmful stereotypes and actively support people and organisations that are committed to this mission. We must create a more inclusive and equitable world where everyone feels seen and celebrated for who we truly are.

**CASSIE BROOKS:** Gender roles are important to our culture as a whole. How they are presented to children is important because these portrayals contribute to the images they hold of themselves and subconsciously helps develop their role in society and their view of their gender. LGBTQ inclusive children's books are needed so kids can see representation with a positive perspective. It's sad that a lot of people seem to miss this. A lot of books that include

LBGTQ representation are banned, but it needs to be available to children and adults to help build their sense of belonging with their families and within their communities. That's the purpose behind the Magic and Me series to encourage readers to decide on who they are going to be and not let anyone else decide for them. Their magic has, uh, been inside them all along, and it's important that we help create supportive environments so they can feel accepted, whole and happy.

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Our first book is from Laura Kate Dale, who has worked as a full-time video-game critic for the past seven years, writing for Polygon, IGN, Kotaku UK, Destructoid and a whole bunch of other outlets. Her previous published books include the illustrated coffee-table book called Things I Learned From Mario's Butt, about the educational value of assessing video-game characters' buttocks. We're talking about her book Gender Euphoria: Stories of joy from trans, non-binary and intersex writers, an anthology of positive, real-world stories from trans writers. I was fortunate enough to speak to Dale, hence here is a snippet of our chat, but find the full interview on [www.howtobe247.com](http://www.howtobe247.com) or on the YouTube channel.

**LAURA KATE DALE:** I'd wanted to write a book like this for, uh, quite a long time, and it's one of those projects that it had been bouncing around for a while. I've been trying to find a publisher that I could properly pay contributors because that was important for getting off the ground. But the spring and summer of 2020 really sort of got a bit of a kick up the backside to start working on it. It was in part because during 2020, there was a bit of an upswell in negative coverage of the trans community by media publications. It had been a thing for a while, but in 2020 it seemed to really step up. You saw a lot of previously, I would have called them progressive British media institutions suddenly taking a turn and platforming. A lot of very vocal, anti-trans voices, very uncritically. But that came at the same time as obviously we started encroaching into a global pandemic. In any other year, I'd have had pride events to go to. I'd have had things throughout the summer to feel a sense of community, a sense of camaraderie, a sense of connection with the trans community and the rest of the queer community in general. But without that, I felt very isolated and like I needed something to immerse myself in some positivity. And working on this book seemed like as good an excuse as any to collect a bunch of joy and positivity together. So gender dysphoria is a term that is often associated with a medical diagnosis that is a deep discomfort with a person's biologically assigned gender or sex. To give myself as an example, when I was born, doctors decided I was male, and I had a lot of areas of my life in which that caused me to feel deeply uncomfortable. A good example from my own life is when I started going through puberty, my voice got much lower and it felt very alien to me. I felt someone else's voice was coming out of me. It was upsetting and concerning. That was an experience of gender dysphoria. It was an experience of the way that my body was and the way that I felt not lining up in a way that was very distressing. Writing stories for gender euphoria was a very positive process. The first published book I ever did was a book called Uncomfortable Labels, which was a sort of memoir written about growing up at the intersection of being both trans and autistic. And a lot of what I talked about in that book was the things that I struggled with. Because during the early years of transition, struggle was a big part of my day to

day. There were a lot of aspects of transition that were about trying to escape from discomfort that I was going through at the time. But gender euphoria as a book was completely different because once I'd sort of gotten that bit of story told, I had room to go, what day to day? Most of the time, my experience of being a trans person is very joyous. I'm very much focused on the happiness that I get to experience being who I am, rather than thinking about trying to avoid discomfort and giving myself space to just sit and try and write stories that were about joy and positivity and to really appreciate the things that I liked about my own life story. It felt very healthy. I think that taking time to think about where your sources of joy are and how to explain the things that make you happy to other people is something that is really worth putting time into. There are a couple of things I wanted to balance. First and foremost, something really important to me was making sure that the stories that were told were not just from one perspective and trying to be aware of the kinds of stories of transition that tend to get told and that tend to get platformed and making an effort to not have that be all that this anthology would be. Usually when you read stories of transition, it's from white, usually trans women, usually from the United Kingdom or the United States, very few places outside of that. Usually you don't read stories from people, say with disabilities or with overlapping other situations in their life. And I wanted to make sure that not only did I have a collection of stories that were all distinct in the topics they covered and covered as much or overlapped as little as possible, but that told stories from parts of the world where often trans experiences are, um, not signal boosted as much. And trying to make sure that I didn't fall into the trap of how I've experienced trans joy being the way that I presented it in this book and trying to go there are other people who have other experiences and it's important to give a sort of full context of what that joy can be. Depending on what day you ask me this question, I would give you a different answer. There's so many stories that depending on the day you catch me, but one that jumps to mind right now, I think it might be. The first story at the start of the book is by an author called Miles Nelson, who tells a story of him and his husband getting married and trying to make sure that their wedding day could be as gender affirming as possible, despite some of the hurdles that were placed in front of them. And that's a story that I think about a lot. It's a story that doesn't shy away from the fact that there are some difficulties and hurdles that existed but were able to go. Those didn't stop us finding joy that looked the way it does for us. And that story really, I love that one a lot.

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The book is a personal and deeply insightful exploration of gender identity and expression. As a trans woman, Dale shares her own experiences of discovering and embracing her gender identity, as well as the challenges and joys that come with living authentically as oneself. Through a series of essays and personal anecdotes, Dale explores a range of topics related to gender identity, including the social and cultural pressures that can limit or stigmatise gender expression, the role of gender in relationships and sexuality, and the ways in which gender identity intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, and disability.

One of the central themes of the book is the concept of "gender euphoria," which Dale describes as the feeling of joy and liberation that comes with embracing one's true gender identity. Dale contrasts this with the more well-known concept of "gender dysphoria," which refers to the

discomfort and distress that can arise from feeling a disconnect between one's gender identity and one's assigned gender. While gender dysphoria is often used as a diagnostic criteria for access to gender-affirming healthcare, Dale argues that focusing solely on the negative aspects of gender identity can limit our understanding of what it means to be trans. By highlighting the positive experiences of gender euphoria, Dale challenges the idea that being trans is inherently painful or tragic, and instead celebrates the diversity and beauty of gender expression.

Throughout the book, Dale draws on her own experiences as well as interviews with other trans and non-binary individuals to highlight the ways in which gender identity intersects with other aspects of identity. For example, she discusses how trans people of colour may face additional barriers to accessing healthcare or experience different forms of discrimination than white trans people. She also touches on the experiences of trans people with disabilities, who may face additional challenges navigating physical and social environments that were not designed with their needs in mind. By highlighting these intersections, Dale underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the complex and nuanced experiences of trans and non-binary individuals.

One particularly compelling chapter of the book explores the role of gender in relationships and sexuality. Dale discusses her own experiences of navigating dating and relationships as a trans woman, as well as the ways in which gender identity can impact sexual desire and pleasure. She also interviews other trans and non-binary individuals about their experiences of dating and sexuality, highlighting the diversity of experiences and desires within the community. By sharing these stories, Dale challenges the idea that trans people are inherently less desirable or less capable of experiencing intimacy and pleasure, and instead affirms the importance of respecting individuals' gender identities and desires.

Another key theme of the book is the importance of self-acceptance and self-love in the process of embracing one's gender identity. Dale discusses her own journey towards self-acceptance, which involved letting go of societal expectations and learning to embrace her own desires and interests. She also shares advice for others who may be struggling with self-doubt or shame, emphasising the importance of finding supportive communities and taking small steps towards self-acceptance. By emphasising the value of self-love and self-acceptance, Dale underscores the importance of treating oneself with kindness and compassion, even in the face of societal pressures and discrimination.

Throughout the book, Dale also addresses the challenges and limitations of existing gender norms and institutions, such as gendered bathrooms and dress codes. She argues that these norms can limit individuals' ability to express themselves authentically and can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discrimination. However, she also acknowledges the importance of finding ways to navigate these systems in order to access necessary resources and affirm one's gender identity. By sharing her own experiences of navigating these challenges, Dale offers practical advice for others who may be facing similar obstacles.

Some notable stories include "My Mr's Mr: Ensuring I Got a Gender-Affirming Wedding" by Miles Nelson, who is an autistic author and trans man living in Durham, UK. He talks about anxiety surrounding the tradition of having to be referred to as husband and wife under the civil contract, and how he wanted to make sure his big wedding day was not overshadowed by this prospect. In the end, he had a wonderful celebration and was able to adapt it to his preference.

Other important stories included those from abroad, with "The Euphoria That Lies in Revolt: Loving Myself While Living in Brazil" by Júlia F. Cândida. She is a trans woman making movies in the region of Goiás. In a country where the previous president Jair Bolsonaro used fearmongering tactics to demonise LGBTQIA+ people, Candida truly didn't feel safe. Brazil has the highest transgender murder rate on the planet, according to TGEU (Transgender Europe), an NGO. In addition, events such as 1987's Operação Tarântula, during which over 300 trans women were arrested, and the cruel murder of Dandara dos Santos in 2017, show how much living in Brazil can still be a challenge.

Which is why Candida talks about the joy she felt when she bought her first dress and got the chance to watch the 2017 film *Una Mujer Fantástica* (A Fantastic Woman), which showed representation of transgender people on the big screen. She said: "Given our poor representation in the media in general, seeing an actual transgender actress (Daniela Vega) playing the main character, in a story that doesn't look down on her or judge her just on account of her gender identity, while not pulling back on depicting the massive hurdles she goes through caused by transphobia, was really powerful to me."

Similarly, Olu Niyi-Awosusi who is a nonbinary software developer, writer, philomath, and originally from Nigeria speaks about the fact that they never "had a strong attachment to any particular gender in private". The moment they picked items of clothing that matched what they were comfortable with, they felt "cohesive", and exactly where and who they were supposed to be. These moments of euphoria show the complexity of all of our emotions, and that we shouldn't take small moments of joy for granted.

Our next book is from Ben Pechey who wrote *The Book of Non-Binary Joy*. Pechey — who is a social media creator, LGBTQ advocate, and all round source of joy — has written this book that aims to help non-binary people to be themselves outside of the confines of other people's judgement, prejudice, and unsolicited opinions. Here they are speaking at a TEDX talk.

**BEN PECHEY:** Being trans is awful. Well, at least that's what we're told by the media, the government, certain authors and charity groups. And, um, this hatred and criticism can be a deafening wall of silence. It's not our fault, and it's out of our control. When I say ours, I mean the trans community. Trans joy, on the other hand, is not awful. However, it's currently being seen and treated like a sacred shroud, never to be touched by a human hand. It's a fleeting thing, a scarce resource, like, none of us could ever experience it. And it's often seen through the lens of trauma, pain, suffering, which is the opposite of transjoy. Now, in my own experience, transjoy hasn't always felt attainable. I felt uncomfortable, awkward, like there wasn't enough room for me to be myself. So I made myself as small as I possibly could so that life would take

as little as it could from me. Now, it's taken me a really long time to work out, but I have worked it out. Transjoy is in all of us. It might not be there every minute of every day, but trust me, it's there. As an advocate for my community, I see it as my responsibility, my role, to help us all find this joy every day. When I wrote *The Book of Nonbinary Joy*, I was explicit about who and what those pages were for. It was a space for us, exclusively for us, to work out who we were. Now, I didn't define transphobia, I didn't explain dysphoria, and I certainly didn't talk about pronouns. We know all of this. We live it. We have these conversations every day, so why would we choose to focus on this? So instead, I chose to focus on the joy of knowing who you are, what that opens you up to, how to find that, and most importantly, how to do that right now. And, uh, the reason I'm able to unlock trans joy for my community in a relatively short amount of time is because trans joy is not radical. Now, as a writer, I found myself asking through this process, well, if it's not radical, what adjectives can I use to describe it to you? Well, don't worry, I've come up with three. First of all, I would say that trans joy is mundane. Early on, with my experimentation and exploration of gender, I used clothing to explore and test my sense of self. Now, my first experience of trans joy came from the most arguably mundane of purchases: a pair of black, wide leg trousers. Now, the polyester was so cheap that in low light they created sparks. Yeah, I know. I remember trying them on. And once the static wore off, I felt like the best version of myself. They were freeing, exciting, and new. Now, that's a lovely anecdote. I'm sure we can all agree, but I'm sure we can also agree it's pretty mundane. There's no blockbuster film coming out of those trousers. So, as I said, transjoy is mundane, but it's not only mundane, it's also individual.

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The book is a vibrant and celebratory exploration of non-binary identity and expression. As a non-binary person themselves, Pechey shares their own experiences and perspectives alongside those of other non-binary individuals, highlighting the diversity and complexity of the non-binary community.

The book is structured around a series of themes, such as identity, language, and community, with each chapter featuring essays, poems, and artwork by a variety of contributors. Through this format, Pechey offers a multifaceted and intersectional look at non-binary experiences, encompassing a range of identities, backgrounds, and perspectives.

One of the central themes of the book is the importance of language and self-expression in the process of embracing a non-binary identity. Pechey discusses their own journey towards realising and accepting their non-binary identity, which involved exploring language and concepts beyond the traditional binary of male and female. They emphasise the importance of finding language and labels that feel authentic and empowering, rather than limiting or confining. They also highlight the ways in which non-binary individuals may express their gender identity through fashion, hair, makeup, and other forms of self-presentation, and the ways in which this expression can be liberating and empowering.

Throughout the book, Pechey also addresses the challenges and limitations of existing gender norms and institutions, such as gendered bathrooms and pronouns. They discuss the harm that can be caused by misgendering and the importance of respecting individuals' pronouns and gender identities. They also highlight the ways in which non-binary individuals may face additional barriers to accessing healthcare or experiencing discrimination, particularly when it comes to mental health services. By sharing these stories and experiences, Pechey underscores the need for greater awareness and understanding of non-binary identities and the importance of creating more inclusive and affirming spaces.

Another key theme of the book is the importance of community and solidarity in the non-binary experience. Pechey emphasises the value of finding supportive communities, both online and in person, as a means of navigating the challenges and celebrating the joys of non-binary identity. They also discuss the ways in which non-binary identity intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, and disability, and the importance of recognizing and addressing these intersections in order to create more inclusive and equitable spaces. Through their own personal stories and those of other contributors, Pechey highlights the diversity and richness of the non-binary community, and underscores the importance of creating spaces that honour and celebrate this diversity.

One particularly powerful section of the book focuses on the concept of joy itself, and the ways in which non-binary individuals may experience joy in the face of societal pressures and discrimination. Pechey highlights the importance of finding moments of joy and pleasure in everyday life, whether through fashion, art, music, or other forms of self-expression. They also discuss the ways in which non-binary individuals may find joy in building supportive communities and in advocating for greater visibility and acceptance of non-binary identities. By foregrounding the concept of joy, Pechey challenges the idea that non-binary identity is inherently tragic or difficult, and instead affirms the resilience and strength of the non-binary community.

Throughout the book, Pechey also addresses the importance of allyship and solidarity in creating more inclusive and equitable spaces for non-binary individuals. They discuss the ways in which cisgender individuals can support non-binary people, such as by using correct pronouns, challenging gender norms and stereotypes, and advocating for greater visibility and representation. They also emphasise the importance of listening to and learning from the experiences and perspectives of non-binary individuals, rather than assuming one knows what is best for them. By highlighting the importance of allyship and solidarity, Pechey underscores the need for collective action in creating a more just and equitable world for all.

Our final book is *Unicorn: The Memoir of a Muslim Drag Queen* by Amrou Al-Kadhi which is a powerful and deeply personal exploration of identity, culture, and belonging. Now a screenwriter, journalist, actor, and performer, Al-Kadhi writes on topics such as identity, intersectionality, activism, and sexuality and has the drag persona Glamrou. The book chronicles Al-Kadhi's journey from a young Muslim child in London struggling with their gender and sexual identity, to

a successful drag queen and writer navigating the intersections of race, religion, and queerness. Here they are speaking to Google

**AMROU AL-KADHI:** I think one of the most toxic things that has happened in the past few years has been talking about trans rights as a debate. So you get invited onto a show where someone thinks trans people shouldn't exist, and then you're supposed to debate them. But that's obviously not a conversation at all. It's just a kind of two minute argument to get the ratings up. So I was just constantly finding myself, having to defend myself on whether it be journalistically on a TV, and I was like, wow, I feel like I'm on the back foot. They always bring you on to argue against someone, and that's not a very kind of empowering position to view your identity when they only really want you as a kind of site of conflict. I would love 80,000 words to be able to write about my experience with no one shouting back at me except the voices in my head, which were there the whole time. The book, for me, was a way to really demonstrate the nuance of being a Muslim or queer identity without having to defend the experience at all or even justify why it exists. There's none of that in the book, uh, or there's no kind of polemic of, is it okay to be queer? This is just my experience, infer from it what they want. And also I was noticing, especially like on the left of politics or social politics, everyone was becoming quite obsessed with the word intersectionality without, I don't really think, understanding what it meant. I feel whenever I read about mostly - love white people, by the way, I'm sorry, but yes, a lot of white people kind of got quite obsessed with the term intersectionality as this really wonderful thing of, wow, isn't it great? Identity is so complicated and race and gender are linked and it's all so fluid. And it's also everyone's moving between social groups. And that idea, I think, does hold in theory. But the experience of having someone who has an intersectional identity is really not a fluid experience at all. It's very sort of you're this or that in that particular space. So being too gay for Muslims and a bit too Muslim for gays, and kind of the experience of intersectionality for the people who really do exist at intersections is you're always actually a conflict with one side of yourself in every different space. And I thought that was missing with the discussion of intersectionality.

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One of the central themes of the book is the tension between Al-Kadhi's Muslim identity and their queer identity. They discuss the challenges of growing up in a conservative Muslim family and community, where gender and sexual identity were not openly discussed or accepted. Al-Kadhi describes the feelings of shame and self-loathing that accompanied their realisation that they were queer and non-binary, and the ways in which these feelings were reinforced by their religious upbringing. They also discuss the ways in which they navigated this tension as an adult, reconciling their queer identity with their Muslim faith and culture.

Throughout the book, Al-Kadhi also explores the ways in which their identities intersect with other aspects of their life, such as their experiences as a person of colour and a working-class individual. They describe the ways in which their identities have been shaped by systemic inequalities and discrimination, and the ways in which these experiences have influenced their approach to drag and performance. They also discuss the importance of representation and



visibility, particularly for queer people of colour, and the ways in which they have used their platform as a drag queen and writer to advocate for greater diversity and inclusivity in the arts.

One of the most powerful aspects of the book is Al-Kadhi's vulnerability and honesty in discussing their struggles with mental health and self-worth. They describe the ways in which their childhood experiences of bullying and isolation, combined with the challenges of navigating their queer and Muslim identities, led to feelings of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. They also discuss the ways in which drag and performance provided an outlet for these feelings, allowing them to express themselves and connect with others in a way that felt authentic and empowering. By sharing their own experiences of mental health, Al-Kadhi underscores the importance of destigmatizing mental illness and seeking support when needed.

Another key theme of the book is the power of art and storytelling in creating community and fostering empathy. Al-Kadhi discusses the ways in which they use drag and writing as forms of creative expression, and the ways in which these forms of art have allowed them to connect with others and build a sense of community. They also discuss the ways in which storytelling can be used as a means of building empathy and understanding between different groups, particularly in the context of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment. By sharing their own experiences and perspectives, Al-Kadhi challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim and queer identities, and underscores the importance of listening to and learning from diverse voices.

Throughout the book, Al-Kadhi also addresses the challenges and limitations of the mainstream drag scene, particularly as it relates to issues of race and representation. They discuss the ways in which the drag scene can reinforce harmful stereotypes and exclude individuals who do not fit into narrow definitions of what is considered "marketable" or "acceptable" in drag. They also discuss the ways in which drag can be used as a means of resistance and subversion, particularly for individuals who exist at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities. By foregrounding these issues, Al-Kadhi challenges the idea that drag is a monolithic or one-dimensional art form, and instead highlights the diversity and richness of drag as a means of creative expression.

Finally, one of the most striking aspects is Al-Kadhi's ability to blend humour and pathos in their storytelling. They use humour as a means of coping with difficult situations and finding joy in the midst of pain.

So to sum up:

Gender Euphoria by Dale is a memoir that explores the author's experiences as a transgender woman, focusing on moments of gender euphoria - those fleeting instances when gender aligns with a person's true identity. The book is a powerful and honest portrayal of the transgender experience, highlighting the importance of representation and the need for greater acceptance and understanding of trans people.

The Book of Non-Binary Joy by Pechey celebrates the beauty and diversity of non-binary identities. Through humour, vulnerability, and a deep sense of empathy, Pechey challenges societal norms and invites readers to embrace their own unique identities. The book is a testament to the resilience and creativity of non-binary people, and a call to action for greater recognition and acceptance of non-binary identities.

And finally, Unicorn by Al-Kadhi is a powerful and personal exploration of identity, culture, and belonging. It chronicles their journey from a young Muslim child in London struggling with their gender and sexual identity, to a successful drag queen and writer navigating the intersections of race, religion, and queerness. Throughout the book, Al-Kadhi explores the tension between their Muslim and queer identities, the importance of representation and community, the power of art and storytelling, and the limitations of the mainstream drag scene. The book is a poignant and honest portrayal of the complexities of identity, and a call for greater empathy between different communities.

I learnt a lot speaking to Laura and reading more upon this subject so that I can be a better ally to my friends in the community and understand acceptance. Please join in on the conversation by following @howtobe247 on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and subscribe to the podcast, which can be found via [www.howtobe247.com](http://www.howtobe247.com).

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Before we go, here are Chelsea Winstead, co-founder of HerHQ, who is also a Lesbian as well as a former US Airforce Reserve Officer and successful entrepreneur, and Dr Anjali Ferguson, who is a culturally responsive licensed psychologist, children's book author, podcast host, and widely sourced expert on treating racial and social trauma and its mental health effects on children and families. See you in two week's time!

**CHELSEA WINSTEAD:** For me, I think basically, I'd want to say that as a lesbian woman, being a leader to a large group of people is great because it creates exposure and also representation for people like me. So I've actually had quite a few students who are also gay or lesbian, really commend me and sharing that publicly to create just representation in the space.

**DR ANJALI FERGUSON:** Representation is incredibly important for any individual, but especially so for marginalised communities, and even more so for LGBTQIA+ communities. Representation helps somebody feel seen, helps them feel heard, and helps validate their experiences in our society. Today, many marginalised communities, unfortunately, do not feel seen or accepted. This can lead to significant mental health issues. We know statistically that LGBTQIA plus youth and adults experience some of the greatest rates of mental health challenges, like depression and anxiety, as well as suicidal ideation and attempts. So why is representation of gender diverse communities important? It's essentially life saving.