I remember the first time that I understood what being gay was. I would race across my house to make sure I made to watch the show *Glee* with my older sister. I relished listening to the characters sing on screen and to spend time with my family. But, the show did more than just provide me with entertainment. It exposed me to a world and culture I had never experienced. The first time I understood what “gay” meant I realized two things. The first being that it applied to me, and the second that people would hate me for it.

Because of this conclusion, I spent a great amount of time hating myself. I first began to cope with being gay by ignoring it. I would cram it down into the dark corner of my mind and suppress with a false interest in girls. Being gay was being "broken." I was straight or nothing else. Society enforces heteronormative ideas on extremely young children, and this locked the people around me into strict cages.

Despite the fact that I tried to subdue my true sexuality, I was still aware that it was there. I didn’t want attention from girls, but only boys. I assumed that if a boy liked me he would tell me. Sadly, no boy ever did. As a child, I didn’t comprehend that this wasn’t my fault. I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t good enough to be liked. This negative conclusion derailed by self-image to a point where I’m still struggling to fix it today. My self-worth was stunted until I could overcome the barriers my mind has established.

Coming to terms with myself was a difficult and tedious process. Although, I noticed that the older I became the more accepting I was toward myself. Around 6th grade is when I started to come out. I had submerged myself into the Internet and absorbed as much information that I could. I learned as much as possible about my community and culture, and this gave me hope. There were other people like me in the world, and this was amazing. This newfound confidence and comfort drove me to come out. I worked my way through my family and then down into my friends. I came out first to my mom, then my sister, my dad, et cetera. I was so unbelievably overjoyed that I freed myself that I forgot about the world around me.

I remember the first time I was called a “faggot.” A girl shouted it at me down the hallway of my middle school. I was completely frozen and tears welled up in my eyes. As I stood in that hallway, every wall I had torn down desperately tried to build back up again. I was stupid enough to forget that the world hated me. For the first time in a while, I was scared to be myself. I forgot that I was alone. From this point forward, I started looking at the people around me and realizing I was nothing like them. I was by myself in a world of people and that loneliness has stuck with me for a very long time.

Having a mentality like this truly impacted my development. Believing such low descriptions about myself at a young age put a sort of split down my mind. It made me both more mature and more stunted than my peers. Dealing with the fact that I believed I was alone and unlovable pushed my mental age up. At the same time, convincing myself of these things left me in a state of internal purgatory. While my friends grew and become more comfortable with themselves I still carried around the low self-esteem and body image that I had nailed to myself at a younger age.

Growing up gay in America definitely impacted my mental health. To this day I struggle with problems like self-image and self-esteem. I watch as my friends pair off into couples and I’ll think to myself, "When will that happen to me?" and voice in the back of my mind
will say, "You'll never have that because you don't deserve it." People who love me can surround me, but I'll still feel alone.

I'll be sitting in my therapist's office discussing my mental health and something will say to me "You wouldn't have so many problems is you were straight!" And the sad truth is that this voice is correct. If I were born straight, I wouldn't have been poisoned by the internalized homophobia that is ingrained into our society. If I was born straight, I would struggle with the casual homophobia in our school system. If I were born straight, I wouldn't think I was so alone because almost everyone would be like me. If I were born straight, I would fit directly into a role in society and not aimlessly drift along the outside.

But even after all the struggles I endure today or in the past, I still wouldn't give up being gay. I want to love myself, so I try as hard as I can every day. My mental health may be difficult to manage sometime, but I'm not willing to give up. I love being gay, and I'm not going to allow myself to be my own worst enemy.