

Emily : I'm Emily Kumler and this is Empowered Health. So this month is pride month and we thought it was a great opportunity to talk a little bit about gender issues. We focus so much on sex differences in terms of the sort of medical basis for research and experience, but actually gender is becoming something that's really important for people to think a little more about. So this week I'm gonna talk to Sarah McBride who is an activist and an author and is the press secretary for the human rights campaign.

Sarah:

My name is [Sarah McBride](#)¹. I am the National Press Secretary at the [Human Rights Campaign](#),² the nation's largest LGBTQ civil rights organization. I'm the author of [Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss, and The Fight for Trans Equality](#).³ And I am myself a proud transgender woman.

Emily:

One of the things that I am just sort of really interested in, in life in general, is sort of disruption. I've covered technology, obviously, I'm really interested in women's health, and I sort of thought, you know, you have gone through such a transformation in the last, you know, few years really. And that idea of sort of identity being such a core to who we are and how we sort of interact with other people and how we feel about ourselves based on the reflection that we get back from other people. I thought it might be an interesting way for us to start to just sort of, you know, go into your memoir a little bit. Talk about what that was like to come out in a big [op-ed](#)⁴ at a big school and not really know how everything was going to be, how that was all going to go, but deciding it was worth the risk.

Sarah:

Yeah. You know, I think you've just so beautifully articulated all of the big substantive issues that LGBTQ people struggle with as they're, as they're coming out. And you know, I think this world tends to, when you're existing in this world with a sort of dominant or privileged identity, you don't realize how often that identity is reflected back on you and how often the world interacts with that specific identity. And there are a few identities that the world interacts with more blatantly than gender. And you know, I think in this conversation around transgender rights, one of the challenges that we have, that's different than the fight for gay rights, is that most people who are straight understand what it feels like to love and to lust. And so they're able to enter into conversations around sexual orientation with an analogous experience that allows them to find empathy and compassion for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. But the challenge around transgender people and transgender identities is that most people who aren't transgender--and the term is cisgender--most people who are cisgender don't have an analogous experience to having a gender identity that differs from your sex assigned at birth. And to have that gender identity not seen and reflected and affirmed by society. And for me, the closest thing that I can

¹ <https://www.hrc.org/staff/sarah-mcbride>

² <https://www.hrc.org/>

³ <https://www.amazon.com/Tomorrow-Will-Be-Different-Equality/dp/1524761478>

⁴ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-real-me_b_1504207

compare the first 21 years of my life of being in the closet to, was a constant feeling of homesickness, an unwavering ache in the pit of my stomach. That would only go away when I could be seen and affirmed as myself. And, you know, when I eventually came out, one of the most frequent responses from people was, I hope you're happy. And it was always said with the best of intentions, but it, so I think fundamentally misunderstood the sort of motivations that at least I had in coming out. I didn't come out to be happy. I came out to be free to pursue and feel every emotion, to think more clearly, to survive, to be seen, to be myself.

Emily:

I think that's so fascinating because I feel like we always, I mean just as a species, right? Try to oversimplify things that we don't understand.

Sarah:

Right.

Emily:

And what you're basically acknowledging is that there's such a complexity to experience, right? And that that's what you were craving.

Sarah:

Yeah. Well it wasn't, I think, you know, I think particularly when it's a topic that we don't understand, when it's a feeling or an experience we can't wrap our minds around, you know, we go to the closest thing that makes sense. And I think, you know, maybe the images people have in their minds, the sort of, the joyfulness of the queer community maybe that you oftentimes see people are like, oh, you are coming out as trans because you get like some joy out of wearing a dress and having long hair, to put it crudely and simplistically. And again, that I think so fundamentally misunderstands the experience. And I think my gender identity was a fact I thought about every single waking hour of every single day before I came out. It was something that was so all-consuming that, and it's an imperfect metaphor, but just as with like sort of a chronic pain that becomes, you know, so all consuming that you can't really think about anything else. It was a fact I could not avoid. And so it was sort of, I was incapable of thinking or pursuing or doing really anything else because that glaring incompleteness, that really tangible pain was all-consuming. And so for me it was at a certain point that that pain became so much and the rationalizations I told myself would make that pain and the excuses I gave myself around what would make that pain go away when I realized that they wouldn't, when I realized being, you know, successful in my community, making a difference in my community, making my family proud. When those things didn't heal that pain, and in fact in many ways made it worse, I could no longer continue hiding. So I came out to my parents and then as you mentioned, came out during the final day of my term as president of the student body at American University in Washington D.C., which is sort of the most politically active campus in the country. And so it's not every day that a student body president anywhere comes out, but it's certainly not every day that a student body president at a sort of hyper-political, hyper-aware, hyper-involved campus like American comes out. And I was really scared about the reaction from my campus

community. It was 2012. It was before what [Time Magazine called, "the transgender tipping point."](#)⁵ I didn't know how my campus would respond, but the incredible thing is that from the moment I posted that note and posted that op-ed in the student newspaper, every single message that came in was a message of love and support and in many cases, celebration. Celebration and the diversity of our campus, celebration and the diversity of humanity, celebration of the fact that our differences make us more beautiful and stronger and better. A celebration of the fact that the campus was celebrating. And that was really incredible because I think what happened was when I came out, whether it was my parents' support, whether it was my campus' support, those responses created a bar for other people to meet. Acceptance provides a standard, while rejection offers an excuse to others. And so for me it was, it was life-affirming and many cases probably life-saving to have such clear acceptance and support from my community. And that is a fact that is denied to so many transgender people, so many LGBTQ people across the country.

Emily:

Well, and that's why it's so scary to come out because you don't know, ideally everybody would be received with such love, but then there are horrible stories of people not being received that way. And I think it is a risky proposition, you know, depending upon where you are or what kind of environment you're in. Did you share the op-ed? Like were there early drafts that you circulated amongst people that knew you? Or like what was the sort of temperature read that you were trying to get?

Sarah:

So I, you know, I'd come out to my parents on Christmas Day in 2011. I feel like it's always a holiday that people come out.

Emily:

Merry Christmas!

Sarah:

Merry Christmas. Yeah, no, it was not much to do after you open the presents so you might as well just lob that in there. But, you know, I then came out to my close friends because I wanted to tell my close friends personally before I told sort of my broader community. And so I did have input from my brother, Sean, and one of my best friends, Helen, and I just sort of wanted to make sure that it read in a way that didn't feel, for lack of a better term, self-pitying. I wanted it to be something that people could empathize with, while also being self-aware, right? Self-aware of the fact that I was also entering this challenge and this moment with a great deal of privilege from my family support to the fact that I'm white and from an economically secure family with, you know, significant educational backgrounds. I had all of these privileges that created a structure and a support system that shielded me from some of the worst discrimination and rejection that comes the trans community's way. And so I wanted to be self-aware. And I think

⁵ <https://time.com/magazine/us/135460/june-9th-2014-vol-183-no-22-u-s/>

by the time I came out publicly, I had come out to enough people in my life who were, you know, deeply important to me, and I saw their responses, that I knew that I'd have their love and support no matter what. But before I came out to anyone, including my parents, I didn't know, I mean there was no one in my community that was out as trans, that I knew. So I didn't, I knew pretty much everyone in my life had embraced openly gay people that they knew, but I had no reference point for how they would respond to trans people. I think the fact that they were openly accepting of cisgender gay, lesbian and bisexual folks was, you know, a definite clue as to where they would be. But it was hard to know for sure. Again, it was sort of early days in the public discussion and I didn't have a reference point. So I didn't know how people would respond and all I knew, really definitively, was one that they mostly, for the most part, embraced LGBT people. But two that I knew what I had seen on TV, and what I had read online, and what I had watched in movies. And so much of that was a message that there is no space for you. That even if it was delivered with love, it was if you come out as trans, your life is effectively over. You will be--if not rejected by your close family and friends--you will not really have professional opportunities and the vast majority of fields in this world, you will not be able to advance beyond a certain point. You will not be able to find love. I remember the first time I heard, I found out that there are other people like me, I was 10 years old and at that point I knew who I was and I knew this fact about myself, but I didn't know the language to describe it. I didn't know that there were other people like me. I didn't know that there was anything I can do about it. And the first time that I found out, what could have been life-affirming information, was I was watching a sitcom with my mom and during the course of the episode a guest character is revealed to be transgender and the character was played by a beautiful non-transgender actress. And over the course of the episode the sort of running gag was that every single time another character expressed any kind of interest in this transgender woman, not knowing she was transgender, the laugh track would cue. And I turned to my mom and I said, you know, what is this? Is this real? Wondering if even asking the question would reveal, you know, a level of interest that would out me. And she sort of nonchalantly said, yes, they're called transgender or something like that. And sort of described what that meant, probably in not the most artful way. It was 2000-2001 and what could have been a moment of, like I said, a life-changing moment was a moment where my heart dropped and I looked at my mom and I thought in my head, my God, I'm going to have to tell you this someday and you're going to be so disappointed. Because at 10 years old, you don't know a lot, but watching that show, I knew I didn't want to be a joke.

Emily:

Do you know what the, do you remember what the show was?

Sarah:

It was called, "Just Shoot Me."

Emily:

Oh, I remember that show.

Sarah:

Yeah, yeah. And you know, I don't think, by the standards of 2000-2001, it wasn't a particularly, you know, offensive portrayal of trans people. I mean, it wasn't positive, but it was probably pretty neutral by the standards of the time, which just goes to show you where we were.

Emily:

No, it's definitely telling you something about what the culture was though, right?

Sarah:

Right.

Emily:

Yeah, absolutely.

Sarah:

Right. I mean all the references I had were basically like that show, "Silence of the Lambs," and, you know, maybe an episode or two of "Friends," which had some [problematic storylines around Chandler's parent who was transgender](#).⁶ So like, you know, it was, you were either a punchline in a comedy, a dead body in a trauma, or a villain in a horror.

Emily:

Yeah. I mean, I also feel like I've had conversations with older members of my community who are like, you know, people used to always kind of dress up. Like [J. Edgar Hoover used to wear dresses](#)⁷ like, you know what I mean? It's like, it's almost like this trying to like figure out is this a new phenomenon? Or like has this always been a part of our culture, but we just called it something else? And I think that's another real human sort of neurological, I think, probably characteristic is really trying to categorize things, right? And like figure out, you know, not just like what box can I put this in of knowledge I already have? Or experiences that I've had in order to relate to the data that in a way that can then be malleable, right? I mean, and hopefully in a positive way. Like I feel like, anecdotally, I went to Smith College and there were trans people who were there and now it's, you know, become much more open to it. And it was sort of, it wasn't a secret, but I think the admissions department hadn't quite figured out how to openly talk about it because obviously Smith is all women, right? And I'll never forget the dining commons are, you know, there's a couple of dorms that have shared dining commons, but mostly you eat in your dorm and you know, the dorms have chefs and it's like sort of this old school way of getting to know the people that you're living with. And I was sitting around a round table with other people, some of whom I knew and some of whom I didn't, and we were all talking about some, maybe we were talking about like hooking up and one of my sort of fellow students was like, well my penis blah blah. And we were all like, what? What? What are you talking about

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/should-we-forgive-friends-for-feeling-a-little-offensive-in-2016/2016/02/18/e8d47280-d0d3-11e5-b2bc-988409ee911b_story.html?utm_term=.ef208675a0f3

⁷ <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/814>

your penis? Like we're all women here. And that then led to this really awkward moment of silence. And like if I didn't know before that I was going to be a reporter, I should have known in that moment that I was because I couldn't help but ask questions. But I actually found that the open, like, I mean he really wanted to let us all know that he had a penis, right? And then he also wanted to let us all know that he wasn't really a he. And it was such a formative conversation for me to have with somebody who was so open because I think in that moment she was actually trying to figure it out herself. How do I explain this identity? Or that I have this body, but here I am at this all women's, very prestigious, all women's feminists college. And the best way to do it was to just sort of announce that under the table there was a penis joining us for lunch.

Sarah:
Right, right.

Emily:
You know, and I think we've come that was, you know what, at 19, I graduated from college in 2000 so that was a while ago. And I think, you know, things have changed, but I do think there is a general lack of understanding about this stuff still, right?

Sarah:
Yeah.

Emily:
And so I think people will sort of act like, oh yeah, it's okay, or I don't really understand that. And then one of the other sort of formative experiences that I had was when I was working at 20/20 and Primetime in New York, there was a family that we had been following who had twins and one of them was transgender. And the parents had basically decided to like very openly support the child.

Sarah:
I imagine this is [the Maines](#).⁸

Emily:
Yeah. I can't remember their name, but that sounds right.

Sarah:
Yeah. Yeah.

Emily:
And I remember there was a lot of controversy, like how do we cover this? And everybody was pretty much on the side of the parents, but we knew that the audiences might not be.

⁸ <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/identical-twin-boys-transgender-brother-sister/story?id=15142268>

Sarah:
Right.

Emily:

And, and so it was like this very interesting time to be thinking about like, how do we tell this story? And I remember kind of thinking like, isn't it child abuse to not do what they're doing? Why wouldn't we think about it in the context of just logically, right? Like when a kid wants to tell you something about who they are in other contexts, if we say to that child, like, no, you're not, you know, you have to fit into this other category because that's what you have been prescribed, right, by the world, by our family, by our religion, whatever. That generally, at that point, which was what, like 2006, 2007, 2008, like around then. That wasn't cool, you know what I mean? Like people were very much not into that. That was also another, I mean that was sort of the idea of sort of not just asking questions, but figuring out how do you share this story with people in a way where it'll open people's minds and not be like a freak show kind of episode, right, which there had been other talk shows that had done,

Sarah:
Right.

Emily:

But it was terrible.

Sarah:

I remember growing up watching, you know, turning on the TV and seeing Jerry Springer and it was sort of

Emily:
Yeah.

Sarah:

It was, you know, [trans folks walking out and it was the audience would try](#)⁹ to guess whether it was a quote, "he or she."

Emily:
Yeah.

Sarah:

Right, like really dehumanizing portrayals of trans people. And then in the 2000s, you started to see like the [Jazz Jennings](#)¹⁰, and the Maines', and families that were openly grappling with, you

⁹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jerry-springer-transphobia_n_6431934?utm_hp_ref=gay-voices

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJw3s85EcxM>

know, supporting their child. And to your point, you absolutely summed it up that denying a transgender person, including a transgender young person's gender identity is, abusive behavior. The sad reality is, is that far too many people still don't understand trans identities and will accuse affirming, supportive parents of abuse. And again, it demonstrates a complete misunderstanding. And I think a desired misunderstanding of trans identities because it's usually evoked in pursuit of an ideological agenda to push transgender people back into the closet and in the shadows. But you know, the reality is, is that trans, I think people also think that being transgender is like an intellectual decision. Like you're like, I'm going to create a pro and con list of what gender identity I want to, you know, live as and whichever one sounds the best to me, I'm going to live as, right? It's not an intellectual decision. It's a visceral fact.

Emily:

Well right, and then you get into discrimination and you say, well, then why would anybody choose to be a woman, right?

Sarah:

Yeah. I mean it's like why would anyone choose to be of a circumstance that makes their life harder? In addition to like being a trans woman, in particular, is like one of the most discriminated against identities. But, you know, I'm also proud to be trans. Like if I was given an option to not be trans, I wouldn't take that option. Like I'm proud of who I am and I'm glad that I am who I am. But it's not because I like put out a pro and con list and decided that like this was what made me, like this seemed like what was fun to do or whatever. It's a visceral fact that you know about yourself, which is not an intellectual sort of maturity-based decision like marriage or like who you want to marry or you know what you want to do with the rest of your life professionally, right? This is about who you are at your most basic. And we know that right now in this world, studies show that [roughly 41% of transgender people attempt suicide at some point in their lives](#)¹¹ and that's not because transgender people are predisposed to attempt suicide. It's because society puts so many barriers in our way to wholeness and health and opportunity and stability and love and community that nearly half of transgender people decide that they would rather end their lives than exist in this world. But the powerful thing in those statistics is that there's a clear path forward, that when transgender people are accepted and embraced by their family, that number drops in half. When they're accepted and embraced by their community, that percentage of those who attempt suicide drops even further. And studies that we see now show that when transgender people--transgender young people--are allowed to be affirmed and accepted and embrace in their gender identity from an early age, when we remove some of the challenges that trans people face when they transition later in life after puberty, when we, when we allow people to live as much of their life as their authentic selves, they report the same mental and physical health outcomes as their cisgender peers. So there's this, when trans youth are allowed to be themselves and embraced for who they are and loved by their family and community, the [suicide rate for trans people goes from 41% to less than 1%](#).

¹¹ <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/4/e20174218>

[the same as the general population.](#)¹² And so there's a very clear demonstrable public health sort of answer here that if people are rejected, if people are refused access to living authentically and to community and to love and to affirmation of their gender identity, people die. And if people are allowed to live authentically from as early in age as possible, in families that love them, and in communities that embrace and affirm them, they live. And I don't think that there's a clear demonstration of both the stakes of this issue and the moral clarity of this issue.

Emily:

Well, you know, it does strike me that it seems like there is a natural progression when there is some sort of social disruption, right? And like we could say this with gay and lesbians too, right? That, like there was, I don't know what the numbers are, but I'm sure there were higher suicide rates in, you know, 50 years ago amongst those groups than there was amongst the general population for the same reasons that you're describing, right? Because when somebody is denied the ability to be who they feel they are, then they are kind of denied the right to actually live. I mean, I think we think about depression in such a, I don't know, simple way, I feel like especially in the United States. That doesn't really explain the complexity of people feeling the right to live today, right? And if you're denied the right to live by who you are, then living doesn't hold as much value, right? Because you can't be, you know, I think the word authentic is a good one, but I think it's so much deeper than that. It's like the zest of who you are.

Sarah:

Yeah. Right. You're not living your life because you're living someone else's life. And I think, but then beyond that, you know, trans folks come out and then the individual systemic and institutional discrimination that they face means that they end up getting pushed out of public life to such a degree that they can't live either.

Emily:

Right.

Sarah:

Right? The consequences of the discrimination that trans people face, both you know from individuals who discriminate but also from a government that discriminates too often, means that transgender people are put in circumstances where they are pushed back into the shadows or back into the closet. To that point, one of the conversations we have so often in this fight is around bathroom. And I think it seems silly to people why bathrooms come up so often in this fight, but the reality is, is that bathrooms have been at the center of every single battle for civil and human rights over the last 70 years. [Bathrooms are at the center of the fight](#)¹³ for the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#)¹⁴. Bathrooms were at the center of the conversation around gay, lesbian, and

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https://www.schulich.uwo.ca/about/news/2015/june/study_finds_that_risk_of_suicide_in_transgender_community_may_be_reduced_by_changing_policy_and_societal_factors_.html

¹³ <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/explaining-bathroom-bills-transgender-rights-and-equal-protection>

¹⁴ <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=97>

bisexual identities in the sixties and seventies, [people talking about bathroom predators](#).¹⁵ Opponents of equality defeat of the [Equal Rights Amendment](#)¹⁶ in large part because of concerns around inclusive restrooms. They almost defeated the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#)¹⁷ in 1991 talking about bathrooms and burdens and they're [talking about bathrooms again today and the fight for transgender rights](#)¹⁸, opponents are, because they understand that if they lose on everything else, but win on bathrooms, if they can legislate, legalize and in some cases mandate discrimination in restrooms, it becomes the closest thing to a silver bullet to legislating that community out of public life. Because if you can't use a restroom that matches who you are and doesn't other eyes or stigmatize you, if you can't easily and safely access that kind of space, it becomes much more difficult to go to school, to go to, to leave your house for more than a few hours. And so all of these conversations are nothing less than a conversation about whether transgender people can exist in public life, can be full and equal citizens, can be full and equal neighbors, and be visible in their communities as just everyday people.

Emily:

Well, and also, psychologically, you're confronted with having to go the bathroom several times a day, right? So like it's a, you're confronted with the fact that you are not accepted, right, several times a day. I mean, that is significant.

Sarah:

Right, I mean in addition to the logistical challenges of existing in public life and not being able to safely access a restroom, that does another or stigmatize you, it's also just a constant dehumanization and indignity. And that's one of the things we don't talk about enough about when we talk about discrimination. You know, when we talk about discrimination, we try to always make it tangible. So you know, it's the job lost, it's the service denied, it's the money lost, it's the, you know, all of these tangible things which are obviously critically important to talk about and really meaningful. But we don't talk enough about the dignitary harm that comes from existing in a society that's both structured against your success and constantly sending a message to you and to those around you that you are less worthy of dignity, less worthy of respect, less worthy of love, that you are less worthy person. And that dignitary harm that has serious consequences for our mental and physical health.

Emily:

We just did an [episode on period poverty](#)¹⁹ and how, you know, women in prisons are not given access to like adequate pads or tampons, and how the homeless population faces similar struggles and how, I mean I ended up leaving that experience, like that sort of research and

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<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/2016-bathroom-bills-politics-north-carolina-lgbt-transgender-history-restrooms-era-civil-rights-213902>

¹⁶ <https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/>

¹⁷ <https://adata.org/learn-about-ada>

¹⁸ <https://transequality.org/what-experts-say>

¹⁹ <https://empoweredhealthshow.com/ep-12-punished-for/>

then all the interviews we did feeling like this is significant in a way that I don't think most people realize, like this isn't a trivial kind of topic. This is like if we said, okay, people who are in male facilities no longer have access to toilet paper unless they, you know, work for a week so that they can buy a roll of toilet paper, which will last them less time, right? And I think, you know, I've always been very interested in systems, but I feel like what you're explaining is another example of this, right? We also had [an episode with Soraya Chemaly](#)²⁰, who I love, and she is the one who sort of brought to the forefront of my mind the inequalities in like the women's restroom versus the men's restroom. And that like women's restrooms are often designed just the same as men's, except that there are stalls, right? But it's not like there's more. Yet people who use the women's bathroom often have to go more, they have small children, they have periods, right? Like there's a lot more reason to go to the bathroom. So there should probably be twice as many stalls. But public spaces are just not designed that way. And so the takeaway message is sort of like, well, so you need to wait and like, aren't you lucky to be in this public space that was designed for men, but aren't you lucky to be out of the house? Like, don't complain about the line in the museum that like all the people who don't need to use the women's restroom get to go enjoy the art. Whereas like you have to go the bathroom and so you will spend half of your time waiting in line and that's just life.

Sarah:

It's one of those messages we got so often, a lot of times from anti-LGBTQ politicians, you know, we'll hear from them that we should consider ourselves lucky that we aren't living in a country that wants to, that doesn't [criminalize our identity](#)²¹ and you know, [put to death LGBTQ people](#)²². Like that is the bar that these, some of these elected officials are operating on where they're like, you should be so thankful that you don't have to face this, that like you shouldn't be asking for or complaining or needing anything else.

Emily:

I feel like that's like, there's a name for that as like a legal strategy of like, you're basically indirectly threatening somebody in the way that you say like, be grateful that you're not tortured, like that's not on the table. So like, what are you talking about? That's, you know, we're moving forward.

Sarah:

No, no one was talking about that in this context and you suddenly have brought it up like.

Emily:

It's a scare tactic. Yeah.

²⁰ <https://empoweredhealthshow.com/women-and-anger-with-soraya-chemaly/>

²¹ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/11/no-support/russias-gay-propaganda-law-imperils-lgbt-youth>

²²

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/06/14/countries-where-being-gay-is-legally-punishable-by-death/39574685/>

Sarah:

Well, it's a scare tactic and it's also, I mean it's the hypocrisy of like these folks who are like, you should be thankful that, you know, we're not trying to criminalize you. And it's like, yet, you know, those [sodomy laws](#)²³ and those laws that banned any kind of gender diverse expression, those were all undone over y'all's objection.

Emily:

Yeah.

Sarah:

Right, like it's not because like you all supported this, you know, decriminalization effort and the breaking down the elimination of anti-sodomy laws and that you're just stopping at nondiscrimination protections. You don't support nondiscrimination protections, but when the issue is up for debate, you were supporting anti-sodomy laws, you were supporting the criminalization of LGBTQ identities. And so it's just

Emily:

So, it's like I'm not grateful for you, actually, because it seems like if you had your way, like

Sarah:

Right. Yeah, exactly.

Emily:

Yeah. I actually, I have like sort of an ongoing folder of people who sort of make a big stink about something or say something like that, that you're sort of like, well that's kind of out of context. Like, and I think the name of the folder is like "doth protest too much" and it's like all these, you know, old white guys who make a huge deal about, you know, gay rights and then it comes out that their like gay lover is really annoyed that they won't acknowledge them in public and you're like, oh wait, okay, this makes sense now, right?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Emily:

There's some sort of self hatred I think that goes on when people are unable to see somebody else as a human. And I think that lies very deep within the person. And I often feel like they're revealing a whole lot more about themselves when they express such vitriol than they realize they are.

Sarah:

²³ <https://www.aclu.org/other/why-sodomy-laws-matter>

I think that that's absolutely true. In 2016, after North Carolina passed [HB2](#)²⁴, which banned trans people from restrooms consistent with our gender identity, I was actually in North Carolina in a restroom that I was legally barred from being in and I ended up taking a selfie. And I posted a selfie of myself in this bathroom with some commentary and [it went viral](#)²⁵. And the initial responses that came in were, you know, positive responses, some misguided, but mostly positive. And then eventually as it went more viral, the responses that came in were incredibly negative and incredibly hateful and in many cases, threatening. And it was a selfie that was featured on like MSNBC in prime time, like it went super viral. And the messages that came in, the most frequent one was just three letters on my screen that kept popping up: KYS, KYS, KYS, kill yourself, kill yourself, kill yourself over and over again. And I'm 25 at this point, I did not think words on a screen could impact me that much, but the repetitive nature and the repetitive threats and the repetitive insults eventually started to get to me. And at a point I wondered, can I do this work? Can I do I have thick enough skin to basically be a trans person in public in this country. And I spent a lot of time reflecting and I came across a really powerful podcast where they interviewed Lindy West, who's the writer of [Aidy Bryant's new show on Hulu](#)²⁶, and [Lindy West](#)²⁷ is a like very body positive journalist and she talks, she writes a lot about her body and her weight in a very proud way online. And she got a lot of hate. And there was this really powerful episode where she ended up sort of confronting her troll. And that episode gave me a really powerful glimpse into the psychology of hate and the psychology of trolling. And it sort of gets to your point, but I think it actually illuminates a slightly broader fact because yes, a lot of times the biggest bullies are the biggest closet cases themselves, but there's a more universal truth that I think to me helps to explain the phenomenon of harassment and trolling, particularly online around LGBTQ identities and around gender and body image. And that is that everyone has an insecurity. Everyone has something that society has told themselves they should be ashamed of. Whether it's your sexual orientation or your gender identity, whether it's what you look like, how you sound, any host of different characteristics or identities or features, everyone has something that society has told them is worthy of being mocked and hidden. And the thing about LGBTQ people, is we have taken that fact, we have not only accepted it, but in many cases walked forward from a place of pride and the bullies see that power. They see that individual agency and conquering our own fears and insecurities and they're jealous of it, and they're jealous that they can't do that in their own life for whatever factor or identity or characteristic is causing them pain. They are jealous that they don't have the same power we have exercised, and in their effort to prove to themselves and to us that they are indeed quote, "more powerful than us," the power they're jealous of is less than the power they actually have over us. They bully us and they insult us. And that hatred and that bullying and that trolling and that harassment comes from that place of jealousy, jealousy of our power, jealousy that we have freed ourselves of the constraints of that insecurity or fear, and jealous that they can't do the same.

²⁴ <https://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/HTML/H2v4.html>

²⁵ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/leticiamiranda/trans-bathroom-selfie>

²⁶ <https://www.hulu.com/series/shrill-54eab813-3a9b-496d-9d7e-908597ad8d1a>

²⁷ <http://www.lindywest.net/#about>

Emily:

Yeah, I completely agree. I mean that makes perfect sense to me. I also think I would add to that fear.

Sarah:

Right.

Emily:

I think when somebody becomes self aware enough to recognize that they are something different, right? Or that they are, they have qualities maybe that are different, right? So maybe it's that you're heavier, maybe it's that you're really smart, but most of the people around you, you know, aren't intellectually curious, right? Like it could be as you said, like a myriad of different qualities, but once you sort of, you recognize that in yourself and then you feel comfortable enough saying like, not only is this a part of me but it's something that I think is kind of cool, right? And that I'm proud of or that I want to be proud of. Maybe I'm not yet, but the first step is to sort of say this is me. And I think so many of the people, especially I hate Twitter, like especially on Twitter, it's like the anonymity mixed with the sort of just, I don't know, like gang mentality that I think really revs people up in a way that exposes the jealousy of somebody else's like sort of personal power or feeling that sense of power that is so wonderful, right? That is really one of the great joys in life combined with this idea of like what? Like I've never asked myself those questions. What gives you the right to get to know yourself that way? Like I was just told to be who I am, like, you know, be the way that I was told to be, and that's what I tell my kids, and this idea of like self-exploration is not something that I know how to do.

Sarah:

And I'm scared to do it.

Emily:

And you doing it is terrifying.

Sarah:

Yeah, exactly.

Emily:

So talk to me a little bit about where we are in the political landscape. I mean, I feel like you were at the Democratic National Convention. We all thought Hillary was gonna win. And then like here we are, we're looking forward to 2020 but like I would love to get your take on like sort of what are the state of things right now?

Sarah:

Yeah. You know, I think that right now we're in the midst of June, which is [pride month](#)²⁸ and we are commemorating 50 years since the [Stonewall Riots](#)²⁹ in New York City, when LGBTQ people led by two trans women of color, [Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera](#)³⁰, fought back against oppression and brutality at the hands of law enforcement. You know, I'm trying to reflect on this moment, both in the context of the current moment, but also in the context of the history that we've seen. There's no question that right now we are facing, as a community, unprecedented challenges, particularly the trans community. We are seeing a level of unprecedented, explicit attacks on the trans community at the federal level that we've never seen before. We went from an administration, a president, Barack Obama, who [was the most trans inclusive president in American history](#)³¹ and basically no one's in second place, as my friend Mara Keisling likes to say. And from day one of Donald Trump's administration, he has targeted the rights and dignity of transgender people. We have seen roughly [100 to 150 anti-LGBTQ bills](#)³² introduced in state legislatures across the country, ranging from legislation that seeks the licensed discrimination under the guise of religious freedom, to legislation that seeks to target the trans community for discrimination in schools and in facilities. So we have significant challenges. But one of the things that I think is, that provides me hope is, the fact that we have seen throughout every challenge we faced as a community, whether it's the early days of the movement following Stonewall, whether it's the height of the [AIDS epidemic](#)³³ in the 80s and 90s, whether it's the [passage of bans on marriage equality](#)³⁴ in state after state in the 2000s, whether it's the attacks on trans people that we're seeing right now, it's that every single time opponents come for us, we ended up organizing and mobilizing, we ended up having a conversation with this country that serves to open hearts and change minds. And in the end, we end up growing stronger. And so every single time they come for us, we end up laying the foundation for more progress. And I'm confident that that will be the case today because the reality is, is that every single time we have that conversation, right? So, [George W. Bush inserts marriage equality into the public discourse](#)³⁵, into the political debate more significantly than it had been in a long time, if ever. And even though those conversations at the start were really hurtful and really negative, even though marriage ban after marriage ban after marriage ban passed in states across the country, the moment the conversation created the synaptic

²⁸ <https://www.loc.gov/lgbt-pride-month/about/>

²⁹ <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/the-stonewall-riots>

³⁰

<https://sites.psu.edu/womeninhistory/2016/10/23/the-unsung-heroines-of-stonewall-marsha-p-johnson-and-sylvia-rivera/>

³¹

<https://transequality.org/blog/president-obama-acknowledges-humanity-of-trans-and-bisexual-americans-in-historic-state-of-the>

³²

https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/HRC-Anti-Trans-Issue-Brief-FINAL-REV2.pdf?_ga=2.71127833.883103943.1561052281-1937703410.1561052281

³³ <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>

³⁴ <https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/gay-marriage>

³⁵

https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2014/10/20/gays-and-lesbians-owe-thanks-to-president-george-w-bush-and-justice-scalia/?utm_term=.fca9cbccd00a

connection between gay people and humanity, and in that case, in the context of marriage, once that synaptic connection was made, it was practically inevitable that gay people and humanity would be brought together in people's minds. And the same thing is true for trans people today, whether it's trans people being students, whether it's [trans people in the military](#)³⁶, whether it's trans people just needing to go to the bathroom, as silly as that seems. It creates a synaptic connection between trans people and an element of humanity that everyone can relate to. And the moment that that connection is made, even if the conversation starts from a negative place, it is an unalterable course toward greater understanding, greater acceptance, and in the end dignity and equality for that community. It's sort of a conversational way of talking about what [Martin Luther King described as the arc of the moral universe](#)³⁷, that with conversation and fighting and organizing and mobilizing that arc bends towards justice.

Emily:

I once had a really interesting conversation with somebody about discrimination against gay and lesbian people and discrimination based on race. One of the points that was highlighted that I thought was really worth thinking about, was that like as more people came out, more people realize that they had people in their families, social spheres that they loved, who had not been able to express that this was who they are. And that they already loved them, right, and so they either had a choice to push them aside or you know, sort of deny the relationship, which would be painful and hurtful and awful, right? Or to accept, okay, like I love you, you're a gay man, let's, you know, figure this out. Can you tell me more about it? Or when I hear somebody saying something homophobic, you know, I'm gonna think twice about that person because I love you. And whereas with race, you know, there hasn't been as much sort of whether it's interracial marriage or other things that sort of break the family unit down and force people to be confronted with this idea that there's still so much segregation basically in this country that the idea that you know, somebody in your family turns out to be African American, like that's unlikely. Where somebody in your family being gay, well that's probable.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Emily:

I would love to have you talk a little bit about that in terms of where the Trans Movement is, in terms of coming out and it being safe to come out or it not being safe to come out and how people can think about that a little.

Sarah:

Well I think what you described is, it's something I talk a lot about with colleagues and friends, I think it's an incredibly apt observation, which is that so much of the progress that we have seen on LGBTQ equality, I think similar to the progress we've seen on gender, more broadly, and

³⁶ <https://www.apnews.com/6db39b62ed1d41388e2b69720e586cb5>

³⁷ <https://www.msnbc.com/politicsnation/watch/bending-towards-justice-206485571681>

also disability, in particular, right, and disability rights in this country is that LGBTQ people it organically exists across race and geography and class and family and ideology. I mean, like LGBTQ people, to your point, exists in most families. And it creates this organic change maker in every circumstance and in every place no matter, you know, no matter where you find yourself, no matter the ideology of the,

Emily:

Of those synaptic connections that you were talking about.

Sarah:

Right. And those opportunities don't exist on some other issues around race, around class, and around religion where geographic segregation exists much more than when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity or disability. And so the lack of exposure to people who are different than you as it relates to race, religion, or class results in a hardening of negative perceptions and stereotypes, ends up, you know, resulting in not the opportunities to unlearn as sort of organically the prejudice and the stigma you have as exists for LGBTQ identities. And I think one of the major questions we have as a society is how do we replicate the kind of progress and change we see on public perceptions and understanding and attitudes around LGBTQ identities? How do we replicate that when the physical segregation exists in more significant ways. I think maybe social media is part of the solution there. I think, you know, we have greater opportunities to hear each other and see each other and have windows into the lives of other people. Now with that access, has also come such an individualized media experience that we have to, the question is, will we actually see those stories?

Emily:

Right, I mean, I think everybody's in their own silos to such an extent.

Sarah:

Exactly. So it's figuring out, like we have the technology to bridge that, but also at the same time that technology ends up creating greater silos. So how do we remedy that? And I think that's a huge question for society. I think it's literally one of the most fundamental questions we have in terms of democracy because we have such different conversations happening that like one side is playing football and the other side is playing baseball, when it comes to our democratic institutions and our democratic conversations and in the United States and around the world. And I think that's one of the reasons why you see the crisis and the liberal democracy. So that, that I think is a big question and I don't have a good answer to that. I think right now what we are seeing for the trans communities, there's no question that more and more trans people are coming out more and more trans people feel safe coming out. More and more trans people are affirmed and welcomed when they come out. One of the things that we track, really closely, is the percentage of Americans who say they know someone who's transgender. And in the last decade that number has increased from single digits, percentage wise, to [roughly 30 to 40% of](#)

[the public](#)³⁸. And there's still a lot of room to grow. But that increase reflects two things: one, we know that support for equality is greatest amongst those who know someone in their life who's gay, lesbian, bisexual, or in the context of trans rights trans. And so one, it's a reflection the greater that number, the deeper our support is among wide swaths of the public. But the second thing that that number reflects is the percentage of people who feel safe coming out is increasing because that means that if more and more Americans know someone who is transgender in their life, more and more trans people are coming out. And not just coming out, but coming out and being very open about who they are in every aspect of their life. And so that statistic I think is a powerful reflection of the progress we're seeing in terms of the ability of trans people to come out. And it's one of the reasons why I think we saw the number of Americans who are transgender, [the estimate of the number of Americans who are transgender, increase from 700 to 900,000 to 1.4 million](#)³⁹ just a couple of years ago.

Emily:

So I feel like, you know, because it's Pride Month and I feel like this is a big thing that is sort of feels like it's in the debate sphere. I actually just recently went on this podcast it's called [The V Word](#)⁴⁰ and talked sort of about the history of feminism a little bit with them. And you know, it was interesting because I had somebody, I think it was on that podcast, ask me, you know, like how is feminism different today than it was say for our mother's generation? And one of the things that I'm really struck by is that I think it used to be this idea of like women wanted to be equal to men. And I think feminism today, at least for me, really feels and I'm not the only person who says this, right, but like actually it's not the right to be treated the same. It's about the right to do what I want.

Sarah:

Right.

Emily:

And it's about the right to like chart my own path and not be told like, you know, this is what's expected of you, this is not acceptable. And in that regard I feel like, you know, with the LGBTQ, I feel like everybody's in the same boat, right? And the alignment of sort of like feminism and misogyny and sexism, I know is something like you did this great [Ted Talk](#)⁴¹ and whatever. I just sort of felt like you'd be a really interesting person to talk a little bit about this in the time that we have left because I know people will often say things like, why do you have to say like, I am woman, hear me roar or you know, have a pride parade. Like can't we all just be human? Like can't we all just, you know, like, fine. That's cool. You're gay. I don't care. Like don't throw it in my face. And from my perspective, I feel very strongly that like, yeah, when we are actually

³⁸ <https://hrc.org/resources/hrc-national-survey-of-likely-voters>

³⁹

<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://vwordpod.com/>

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kw5vyJ30djM>

equal and treated the same, that would be cool, right? Like we're definitely looking forward to that. But until we get there, it's really important to point out that there is a difference. And I think this is something, philosophically, that I think is important for people to talk about in an open way, right? The idea that like there's no difference between boys and girls, right?

Sarah:
Right.

Emily:
Like this used to be kind of an idea of protecting people and saying like boys and girls are the same, so treat them the same. And then I think with the, you know, more people coming out as trans and trans entering the landscape more in a cultural way, people are like, okay, so you're a boy or a girl, like maybe I don't really care, like why do we have to talk about it? Or other people are offended by it in a way where you're like, oh, okay so you do think boys and girls are really different and if somebody basically identifies as something that you don't think they are, that's offensive to you somehow. All of this deserves more attention.

Sarah:
Yeah well and I think that like there's this shifting in our understanding of gender as a concept from this notion of like yes, gender expression as a social construct, but there is something deeply held around our gender identity that goes beyond a social construct. And I think for me the way I think of gender is I think of gender a lot like I think of language. Language is a social construct. The word happiness, the word sadness, they were created by people. But those words describe a very real feeling, a very real emotion, a very visceral, real visceral fact about a person in that moment that they are happy or they are sad, even though the words themselves are social constructs. And just as there is nearly an infinite number of ways to express any individual feeling, right? There's so many different words. Take happiness, there's so many different words to describe happiness. There's different sentences, there's different facial expressions, there's different languages, right? Just as there are so many different ways to describe that feeling, so too, are there nearly an infinite number of ways to express any given gender identity? And so while we recognize that the expression of gender as a social construct, we also can recognize that there is something very deep in us that draws us to an individual gender identity. And for those whose gender identity matches the way society is perceiving them, that draw manifests itself in an innate comfort, right? But once the tension exists, once society, once a disconnect exists between what society sees and what you feel, that's where that homesickness that I described comes in and the need to transition and have the world take the steps that you need to have the world see that gender identity is required. And I think you're right. I think we are moving to a place where we understand that everyone's different. What I might need in order to be safe and healthy and fulfilled that that might be different than someone else. Because I'm also existing in this world with different opportunities, with different backgrounds, with different identities, with different, you know, health experience with a different health background than someone else. And so we have to recognize that individual nature of every person's lived experience and that everyone has something, everyone needs something a

little bit different. And we recognize that with medicine, right? We recognize that when it comes to education, we recognize, not often enough, but we recognize that what everyone needs is a little bit different. And we too should recognize that in questions around justice and equality. There's that meme online that has, you know, the three people standing by the fence of the baseball game and like equality is they all get one box to stand on despite the fact that they all have very different heights, equity is they all get boxes that give them the height that they need to see over the fence, and then justice is actually just removing the fence. And I think that that's a compelling metaphor for what this is. That one, we should be giving people what they need in the short term, not based on this one-size-fits-all understanding, but on the individual understanding. While also pursuing a society that reimagines how we structure society, how we think about things, how we go about living our lives as it relates to gender and sexual orientation. And all of that is necessary in this conversation. All of that is necessary in this fight. And when we accept that, when we allow ourselves to approach these questions with an understanding of the individual needs of people, then we'll actually be able to give people the opportunities and the dignity that they need to be healthy. And at the end of the day, pursue happiness in some form.

Emily: I'm Emily Kumler and that was Empowered Health. Thanks for joining us. Don't forget to check out our website at empoweredhealthshow.com. For all the show notes, links to everything that was mentioned in the episode as well as a chance to sign up for our newsletter and get some extra fun tidbits. See you next week