

GULLP

**A zine telling the stories of LGBTQIA+
people with eating disorders**



Gulp is a zine collection of original pieces – poetry, prose, art – by people who are in the LGBTQIA+ community and have lived experience of eating disorders. You can read more about this on the next page.

Content warning

This zine contains real stories that remain unchanged from their owners' original words. This means their content may be upsetting or triggering for some readers.

If you are affected by anything you read within these pages, tell someone you love and trust. Alternatively, you can contact [Switchboard](#), the LGBTQIA+ helpline where no topic is off limits: 0300 330 0630 /// chris@switchboard.lgbt

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So what's the point?

“You look so much more feminine and attractive now. Embrace your curves, your womanliness, your health. You’ll feel more confident in tighter clothes, nicer clothes, less manly clothes.”

These are whispers and snippets of things that were said to me by health practitioners during my recovery from anorexia. Practitioners who clearly did not understand that praising femininity might not enable recovery for someone with a complicated relationship with gender. This is just a snapshot. A snapshot of how little the majority of health and social care professionals know about the impact of eating disorders within the LGBTQIA+ community. How little the majority of health and social care professionals know about the complexities of bodies, binaries, gender, sex and stereotypes for those outside the norm.

This lack of knowledge causes further harm to underrepresented people and means they remain unheard. Although Stonewall’s [‘LGBT in Britain’](#) report states that 1 in 8 LGBT people and 1 in 4 non-binary people experienced an eating disorder during 2018 alone, when researching for this project, we couldn’t find a single support service or research paper dedicated solely to this issue in the UK. People working in health and care have a responsibility to advocate for those not getting the care they need, to notice the gaps and fill them. By showcasing these stories, we’re asking LGBTQIA+ and eating disorder services to speak up, to collaborate and do more for the people they serve.

Seren Thomas

Boxes and labels. By Anonymous

Having an eating disorder and being queer is like having to fit into two very uncomfortably shaped boxes. There are no set rules to being queer, just as there are no set rules to disordered eating, yet everyone is constantly trying to fit you into the most suitable box.

I like labels as much as the next person. Having a label for my sexuality or my eating habits makes me feel part of a gang and that's comforting, and in some cases, exciting.

But I also think maybe our obsession with labels has gone too far, so that everyone must have a label at all times, and if you don't fit a label you are shoved towards the nearest available one and forced to mould yourself to it in order to be understood. Labels are meant to help us and make us feel safe, but somewhere along the way everyone got more obsessed with labelling us than understanding us.

When I first sought help with my eating, I realised that within the eating disorders gang, like in the rest of the world, there is privilege. I'm not trying to take away from the fact that everyone with disordered eating is struggling, but I think that different disorders are treated differently. Some are taken more seriously than others, and the ones that are taken more seriously tend to be the ones that fit inside the labelled boxes best.

Doctors like to tick certain boxes when it comes to disordered eating. They plop you in your labelled box and pour in the prescribed treatment. But my disordered eating doesn't fit into a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) [whatever-number-we're-on-now] approved box. But that doesn't mean I'm not struggling, that it's not hard, that it's not making life difficult. So, what now Doctor?

Same with being queer. Some parts of being queer are more acceptable than others, the better they fit into their labelled box. Men? Gay. Women? Lesbian. Both? THAT'S NOT A THING! YOU HAVE TO PICK! YOU CAN'T HAVE TWO BOXES!

“Labels are meant to help us and make us feel safe, but somewhere along the way everyone got more obsessed with labelling us than understanding us.”

And that's just the start. What about the kids who have to come out as gay because the concept of being pan is just too complicated for their parents to get their head around? What about trans people being denied surgery because they're not dysphoric or 'trans' enough in the eyes of the medical world? And when the hell is someone going to create a label for someone who wants to fuck EVERYONE, apart from cis men?

This is the issue. Labels aren't the problem, it's our attitude to them. Labels are great, they make us feel valid and real. But when we set such rigid boundaries to these labels and deal out privileges (treatment, recognition from the state, etc) for those assigned to them, that's when the problems start. Because there will always be people whose eating habits aren't disordered enough, or aren't disordered in the right way, or people who aren't bi enough, aren't trans enough, aren't queer enough to be considered queer.

What if we allowed labels to be as fluid as we are? As fluid as our mood, our relationship with food, our gender, our sexuality. What if we allowed people to have one label today, and another tomorrow? What if people were allowed to have five labels? Or no labels? What if all labels were treated the same? And all recognised as equally valid? Maybe that would make things just a little bit easier, to be seen as we want to be seen, not as the nearest fitting label.

Cramped. By Benjamin Butch

I felt like I was cramped for the past six months

Cramped inside a hospital that seriously lacked funds

Cramped in a room with six other patients

With facilities that can only be described as ancient

I have grown within this time frame

More than I thought I could ever claim

I strive to be stronger, and better, and get out of bed

My thoughts no longer overpowered with dread

I felt cramped and crushed and lost in a system

I needed to recover and recovering was my mission

Recovering was my ticket out of this nightmare

But of course, the craving for an empty stomach is still there

'Recovery isn't linear" I would hear them say
I didn't know what that meant until this very day
It's not a steady line of positivity and no mess
Its seconds of happiness after weeks of distress

I felt cramped in the hospital with no life of my own
But little did I know this was a place for me to
Blossom, Expand, and Grow

Thank you to the NHS for changing my life and the superheroes that work at
St Ann's.

I spent six months as an outpatient then six months as a day patient in order
to recover from anorexia. I'm still choosing recovery every day. This is a
poem I wrote during a group therapy session. I lost the patience to explain
my existence to people a long time ago.

Christopher Olive (he/him)

8 weeks. 8 weeks to the day after my hysterectomy I was back in the gym. The pain in my abdomen was agony like I had never experienced before, but the abs I had lost were more important.

I told my boyfriend that I was feeling bad about my body since the surgery, and I had started making myself vomit again because I couldn't exercise. He said, "don't worry, you can start working out again soon enough" and sent me home. I didn't stop making myself vomit, and he hasn't mentioned it since.

Transition is invisibility. My body doesn't exist in public space. Of course, the world makes so little space for bodies that look like mine. Twenty two and already post-transition... how can I have changed so much about myself, sacrificed my health, my freedom, my early twenties and teens to medical intervention only to still never be satisfied? Body dysmorphia and dysphoria go hand in hand.

I might look male but the female socialisation will never go away. No matter how underweight, it was always never enough – not for my mother, not for boys, not for my peers. The cis gay adult world isn't much different now I pass. Trans men aren't glamorous unless they're at the prime of masculinity, a masculinity which is never critically viewed or problematized for its glamorisation of orthorexia.

Big beefcake boys – trans personal trainers encouraging us to shape our backs to mimic the superheroes they always wanted to be. Where else have I ever seen a trans man? Where have I ever had a role model? Certainly not in my own field – always the mentor to trans babies ten years my senior.

“Transition is invisibility. My body doesn’t exist in public space. Of course, the world makes so little space for bodies that look like mine.”

Eating too little to put on muscle, too much to lose the fat I hated so much. Thighs too big (too curvy). Face too chubby (too feminine). I was so beautiful, so so “beautifully” thin just a year ago. All it took was to skip lunch and dinner, and gym four times a week. Unsustainable post-hysterectomy, particularly without support. Unsustainable after I found out he was cheating. Unsustainable with such poor mental health... but was my mental health ever better? Praise praise praise for losing weight... does it make you feel any better?

I want it not to matter. I want him to hold me, to not have a body, for him to love me without any appearance at all. Always reassured I will be “better” soon, but always assumed that better means skinnier. I want happiness, I want food, I want love.

I want to love myself.

I'm not much of a creative but wanted to throw something together because this zine covers a topic that I hold close to myself, and which I believe there is a lack of awareness of - particularly with regard to trans people and especially trans men.

JanCarlo Caling (he/him)



What I came to say. By Lucy Aphramor (she/they)

Dear Body, body of mine what we were starved of was lots – desire, presence, connection. What we were hungry for we didn't even know existed : appetite as guidance, strength in together the pleasure of pleasure the flesh - this flesh as a generous plethora somewhere intellect gets its rigid rounded with feeling its hard lines carded, heart strings tugged its sudden inspirations hugged into a bigger picture so we know we belong to the world's mosaic of ok-ness somewhere where everything that cannot be pinned by cognition finds voice in the kaleidoscopic mix of decision riveting our choppy skiffs of proprioceptive wisdom so we dare the waves, taste the rapids, seek harbour in safe places.

Dear Body, remember anorexia? It was not a fashion statement. Don't patronise. I strived for lots but I was not dying to model myself as a wannabe waif in a raggedy dress that barely covered the breasts I hadn't got. Too easy to blame "the media" , obscuring all the tongue-tying lies of the land that paint us boy or girl – only – and then angel or harridan or whore. I knew I was a useless waste of space, carried it across every synapse, felt it in every cell, dwelt with it the lonely hollowing of my bones. Stupid, bogus, useless, was my nucleus. Sure, my day face fooled a schoolful: never myself.

Listen: This is where I've bitten my lips little by little the red milk drips wherever my story is untold it will be repeated Stitched up we stitch ourselves up until we build - an alternative – which is hearing each other into speech, like this. You know what: dress size nothing. I just wanted to not feel. I just needed to distance myself from this body as a repository of knowledge. Zero in on oblivion. Call nowhere home.

Body of trophies and atrophied spirit when we were thin there were egg shells for treading on everywhere. Crack went my shins with the stress of forgetting and the mileage I cranked up as I crunched out high grades. But you've met me before – I'm that bright white privileged female teen caricatured in the medical texts that yet neglect to indulge me my pain and completely erase the rest Thin, addict, disconnect, when you live there it's really shit and dangerous with it.

Dear Body, when you were my alien no-go zone I was fucking freezing all the time, cold cold, cold, cold cold, there were long chilling prize-winning lessons to sit through on my bony behind, long hours dripped of pipette minutes, and no horizon imaginable that offered a liveable alternative. Then came the ambulance with its twist of complications. When I was in hospital I realised I was killing myself call it an *Aha* moment after moment after moment if you will, with *the Sun Always Shines on TV* playing on the interminable radio in the nurses' station and it was never intentionally meant as suicide, so I ate one brave dollop of chaos after the next ate my way through variations on survival to kickstart the derailed nutrition degree graduating with a hard-won 2:1 and in a terrible irony walking away with a distinction as dietitian, 98% in my intern placement and an untreated eating disorder of a blessedly non-deadly variety

What matters is now. Is that I came to this place, among you today, where my past has a face and is named What I came here to say is These are my truths. Tell me your story. These are my truths. Tell me your story. These are my truths. Tell us your story. And bring on the Body in dialogue! Count on this: not calories, judgement, shame. Whoever you are, however you are battling with the agony of being in your own skin with fat thin feelings food, your haywire moods, already craving your next hit, hoodwinked by gender prescriptions, half-living cooped in the cave of the too real fears of being yourself in a world that clips the wings of difference with intimidation, ridicule, a brick

Drum us, dance us, draw us Your story. I'm telling you mine because its narrative is a drive is a strong hand out-stretched to reach you when you're casting around for an extra thread for your weft - take it - The thing that prevails is Love we are and always were perfect-imperfect enough and each of us deserving of needs, kindness, feelings, dreams ~

Finally, I get desire, presence, connection – can report back that what the lived-in body offers is worth the screaming free-fall risking all for it. Oh yes. It absolutely is.

Come, Body, behold this awesomeness, this dawn

As it stuns us from our slumber.

Anna McNay

I'm 30.

I've only ever had relationships with women, and have always identified as lesbian. 'Always' being since I first really thought about it as a teenager.

But I didn't really socialise at all as a teenager (partly due to exceptionally overprotective parents, partly due to being seriously ill for most of the time – cancer, not ED, although ED was intermittently on the 'back burner').

So I didn't 'act' upon my sexuality until I went off to uni at 18. Then I got into a relationship straight away.

I've been really lucky, in that my parents were totally accepting, as has been pretty much everyone else around me.

From 18-23 I was in relationships back-to-back.

Since then, I've been alone, apart from a couple of very brief 'liaisons'.

I never had an issue with being gay, and certainly don't have an issue with it as a concept. My relationships were all pretty dysfunctional, however. But I am not sure whether that had anything to do with their being with another woman, or just to do with my own problems, undiagnosed PTSD, and inability to define boundaries and not veer from a completely controlling role to a child-like, needy and sick one. Even in the 'honeymoon' period, before I ended up being mothered, and then before the ultimate demise of the relationships, things were never exactly 'great', and I never really found physical satisfaction.

After my final serious relationship broke up, I felt bombarded with 'messages' from society that I 'ought' to be attracted to men instead. This made me start to question things myself. I wasn't meeting any other gay women, and yet I was continually being hit upon by men. Wouldn't it be so much easier/more acceptable to just be straight? What if I was? What if I had just 'decided' I was gay because of my fear of sexuality? I spent a few years getting very drunk and then 'trying it on' with the men who hit on me, but always to no avail. Then I had a couple of really inappropriate 'crushes' on women, which caused a lot of heartache.

I am basically really confused. I don't fancy men. The thought of male bodies makes me feel really sick. But the women I involuntarily fall for are nearly always straight. And when I do manage to 'fall' for a gay woman, I often end up wondering whether I have literally just 'made myself' fall for her, because it is my 'only option'.

I am scared to enter fully into recovery because I know that, as I do, sexual feelings will come back. And I am so disgusted by and fearful of them. They only ever cause hurt to me and others. There is something intrinsically 'wrong' about my feelings in that department. I cannot put it into words. It is paralysing me with such great fear, that I am scared to take that leap of faith.

This is something I wrote to a support group midway through my attempt at recovering from anorexia 10 years ago (I am now fully recovered). It feels relevant as the confusion and fear about my sexuality depicted within the piece was holding me trapped in my eating disorder.

Sebastian Mylly

i dress up the carcass that they call my body

i dress it up real nice and pretty

all black, head to toe

i adorn it with fake gold and ink

and i look into the mirror and say "it looks pretty"

but it's not me and never will be.

there exists a disconnection

i can't feel myself

i disagree with my host

i argue with my shell

it moves when i move and speaks when i speak but it's only an illusion of me

sometimes i can't believe it's real

sometimes i really can't believe it's me

it doesn't look right, she doesn't look right

and i don't know if i want to change it or abandon it

but it's not me and it never will be

i'd rather i was someone else, or something else

anything but this freak that i'm trapped in

help me, free me, i'm trying to claw my way out
through the little dent between my lungs
where i place all my hopes and dreams of a better tomorrow
stop mimicking me, you are not me
stop pretending to be me
it's not me
it scares me
the way my shadow/my slave/my body is me
because it's not me and it never will be

The author wrote this in their diary on 9 October 2018 at midnight.

Much has changed since then: at the time of writing, I was a non-binary lesbian, whilst today I am a binary trans man.

During the time of writing I lived with an Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified; this is my honest, unfiltered poetic take on what it is like to battle an eating disorder while genderqueer.

JanCarlo Caling (he/him)



Legs bent, stockinged, I am Twiggy. By Anonymous

When you are first admitted to hospital, they tell you it is unusual for a boy to suffer from an eating disorder. *Hah, joke's on you*, you think, and you twist in your chair, so pale that you are see-through, slender, untrusting, signs of poorly kept facial hair, smudged eyeshadow and thick rings of eyeliner. Within that room where they make a note of you, where they describe your physical attributes with pen and paper and weigh and measure you, they will not have a word for you. Instead, they will use language that you didn't realise people still used; you didn't realise people with authority still used. You are young, you think hospitals are where you must go to get better. You learn soon that they are not.

It is easy not to eat on the ward, despite how they threaten to section you. The idea of being sectioned isn't as daunting when you've stopped going out. But there is another ward, one that is less pleasant, you are told, and you should maybe try eating more often lest you be sent there. You are young, you can't imagine a place different than this, and yet it is only when your mother arrives and forcibly removes you from the hospital that you realise that there is another place and you have skirted dangerously close to going there.

“You remain not brave enough to call yourself a girl, but not quite a boy.”

On the ward, there are a mix of people, none with your sickness. You see an old woman run into a wall one day. You watch as she staggers backwards and then

runs straight ahead towards it again, as if expecting some different outcome. Lulu, who is older than you but equally skittish, tells you there is a man who used to touch children who lives down the long corridor far from where you are, but you do not know if this is true. When you go back to the hospital as an outpatient, no one will recall anyone by that name.

You spend your time watching television, playing cards, and it is like the outside world has not happened and you were never the almost-boy-not-quite-a-girl who turned up at shul with a proclamation of their queerness scrawled in marker pen upon their clothes.

Decades later, when people start saying that word as if it is a positive thing, you will cry because it makes sense, but you can't explain why. So you don't. And on the hospital ward, long before that day, you remain not brave enough to call yourself a girl, but not quite a boy, sunken skin and scratches and cuts on your arm, cigarette burns lighting the way like constellations on milky flesh. You can see yourself only in the dying and the dead, the frail and the shamed, and you will call yourself Rebecca, and, in dreams, you will be like Karen Carpenter, like Twiggy, but in truth, you are like neither... and you are rotting, slowly rotting inside.

One hundred leaves. By Seren Thomas

The day after I was discharged, a parcel came in the post. I didn't recognise the handwriting on the label. Inside was a box stuffed with paper leaves: hand-cut and coloured with crayon. They were from a woman I'd met only once before. I didn't know much about her, except that she wrote stories for children. About a year ago, she'd come to my school to talk about careers in writing. She'd read some of my poems. Claimed to like them. Told me to keep it up. I'm not sure if she knew I'd dropped out, but I imagine she did. There are no secrets round here. Nestled amongst the leaves was a note.

Dear Seren,

It's predicted that people of your generation will live to be 100 years old. Here are 100 leaves. Lay them out on the floor and look at them. You'll see that every single one is unique. It's the same with years. Each year of your life will be different from the next. Now pick one leaf, any leaf you like, and hold it close. This leaf represents the year you're living right now. A year that, as difficult as it may seem, is just one year in your long, wonderful life. Look how many other leaves are left on the floor, and how insignificant the one in your hand is in comparison.

When I was your age, what's happening to you happened to me too. It was the worst thing. I still cannot describe it to people, not that you need me to describe it to you. I want to show you that it can get better. It will probably still haunt you in years to come, but you will find what you're looking for. Be calm. You have time. Happy birthday.

I left the parcel on my bedroom floor to gather dust. Let's be real, it was a pretty weird thing to receive, and a sickness like mine can make you frightened and suspicious. I didn't want to be told what to do by a stranger who seemed to know far too much about me. It was three months before I found it buried beneath dirty laundry, before the fear had ebbed away and I finally had the courage to do as she asked. I laid the leaves out on the kitchen floor and looked. I held one close. Then I carefully packed them back into the box.

“It will probably still haunt you in years to come, but you will find what you're looking for.”

It's been six whole leaves since then, and I never heard from her again. Four leaves passed before anything got remotely better. But she was right. They were fleeting. And I eventually found my way.

Why Gulp?

It's the noise your throat makes when you swallow. When you push something down and out of sight: food, thoughts, emotions. It happens when you know you've done something wrong. When you're excited or nervous or afraid.

A gulp has many meanings, bodily, psychological and emotional. It's the best word I can think of to describe an eating disorder and all the hunger, fullness and fear that comes with it. It's also the best word I can think of to describe queerness: a quiet but definite gesture that captures all the pain and thrill of growing up different. That's why this zine about LGBTQIA+ people with eating disorders is called Gulp. Although our storytellers have unique ways of articulating their experiences, for me, it's a way of summing the whole thing up in one word.

Thank you

Eternal thanks to our contributors for sharing some of the most vulnerable parts of themselves in these pages. Without you, Gulp could never have come to be.

I give all my gratitude and love to my colleagues at Kaleidoscope Health and Care for believing in this idea and my abilities to bring it to life. Finally, a special thanks to Andrew Grey for his constant care, commitment and thoughtfulness, and for not letting me lose sight of what is important.

Seren Thomas, the person with the idea.

About Kaleidoscope Health and Care

[Kaleidoscope](#) brings people together to improve health and care. We find new ways to overcome old barriers.

We enable constructive conversations on difficult topics, using inspiring events to encourage clarity of purpose and rigorous problem-solving. Our approach to collaboration is systematic, evidence-based and cost-effective.

As a not-for-profit organisation, we seek to work with our clients in a spirit of kindness, trust, and openness. Our multi-disciplinary team includes clinicians, policy makers, managers, specialists in communication and technology, and more.

About the Perspectives Programme

Kaleidoscope's [Perspectives Programme](#) is an internship for people with a passion for improving healthcare, promoting unheard voices and celebrating diversity. It is designed to discover new creative ways to amplify marginalised voices in health and care. It is open to all regardless of background or experience.

Cover design by JanCarlo Caling

[JanCarlo](#) told us he has struggled with body image throughout his life, especially when he was younger. Now he tries to embrace how his body looks by creating paintings and illustrations like those on the cover of Gulp and within its pages.

