

Prompt: *Have you ever felt out of place in a group because you were different from others? This could be due to differences in physical presence, personality, identity, beliefs, or any other aspect that set you apart. What made you feel different, and how did this impact your experience with the group?*

A Systemized Method of Conforming

I believe many members of the LGBTQ+ community can relate to the experience of the dreaded middle school conversation about crushes. For me, I would spend most of my time listening to the other girls talk and hope that no one asked me point blank who I liked. Because I'm gay, I obviously never liked any of the boys, but my neurodivergent brain also couldn't—and still sometimes struggles to—parse the difference between platonic and romantic attraction. Back then, I had a crush on no one.

When I was asked who I liked, I would say as much. This seemed like a perfectly acceptable answer to me. This response, however, was typically met with a chorus of lying accusations, a group decision that I either, a) liked someone another girl in the group had already named, or b) was trying to get attention by keeping it a secret. *Obviously*, the group had decided, *every girl has a crush on a boy*. By the third time this conversation occurred, my neurodivergence took over. I analyzed the situation, certain I could systematically figure out how to fit in with everyone. This highly methodized response also obviously set me apart from the group, but I wasn't aware this was odd at the time. Either way, I came up with a set of rules which seemed to dictate these conversations.

First of all, the person you liked not only had to be a boy, but had to come from a specific subset of the boys attending the school. These were the boys that successfully participated in sports, dressed according to the current trends, and didn't seem interested in anything outside what was currently popular. Second, you could *not* simply pick a boy at random in the moment. When I tried that, it was as if the other girls could tell I had spent absolutely no time thinking about the boy I chose. Third, you had to ensure no one else in the group named the same boy first, and fourth, you couldn't oversell it.

So, armed with these guidelines, I came up with a script for these conversations (again, not typical, but I assumed the others did the same). To make a long and tedious story short, I first tried picking a boy at school but could never seem to get the conversation right, and then changed tactics to attempting to change the discussion to *celebrity* crushes (I had picked a popular male celebrity for this topic, but usually oversold it and was met by confused looks). At that point, I just gave up and stopped engaging the conversation.

When I was young I felt miles and miles from the other girls. Ironically, most of these girls turned out to not be straight either, but I believe my own disconnectedness was further exacerbated by my neurodivergence and struggle to understand those around me.

I would argue that this is a very common experience, however, within America's individualist culture. Our greater culture may value uniqueness, but these small ecosystems, especially within adolescence, place more weight on conformity than I felt like many realized. For me, I would learn the rules of this conformity until they were a part of me, but when someone else broke a rule and I was confused, I would receive rude comments. I think mainstream American culture is more conformist than we would like to believe, which results in both a semi-universal experience of growing up queer and not being able to fit into this conformity, and means that growing up neurodivergent, especially with social deficits, is often an inherently traumatic experience. If America was truly individualistic, the variations and differences found among its citizens would not be met with bullying and ostracization as often as they are.