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**MAC**

Today you'll work in small groups and read more about one of the students from the video. In your small group, take turns reading aloud each part of your student's story. When you're finished reading, discuss the reflection questions posted on the wall and jot down your group's answers on the chart paper on the wall.



Health Skills Models: [www.rmc.org/healthskills](http://www.rmc.org/healthskills)

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Mac has experienced depression for much of his life which he says is connected to his struggles with his gender identity. He grew up in a high pressure community and had a hard time finding the right people to help him. Here he shares his story about how he found hope and help to get through his most difficult times.



MAC 1

**RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION** My depression comes from long-term stress. My depression comes from a family that doesn't talk about feelings. [My depression comes from living in a community with] little or no information/exposure to anything LGBT. My depression comes from my struggles with my gender identity.

[My] days were pulled down by the intensity of my gender dysphoria; people not seeming to get that I wasn't a girl.

**Both my depression and my gender identity are things that show up in my first memories.** With my gender identity, I've had, I have very severe gender dysphoria, which is a severe discomfort with your body, in the fact that your body is not lining up what the map in your mind has it to be. It's not exactly what you think it should be. And so my gender identity—the dysphoria that came with it got more intense with time, especially in middle school ... and my depression got intense at the same time.

**IMPACTING DAILY LIFE** My baseline stress level was at such a high point that anything would tip it. One of my close friends said, *"Everything is a catastrophe for you."* I'd reach a lot of little breaking points over time. If you're constantly tipping over, overflowing with stress, over time, you reach a point where you don't want to deal with it anymore, and you start considering things like suicide.

**I felt really helpless. Especially in the face of my family not wanting to deal with the fact that I am transgender. It was too hard for them to wrap their minds around**

**SEEKING HELP** Getting help was difficult. In high school, my family didn't want to recognize that I had depression. None of my family talked about their own. There was a stone wall—don't ask, don't tell policy—which made it hard for me to ask them for advice, help, connection, and resources.

**I had a few teachers who reached out to me and really understood who I was—some just encouraged my talents and interests, some did tell me that life would get better and that it's not always as rough. It helped me to feel seen.**

[Overall] in school it was really difficult because I met a social worker who believed that they were helping me, but they actually really alienated me, and they didn't listen to me at all. They didn't know what to do with me. So for a couple years I bounced around but a lot of people were trying to help me in ways that weren't helpful, a lot of different therapists, three I think.



**FINDING SUPPORT** [There were] two things that really helped me. **The first thing that really helped me was empowering myself. I got involved in an organization that talked about mental health and taught people what mental health was. It gave me a tangible way to fight back at something [depression] that was so intangible.** Getting involved in things that matter to you, where you can see yourself making a difference in some way, really helped me a lot.



The second thing was I took a lot of time to think about why people were reacting the way they were reacting to me. Especially with my family, it helped me to recognize that they were as helpless as I was in this situation. They had never faced this before. Most people I talked to didn't know what being transgender meant. I had to recognize that they were going to need a lot of time to wrap their minds around a concept they had never heard of, that was terrifying to them, and that there really was no research about.

It was terrifying to me too, it wasn't something I had wanted for myself. They were very clear that they loved me a lot, and although the way they were reacting and acting didn't feel like love at all, I had to remember that they were coming from a place that they thought they were doing the right thing for me.

**COPING SKILLS** What helped me is that people's reactions are their reactions. They're not connected to you. Their reactions aren't about you, it's about their history, their ideas, their preconceived notions. You have to take their reactions with a grain of salt. Reframing things helps a lot.

Reading a lot ... I used information and I think information became really powerful for me, helped me cope with feeling out of control, how to cope with feeling stressed. I actually learned a lot of [positive] coping methods that [from books]. **I found activities that really grounded me and helped me connect with my body—especially sports. I feel most happy and connected when I'm with people I really feel comfortable around.**

**LOOKING FORWARD** I've had a lot of luck finding a few close friends—we call it “no filter”—you don't have a filter, I don't have to filter myself when I'm around them or when we're talking. It makes me feel really good because I feel more connected to them and more connected to myself.

## Reflection Questions

1. What was going on in his life when he was experiencing depression?
2. How might stigma (a negative belief) around the LGBTQ community impact Mac's daily life?
3. Who did he seek support from?
4. Was it a positive experience?
5. If a friend at your high school felt depressed... list two people or resources (websites, organizations, books, etc.) that would be a valid/reliable resource.

