

LGBTQ+ REAL EXPERIENCES

I THOUGHT EVERYONE WAS LOOKING

Understanding watchfulness, safety and the nervous
system

REAL EXPERIENCE • SHARED ANONYMOUSLY



I Thought Everyone Was Looking

Understanding watchfulness, safety and the nervous system

Whenever I walked into a café holding my partner's hand, I immediately became aware of everyone around me.

I'd notice where people were sitting.

Who looked up when we came in.

Whether anyone glanced in our direction.

If someone laughed across the room, I'd wonder if they were laughing at us.

My partner would squeeze my hand and carry on talking.

I'd hardly hear a word they were saying.

I was too busy scanning the room.

One day I asked them, "Do you ever think people are watching us?"

They looked genuinely confused.

"No... why?"

That's when I realised we were having two completely different experiences.

Growing up, I'd learned to watch people before they watched me.

To look for danger before it happened.

To be prepared.

That habit had become so automatic that I didn't even realise I was doing it anymore.

My therapist explained that my brain wasn't trying to ruin my day—it was trying to protect me.

It had learned years ago that being different could sometimes come with consequences.

The problem was, it was treating every situation as though the same danger still existed.

Now, when I notice myself scanning the room, I gently bring my attention back to the present.

I remind myself,

"I'm here with someone I love."

"I'm safe."

"Not everyone is judging me."

Some days it's easier than others.

But I no longer mistake old fear for present reality.

Reflection

Internalised stigma can leave us constantly looking for rejection, even in places where acceptance is far more likely. Sometimes healing begins when we recognise that our mind is responding to yesterday's experiences rather than today's reality.

About This Real Experience

This is a real person's lived experience, shared anonymously. It was created collaboratively: the contributor spoke openly about their thoughts and feelings, and Maggie Learoyd wrote the experience in their own words. The contributor wanted their experience to be heard and understood, but has chosen not to be named.