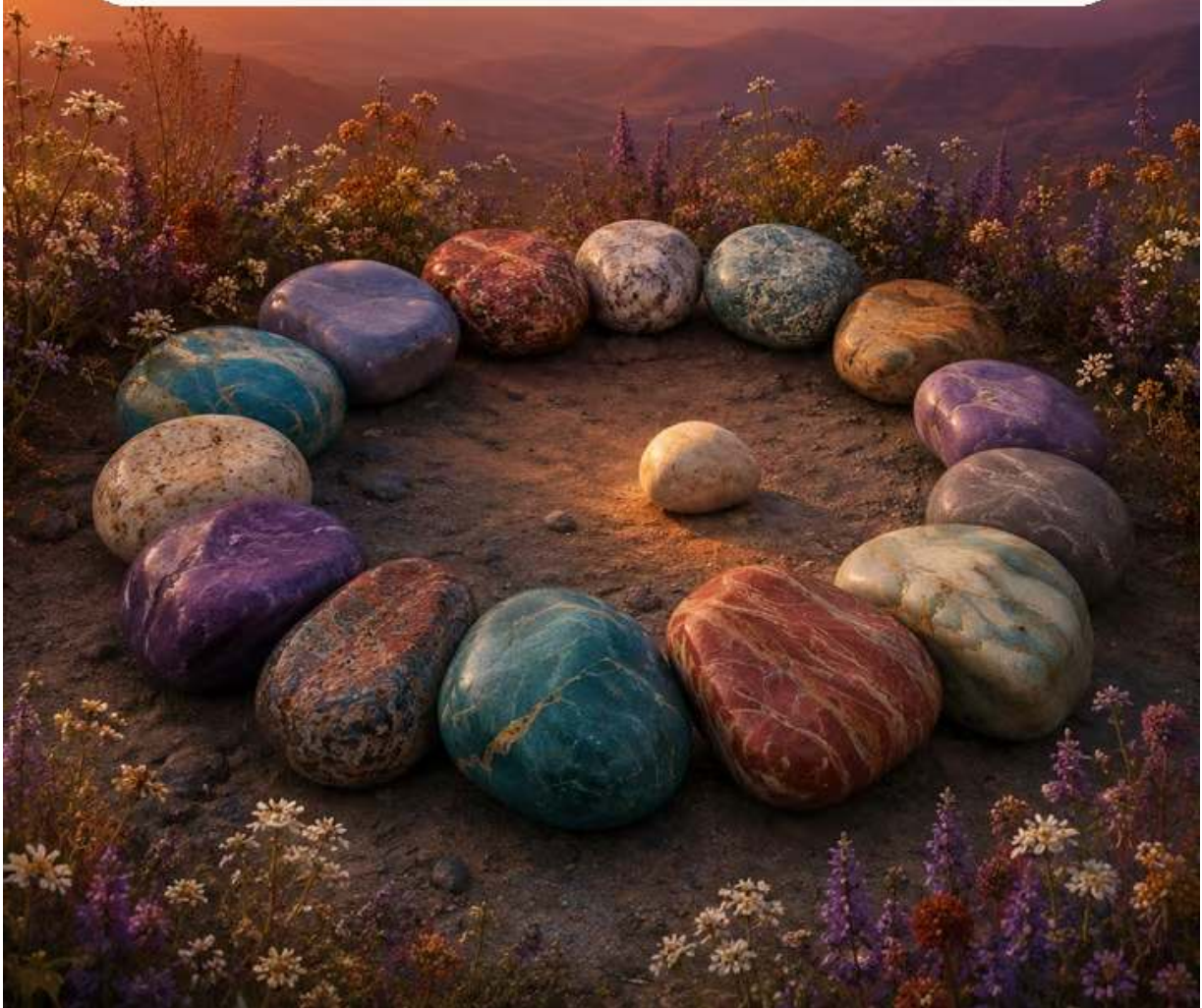


THE JOURNEY OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE

BELONGING WITHOUT LOSING YOURSELF

Finding connection without becoming smaller

ARTICLE 5 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



Belonging Without Losing Yourself

Finding connection without becoming smaller

"When we strip away all the labels, that's when we can see each other as human beings." — Laverne Cox

Introduction

As human beings, we all have a fundamental need to belong.

We want to feel accepted, understood and valued for who we are. We want relationships where we can relax, be ourselves and know that we are enough.

For many LGBTQ+ people, finding that sense of belonging can take time.

Some experience acceptance from family and friends from an early age. Others may face rejection, misunderstanding or silence. Some find themselves living between different worlds—feeling unable to be fully themselves in one environment while feeling completely accepted in another.

Belonging is not about being liked by everyone.

It is about finding people with whom you no longer feel the need to hide.

The Difference Between Fitting In and Belonging

Dr Brené Brown makes an important distinction between fitting in and belonging.

Fitting in often means changing yourself to gain acceptance.

Belonging means being accepted without needing to become someone else.

Many LGBTQ+ people become experts at fitting in.

They may:

- Avoid certain conversations.

Laugh at jokes they find uncomfortable.

Change pronouns when talking about a partner.

Hide photographs or personal details.

Agree with opinions they don't truly hold.

Stay silent to avoid conflict.

These strategies may once have helped them stay safe.

But over time they can become exhausting.

Belonging begins when you discover relationships where those strategies are no longer necessary.

Healthy Relationships Feel Safe

Healthy relationships do not require you to constantly earn your place.

Instead, they are built on:

- Respect.

Honesty.

Trust.

Curiosity.

Compassion.

Mutual support.

In healthy relationships you are able to express your thoughts without fear of ridicule.

You are allowed to make mistakes.

You are not expected to hide important parts of yourself.

That does not mean disagreements never happen.

It means disagreements do not threaten your value as a person.

The Importance of Chosen Family

For some LGBTQ+ people, biological family provides love, safety and encouragement.

For others, this may not be their experience.

This is where the idea of chosen family becomes especially important.

Chosen family refers to the people we intentionally surround ourselves with because they provide emotional safety, acceptance and genuine care.

These people may include:

- Friends.

Partners.

Mentors.

Colleagues.

Support groups.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Chosen family is not a replacement for biological family.

It is recognition that meaningful relationships are built through love, trust and mutual respect—not simply shared genetics.

Boundaries Protect Belonging

Many people worry that setting boundaries will push others away.

In reality, healthy boundaries often strengthen relationships.

Boundaries communicate:

- What feels respectful.

What feels safe.

What behaviour is acceptable.

What behaviour is not.

You are allowed to say:

- "I'm not comfortable discussing that."

"I'd appreciate you using the correct name or pronouns."

"That comment upset me."

"I need some space today."

Setting boundaries is not selfish.

It is an act of self-respect.

Finding Communities That Understand You

Feeling understood can be deeply healing.

Whether through local LGBTQ+ organisations, online communities, hobby groups or supportive workplaces, finding people who share similar experiences can reduce feelings of isolation.

Community offers something powerful:

- The reminder that you are not alone.

It allows people to hear stories that reflect their own experiences.

To ask questions without fear.

To celebrate milestones together.

To realise that there is no single way to be LGBTQ+.

Letting Yourself Be Seen

Belonging requires courage.

Not because you need to impress anyone.

But because allowing yourself to be known always involves some degree of vulnerability.

Being authentic does not guarantee everyone will understand you.

It does, however, increase the likelihood of finding relationships built on honesty rather than performance.

When we stop performing the version of ourselves we think others expect, we create space for genuine connection.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect:

- Where do you feel most able to be yourself?

Are there relationships where you feel you have to hide?

Who leaves you feeling accepted rather than judged?

What boundary could improve one of your relationships?

What would belonging feel like if you no longer had to earn it?

Key Takeaways

Belonging is different from fitting in.

Healthy relationships allow authenticity rather than requiring performance.

Chosen family can provide deep emotional support and connection.

Boundaries are an important part of healthy relationships.

Finding supportive communities can reduce isolation and strengthen wellbeing.

You deserve relationships where you are valued for who you are, not who others expect you to be.

Final Thoughts

Many people spend years searching for places where they feel accepted.

Sometimes they discover that the most important change is not finding people who approve of every decision they make.

It is finding people who allow them to be fully themselves without fear.

Those relationships rarely require perfection.

They ask only for honesty, mutual respect and kindness.

As your journey of self-acceptance continues, remember that belonging is not something you have to earn.

You do not need to become more successful, more confident or more like someone else before you deserve meaningful relationships.

The right people will not ask you to hide.

They will not ask you to apologise for who you are.

Instead, they will create the kind of space where authenticity feels natural, differences are respected and your identity is simply one part of the whole person they value.

Everyone deserves that kind of belonging.

Including you.