

ENBY JOURNEY

BASIC

~~TOP~~

SURGERY  
SURVIVAL  
GUIDE

A ZINE FOR TRANS &  
NON-BINARY BABES  
AND ALLIES

SKYLAR SOOKPAIBOON

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GUIDE

A ZINE FOR TRANS &  
NON-BINARY BABES  
AND ALLIES



WRITTEN BY  
SKYLAR SOOKPAIBOON

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## Preface



Dear reader,

My name is Skylar Sookpaiboon (they/them) and I am writing this zine for you. That's right, this zine is created for anyone who is considering, preparing, or taking care of someone who is getting a [top] surgery AND even if you are none of the above, you can *still* benefit from this - I promise.

I believe that **trans health care is community care.**

I would not be here if it wasn't for every single one of you who have been showing up and supporting me through this journey of healing and finding my place in this world. I believe that everyone deserves all the care and support that they need. No matter where you are at in your life, I hope you are being seen, supported, and loved without any question. If you or someone you know is in need of support and care, my hope is that you will take whatever you need from reading this.

I believe that **knowledge is power.**

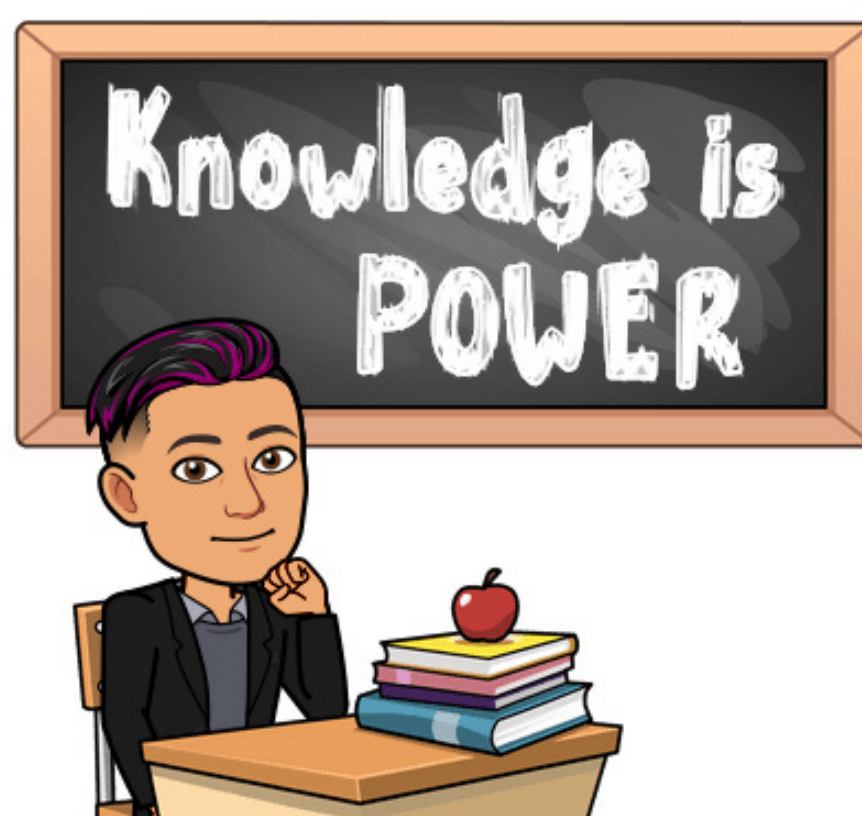
As a Thai, non-binary, trans masc, queer, first-generation immigrant in Canada, I have to figure it all out on my own. *Mostly*. That's why having a community is so important to me and I never want to take that for granted.

There is a lot of literature on health disparities and suicidality among trans and non-binary communities. Despite the latest research showing high levels of education and access to primary health care providers, we are still facing under-employment and unmet health care needs (The Trans PULSE Canada Team, 2020). There are lots of barriers, discrimination, and violence that are rooted in transphobia, racism, ableism, and capitalism (*just to name a few*).

Over the past 7 years, I have been studying the Canadian health care system and noticing significant gaps between education, professional development, policies, and health care practices. As leading community organizers and activists continue to build on the social movements today (i.e. Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, ACAB, #MeToo, and Bill C-16 on gender identity rights, etc.), we need to show up for ourselves and each other.

Honestly, it can feel *exhausting* to exist when you constantly have to explain who you are and having to advocate for yourself all the time. Trans health care is just health care, if only we could normalize respecting people's identities, names and pronouns without making any assumptions. The lack of knowledge and understanding among health care providers are not individual flaws but an outcome of a binary and cis-heteronormative society that we live in. Although there is not much we can do to fix the systems (*which I believe are not broken but rather, working just as it was intended to, if you think about it*), the best we can do right now is to take care of each other.

I can go on about social justice issues and movements but that's not why I am writing this zine. So instead of doing a bad job at explaining why they are all important and you should care about them, I will just include some of my favourite books, poetry and queer/trans authors at the end of this zine if you are interested to check them out and support their work!



## About This Zine

This zine is an accumulation of what I have learned through my personal experiences, research, and community engagement. Section one is all about the preparation, identifying your needs, and establishing a supportive system. Section two highlights the day of and what to expect (only applicable for top surgeries). Section three explores different aspects of a [top] surgery recovery and postoperative care. I initially wrote this zine for anyone who is getting a top surgery. But as it turns out, some of the care tips, reflective questions and additional resources may be useful for much broader settings.

My hope is that you will take whatever you find helpful and leave the rest or pass it on. Regardless of what your circumstances may be, I strongly encourage you to look through these pages.

Please keep in mind that **I am not a health care provider** and do not intend to give out advice or tell you what to do. My only intention is to offer you a piece of me (and my work) to help make your life a little bit easier. I have done a lot of research and have dedicated my life's work to this field [trans health care] so that other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) queer and trans people can live fully and authentically.

Feel free to share this zine with your loved ones, there will be something useful for everyone. And if you're someone like me and *you don't know how to ask for help because you don't want to be a burden*, try writing down what stood out to you the most. Go over it with someone you trust and let *them* tell *you* what they can offer.


**Allow people to show up for you.** You deserve just as much love and care as anyone else. And no, you are not a burden.

If you are reading this to learn how to show up or be there for someone you love and care about, I promise you that you are in the right place.



## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for my main care team, Ellis F. & Emma A. Thank you both so much for all your love, care, patience, and generosity that you have given me. Thank you for making me feel like a family when my biological family were half way across the world. I really appreciate you and your kindness, especially on days when I was not at my best. I am working on that.

Thank you Ethan J. for opening up your home and providing a space for us to stay while we were in Montreal. It was *really* nice to see you and Kaydo. 

And of course, I am super grateful for my sibling, Thanida S. along with Micheal, Lori, and Henry Z. for taking care of my puppy, Willow, for the whole two months that I was unable to have her home. Thank you Liz M. and Emma S., for checking in on my cats, Hazel & Marble, while I was away. They are my babies and it means *a lot* knowing that they were safe and waiting for me at home.

A special thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Kim Anderson, for showing me how much you care about me and my well-being. It has been an honour to learn and witness all your hard work and dedication to carving out space for Indigenous and racialized students within an institution that was not made for us. Thank you for keeping me close and being an Auntie to me ever since my parents moved back to Thailand. They are incredibly grateful to know that I am not alone here.

Thank you to everyone who made a donation and/or share my GoFundMe page. Your support truly means the world to me and I can't express enough how much I appreciate each and everyone of you.



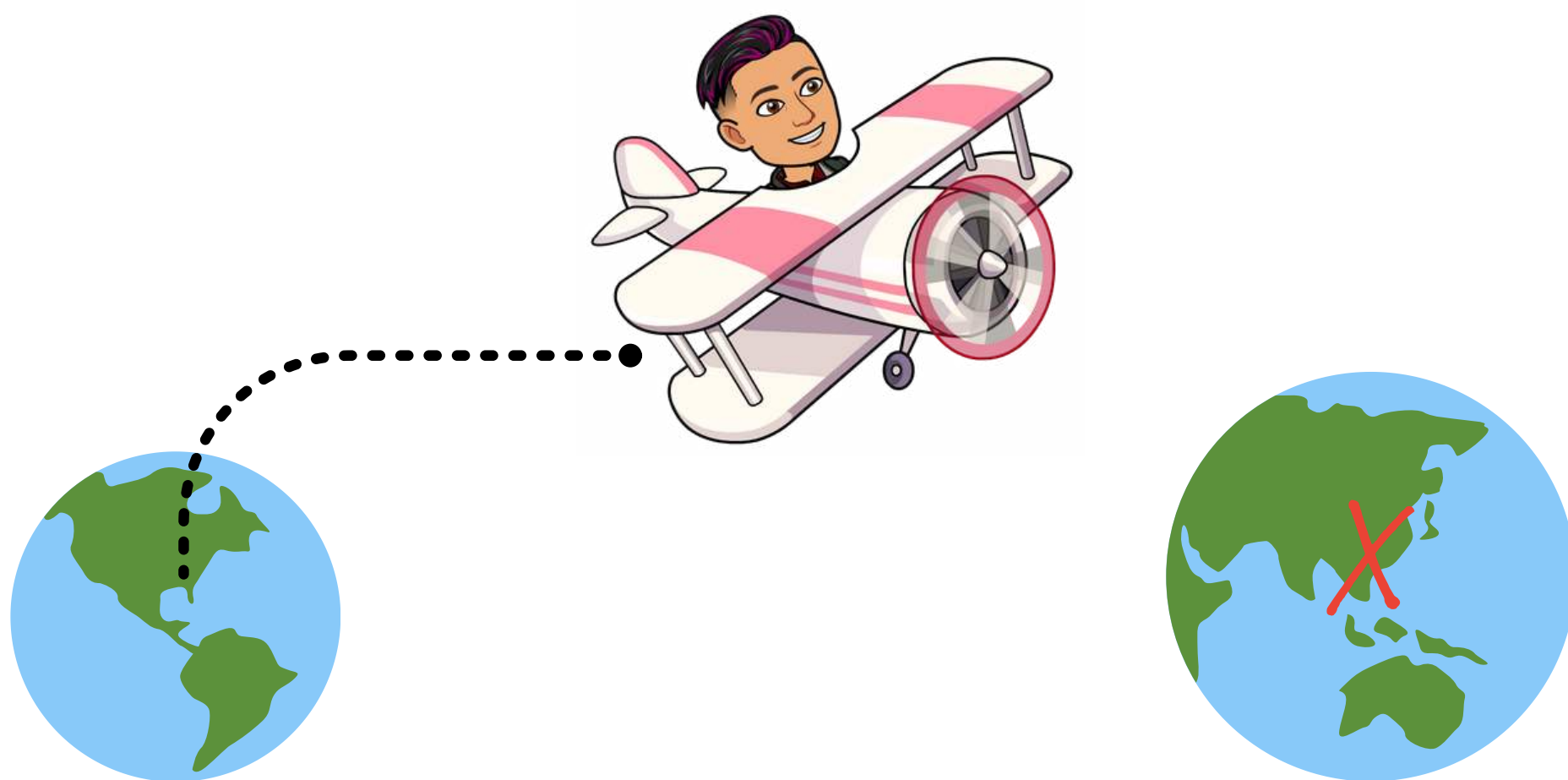
Thanks to Bitmoji creators for all the illustrations in this zine!  
*(I had too much fun lol)*



I want to send a big shoutout to Nurse Practitioner, Emery Potter, for creating and writing "Chest Masculinization Guidebook: What to Expect" that was provided by Women's College Hospital, Toronto, Ontario. Without Ellis or this handout, I would not have known all the rehabilitative exercises that allowed me to re-gain my arms' full range of motion so seamlessly. *I have included them on page 20-22.*

Okay, I think I can probably write a whole book to appreciate all the people who have made a difference in my life and are behind the reasons why I am who I am today. For the purpose of this zine though, I will just say thank you so much to everyone that put in their time and energy to send me your love, care, and support throughout this significant journey in my life.

Most importantly, thank you to my parents, Watchara & Sujitra Sookpaiboon, for being the best parents I could ever asked for. Thank you for all the sacrifices you've made, so that I can have a better future. Thank you for always believing in me and for accepting me, *even if you don't fully understand.* I love you with all of my heart. And I can't wait to hug you again some day.



P.S. Thank you Jessie T. for helping me realize that a lot of what I wrote can be applicable to so much more than I thought. This is not a zine for just top surgeries anymore... it's more like a guide for **practicing community care.**

What did I tell you... trans health care IS community care!!

## Skylar's story

I started my top surgery process around the end of 2018. My family doctor had submitted an application for my funding and a few months later, I was scheduled for my consultation at McLean Clinic in Mississauga on July 21, 2019. I got a call from them in June and they cancelled my appointment because they were booked up for the next 2 years.

(FYI the funding approval from the Ministry of Health in Ontario is only valid for 2 years. After that, you'd have to start applying for funding again)\*

So before I had to leave to go to Thailand for my sister's wedding, I had to rush through all the paperwork and re-apply for funding at GrS Montreal. I didn't hear back from them until November 2019, at which time they offered to schedule me in on March 25th, 2020. So I booked my flight, arranged to stay with a friend, and I continued to wait for my day to come.

Then COVID-19 happened.

Everything and everyone went into lockdown. I got a call from my nurse confirming what I already knew- they had to cancel my surgery. I was devastated. *It was only 6 days away, less than a week. How can this happen? I did my waiting...*

Gender-affirming surgeries are categorized as "elective" surgeries. Non-essential. So the wait continues.

Around mid-June, my nurse called to tell me they were able to slowly begin their operations again and my surgery was scheduled on July 2nd, 2020. I was SO relieved to finally have a day I could look forward to. It was only 2 weeks away. I needed to start planning and figure out all the logistics but whatever it takes, *I will be there.*

\*Update: the funding approval is currently good for 3 years.



It doesn't happen very often in my life but for once, everything *did* fall into place and I had a great experience with my top surgery (for the most part, but I'll get to that later). I am forever grateful for everyone that showed up for me. Especially since my parents had already moved back to Thailand in 2019, and I was living alone in Guelph- I didn't have anyone. It was something like a *miracle* that my friend Ellis and Emma were willing to offer their time and energy to take care of me, and so many people were offering their support in all the different ways. So when I say that *trans health care is community care*, you know I really mean it.

GrS Montreal is known for their lack of communication over emails, which can be a nightmare when you have so many documents to send over and, oh yes, pictures of yourself without a shirt on. They don't make you go there in person for the consultation, which is great for those who don't live in Quebec, Canada. However, you can probably imagine how vulnerable and uncomfortable it would be to send photos of your body for complete strangers to look at. On second thought... maybe it's better than going in for an in-person consultation where you *have* to take your shirt off in front of a surgeon or whoever... *I don't know*. This is just part of the process I guess, so you just have to do what you gotta do... sorry friends.

Anyways, they really are incredibly friendly when you're there. The only thing that took me off guard is the aftercare, or lack thereof. **Please note that I'm only talking about my experience getting a top surgery, which does not require an overnight stay.**

What I remember was waking up from my nap and hearing Ellis on the phone with someone from GrS, trying to get me in to see my surgeon for a follow-up appointment and dressings removal. Turns out, they don't do that- even if you are able to stay in Montreal beyond the 2 nights in the hotel that they had arranged for us. So at this point, Ellis was really frustrated and I remember them saying,

*"So you're telling me that you expect your patient, a trans, non-binary, person of colour who doesn't speak French, to go to any random CLSC\* in Montreal?!"*

\*CLSC - local community service centre in Quebec

*I have never heard anyone advocate for me like that before in my life.*

We all thought that the surgeon would be the one to take off my dressings and assess how my body was healing. That was not the case. So we had to change our plans and return to Ontario as soon as my body was able to handle being in a moving car for 7 hours. Luckily, we were able to go see my doctor in Toronto (about 1 hour drive from my house) on day 7 to get my nipple graft dressings removed. Ellis went in with me. I remember the look on their face when my doctor took off the dressings and we were able to see my body for the first time.

I've seen many videos and pictures of what post-op chests would look like. I was mentally prepared to see my body all bruised up or bloody, or you know, like it's been through *a surgery*. But no, my body looked really, really GOOD. There was no bleeding, barely any bruises (just slight discolouration), my incisions were straight/clean cuts, and my stitches were already starting to dissolve. I think I would have cried if I wasn't still heavily drugged (for the car ride) and on a high dose of testosterone.

Ellis being there with me was super comforting. I still don't know how I got so lucky but I have to give all the credits to my amazing care team, Ellis and Emma. Thanks to them, I was able to rest and have a safe space to heal. My recovery would not have gone so smoothly if I did not have them by my side and it truly means the world to me.

So here we are. I had my community show up for me and now it's time for me to do the same. Now that I have gone through this whole process myself, I feel much more confident in sharing my experiences with you. I hope you find this resource helpful!



# SECTION ONE



PRE  
SURGERY

So you got your surgery date...  
**CONGRATULATIONS!!**



Now what?

Before you jump into it, let's start by asking yourself:

"What do I want my top surgery recovery to look like?"

**Got it? Great! Good luck!**  
I'm just kidding...

This is actually where I come in!  
By the end of this section, my goal is to help you  
answer the following questions:

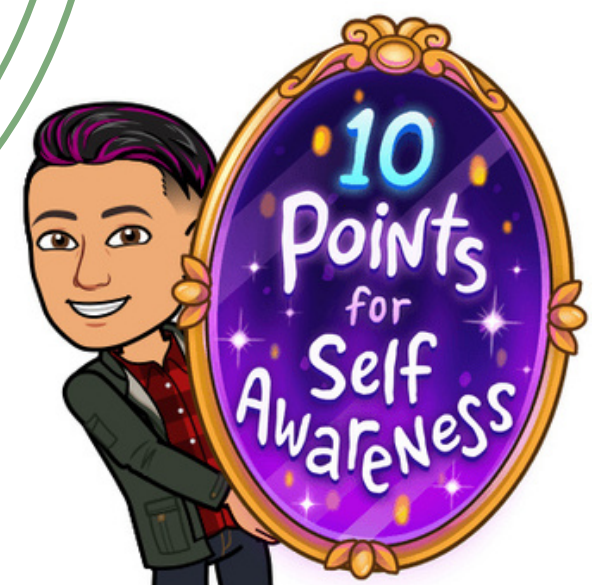
*What kind of support(s) will I need?*

*Who will be there?*

*Where will I recover?*

*How long is my recovery going to be?*

*What do I need to bring with me?*



# Accommodation

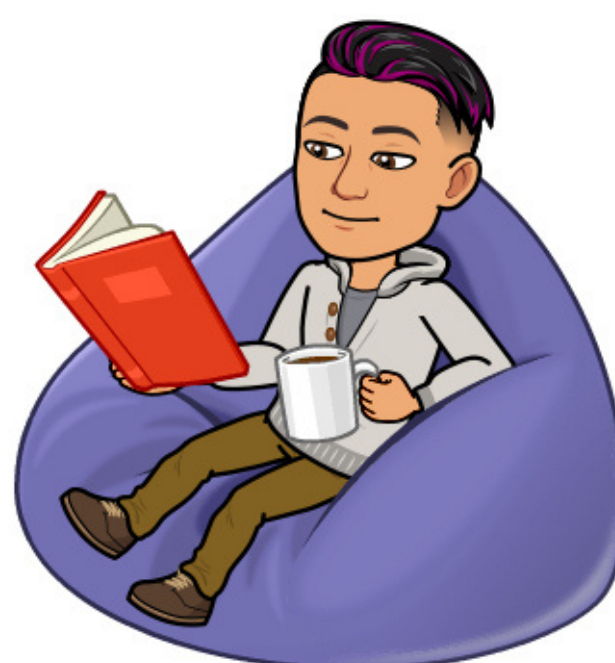
If you are travelling out of town, province, or country - make arrangements *early* (as soon as you have your surgery date), and explore your options.

## Things to consider when choosing a place to stay:

1. **Duration of time** - How long will you need to rest until your body is ready to make a trip home?
2. **Flexibility** - You may need to stay longer or shorter depending on your recovery. Communicate with your host(s).
3. **No pets** - Especially if they can jump or sit on you (dogs, cats).
4. **Cleanliness** - If you are someone who is sensitive to their surroundings like me, you will want to stay somewhere that will not stress you out!
5. **Accessibility** - Are you able to move around easily? Are there any stairs or elevators?
6. **Open Space** - Is there a backyard, balcony, or a park that you can go and get some fresh air?

## Before you leave for your surgery:

- Get groceries and meal prep - stock up your fridge and freezer if you have space.
- Make a schedule to have at least one person stay with you for the first 3-4 weeks after surgery.
- Rearranging your space so that all your essential things are in reach - put out some plates, cups, cutlery, medication, and snacks on the counter or a table where you can easily grab them without overextending your upper body.



## Transportation

Start making arrangements as soon as you get your surgery date.

Check with your assigned case worker or nurse to see if the clinic offers any preoperative and postoperative arrangements. For example, GrS Montreal offers transportation and accommodation for anyone who lives further than 2 hours away from their clinic.

## Crowdfunding

Now that you have thought about where to stay and how to get there, you should have a better sense of how much money you will need. Don't forget other expenses like food, supplies, medication, rent, credit card bills, etc. *Especially if you are financially independent and will not be able to work for a period of time after your surgery.*

If you need financial support, you can try organizing a fundraiser.

There are a few platforms online that can help you get started. I used **GoFundMe** because I find it really simple and easy to set up. Keep in mind that they do take 2.9% plus \$0.30 fee per donation, which goes directly to them.

To avoid this, you can try asking people to do an **e-transfer**.

Another option is to organize a **community event**. This, of course, requires a lot more planning and might not be possible while we are facing a global pandemic. Here are some ideas for you to consider if you do require more funding:

- Host an open mic night.
- Organize a silent auction (this one you can even do online!)
- Sell your soul. I mean *stuff*.
- Create and share your art, music, zines, poetry, whatever.
- House concert - *you can recruit some of your musically talented friends? I don't know, I'm just brainstorming...*





## Your Care Team

★ Think about people in your life that you **trust**.

★ Do not be afraid to **ask for help**.

Check in with your family, friends, or partner(s) and ask if they would be able to support you before, during, and/or after your surgery. Don't make assumptions, just ask.

You will want to be around people who are:

- Caring
- Calm
- Responsible
- Organized
- Attentive to your needs
- And ideally, entertaining



★ Your care team should consist of **at least 2 people**.

Taking care of someone after a major surgery requires a lot of labour, patience, and care. So please make sure you communicate your needs effectively and be open to having more people show up for you. It is both *unrealistic* and *unfair* to ask for one person to tend to all of your needs for the entire duration of your recovery.

Avoid putting your loved ones in a position where they feel burn out or resentful, by being prepared and check-in with each other often so you can all be on the same page as to what people can and cannot offer.

*This is really important and I hope you will practice this with your care team. Do not make the same mistakes I made.*

★ Care Tip #1: try having a conversation around **boundaries**, **capacity** to care, or make **alternative**/back-up plans as you go

Your care team should include people who can provide you with:



## Emotional support

- Someone you can be open and honest with
- Someone you can process your feelings and thoughts with
- Someone who can tolerate/handle your fluctuating mood and energy levels

## Physical support

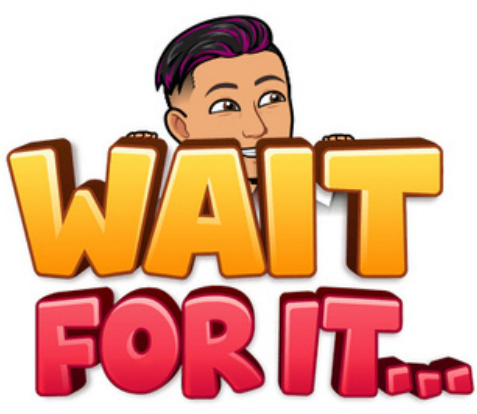
- Someone you feel comfortable to be around
- Someone who can help you shower/bathe, get dressed, put on or take off your surgical binder, and empty your drains (if applicable)
- Someone who can manage your medication
- Someone to be your arms (for the first week or so)

## Logistics

- Someone who can coordinate things while you are in recovery (i.e. meal drop-offs, visitors, care packages, meeting cancellation, etc.)
- Someone you trust to maintain your privacy, your personal AND professional boundaries (i.e. no scheduled meetings, no emails, no phone calls)
- Someone who is detail-oriented and can help you get shit done



If you do not have support, talk to your family doctor and ask if they have access to an "**Acute Respite Care**" or "**Home Care**" in your area ([homecareontario.ca](http://homecareontario.ca)). You may need to request for service as soon as you have the surgery date.



## The Waiting Game

As we all know, there is usually a long waiting period when it comes to gender-affirming health care. Not everyone can afford to pay out-of-pocket or access the care that they need.

*Please be gentle with yourselves and each other.*

I know this part sucks. Some days will be easier than others. Wherever you are in this process, whatever feelings are coming up for you, just remember that they are all valid.

You deserve to be seen and validated in your gender identity.

Hormones and surgeries do not change who you are.

Your name, pronouns, and gender identity are not up for debate.

As I waited for my surgery date to come, it was important for me to get in the right headspace and keep myself grounded. I made this list to mentally prepare myself, with the intention to love and appreciate my body. *This is a personal process, so I would strongly encourage you to make your own list... or don't! Do whatever you need to do.* If you are a care person, just check-in and see if they want/need your help.

- Have a photoshoot with my shirt off
- Make a sculpture of my chest and *maybe* paint it? - *I used plaster cloth but you can also try clay. Just make sure to have a layer of Vaseline or Saran wrap on to protect your skin!*
- Write a letter to myself
- Go swimming in a pool and/or a lake - remember how it feels
- Do fun things that I won't be able to do for a while (i.e. rock climbing, swimming, HUGGING)
- Ask my person to give extra love to that part of my body and remember how good it feels



## Packing List

Start creating a list of things you will need for your recovery as early as possible. You can even try asking your friends/community if they have any supplies they'd like to pass on before you go out and buy them!

Here is a list of things to get you started:

- Your **health card** or passport
- A **list of medication** you are currently on (*you can ask your pharmacy to print one out for you*)
- Large, slightly oversized button-up shirts
- Loose pants, shorts or boxers
- A surgical binder
- 100% cotton t-shirts - *I would recommend at least 3-5 shirts so you can change them daily. They are used to create a barrier under your surgical binder for comfort*
- **ICE PACKS** - I alternated between 3 large ones
- Slip-on shoes
- HRT kit (if applicable)
- Hand Sanitizer
- A pack of gauze pads - nipple care
- Polysporin - nipple care
- Medical tape - nipple care
- Bendy straws
- Dry shampoo
- Melatonin
- Tylenol & Advil - *refer to page 17 for pain management*
- Laxatives/stool softener
- Wet wipes
- Neck pillow
- Arm rest pillow - *I found this super helpful since you will need to sit up or stay elevated for at least 3 - 6 weeks. It will be challenging to get out of bed if you lie on your back for the first little while.*
- Lots of extra pillows - You might need to try different arrangements to find one that is the most comfy for you.
- Some books, DVDs, board games, a laptop (for Netflix, let's be real), or whatever that will keep you entertained while you're in bed!



Oh hey there!



At this point in time, I would like to invite you to slow down, take a deep breath, relax your shoulders, drink some water, and do a self check-in (or you can skip to the next section).

***How is my body feeling right now?***

***What emotions are coming up for me right now?***

I know that we just went through A LOT of information and it can feel a bit overwhelming sometimes. This is a big thing you're doing! So pace yourself, and take it one thing at a time.

I also want to remind you that It is okay to slow down and take some time to process your thoughts and feelings. *Something I wish I was told more often, tbh...*

Don't forget the reason why you're doing this- it's for YOU! (or for someone you love and care about)

If you are feeling **excited, hopeful, secure...** with where you are at - that's awesome! You can skip to the next section and continue on with your preparation.



If you are feeling **stressed out, anxious, or overwhelmed...**  
I totally get it. Maybe let's take a little break?

- Go on a walk, get some fresh air
- Connect with someone you love - maybe ask them for help or brainstorm ideas with you
- Listen to your favourite music

Give yourself some time to **breathe** and come back to it when you're ready.

If you are feeling **sad, conflicted, or lost...** that's okay too! It's okay if you don't know what you want/need right now. It's okay if you are sad about losing a big part of who you are or who you used to be. It's okay if you have no idea where to even begin.

Please remember that whatever feelings are coming up for you- they are all valid and I promise you that you are not alone.

Like I said earlier, we all have our own relationship with our bodies and **there is no right or wrong way** to feel how you feel. This is your body. Your life. Your identity. Your choice.

No one knows you better than you know yourself, so  
**TRUST in your process.**

You got this.



## The Final Countdown

In the interest of achieving an optimal surgical outcome with the least chance of complications, I strongly encourage you to do the following:

When it is **2 weeks** prior to your surgery date:

- No alcohol or substance use
- No smoking
- STOP taking vitamins, supplements, or natural health products

*Depending on where you go for your surgery, some places may or may not offer aftercare/follow-up.*

- ★ Care tip #2: Consider booking an appointment with your family doctor or a nurse exactly one week after your surgery. Since you WILL need someone to help remove your nipple graft dressing on day 7.

**Stay informed and check your local public health guidelines regularly. Follow all health & safety practices to minimize your risk of exposure to COVID-19.**



Some places may require a test result when you show up at your appointment. Make sure you plan ahead and give yourself enough time to do this!



Self-isolate with your care team and avoid going to public places.

When it is **1 week** prior to your surgery date:

- Do not take any Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid)
- No Advil
- No cold/flu medication
- Prepare your space by putting things that you will need on a daily basis at a reachable level (i.e. counter or table)
- Make sure to re-fill all your prescriptions



# SECTION TWO



# SURGERY DAY



## The Night Before

Unless instructed otherwise:

- STOP eating & drinking after midnight (including water)
- Take a bath or a shower with scent-free soap
- Do not put on body lotion

Optional: You may want to shave your chest & armpits. *I didn't have to but you do you!*

If you haven't done so already... *I'm sure you have but I'll mention it anyway, just in case:*

- Make sure to read EVERYTHING they give you thoroughly *Some places may differ in their practices so do whatever that you think is best for you.*
- Write down any questions or concerns you may have and bring it with you to your appointment.
- Keep an open mind. Based on your own body, the surgeon may take a look at you the day of and suggest a method/procedure that would give you optimal result. *I'm only saying this because (I wasn't aware) that they scheduled me in for a peri-areolar based on the photos I sent them a year prior and my surgeon suggested to do a double incision mastectomy (which is what I wanted anyway).*
- Have you decided if you want to have nipple grafts done? You will have to tell your surgeon tomorrow, or consult with them.

It is really important for you to be aware of ALL medical care & decisions. Ask lots of questions, pay attention to all the information given to you, so you can make informed decisions for yourself.

Okay. Goodnight friends!  
I hope you sleep well!



## On Surgery Day



Today is the day! *I'm so excited for you!*

- Make sure to bring your **health card**.
- Wear loose, comfy clothes (no jewellery).
- If you have any **medications** you need to take, bring them with you to your appointment. Check with your anesthesiologist or surgeon and make sure it is okay for you to take them.

If you are accompanying someone to their appointment:

- Expect to wait between 4-6 hours.
- Bring a book with you or return back to your hotel/house/apartment and wait for the call.
- A nurse will contact you to let you know when you can head back over to the clinic for pick up.

★ Care tip #3: Before they go inside, ask if they would like any special treat/food that you can grab on your way to pick them up. I asked for an oreo mcflurry and it was the best decision I made that day!

*Due to COVID-19, you may have to go in and wait for your surgery **alone**.*

What to expect when you arrive at the clinic/hospital:

Your anesthesiologist & your surgeon will meet with you. They will talk you through the procedure.

★ *Ask for clarification and bring up any questions/concerns you may have with them at this time.*

Your surgeon will mark your incisions and nipple placements (*if you are getting nipple grafts*).

★ *Make sure you are satisfied with everything or ask for adjustments.*  
Remember: this is **your body** and ultimately, **your decision**.

When the time comes, a nurse will accompany you to the OR.

*This part can be a little bit intimidating, not going to lie.*

★ Remember that everyone in that room is **there for you**.

Now I hope everything goes smoothly, my friend. Best of luck!

## After Surgery

When you wake up in the recovery room:

- A nurse will check on your vitals, give you meds, and go over your aftercare instructions. *You most likely will not retain everything and that's okay. Ask them to mention key instructions to the person picking you up.*
- Get a drink of water or juice and try to eat something that's easy to digest
- Ask your nurse for **ice packs** to put on your chest, if they have not provided them yet.

★ Care tip #4: If you are picking someone up from their surgery, don't forget to ask a nurse (usually the person accompanying them out) to go over some aftercare plans with you. Make sure you understand all the instructions or ask questions before you leave.

★ Care tip #5: Bring extra pillows and blankets for the car ride. You can set them up so the pillows will keep them in an upright position. This will help absorb shock and hopefully reduce pain while travelling from the clinic to your resting place.



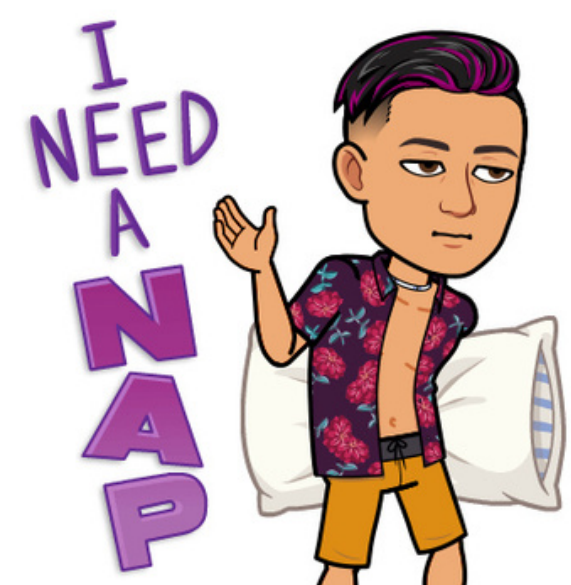
When you are back at your place:

Try to eat or drink something even if you might not feel like it. Be gentle though, you just had a surgery and it may take some time for your body to revive after coming out of anesthesia.

Now rest up and sleep as much as you can.

The toughest part is over.

You did it.



# SECTION THREE



# POST SURGERY

## Medications & Pain Management

Your surgeon or nurse will most likely have given you a prescription to help relieve your pain. Take your medication as instructed.

- ★ Care tip #6: Keep track of all medication intake and set an alarm to remind yourself when the next one is due.
- ★ Care tip #7: Create and maintain a schedule for your medication. *This may feel a bit redundant at first but it is better to be proactive than letting your body be under a lot of pain and stress.*



### Pain Management:

- ★ Care tip #8: Establish a system that would allow you to effectively communicate how your body is feeling so that you can determine what your needs are.

Below is a sample template that my care team used for the first 2-3 weeks after my surgery. We were keeping track of my pain level using **a scale from 1 to 10**, with ten being the most severe/unbearable amount of pain.

Date	Time	Medication	Pain level*



*\*Not only was it useful information to determine how much/little meds I needed, it was also very effective at letting me (and my care team) know how my body was feeling.*

## Post-Surgical Binder

There are various shapes, sizes and layout of surgical binders. Try asking around so you don't have to buy one and see which one feels the least uncomfortable.

**You need to wear a binder for at least 3-6 weeks after surgery.**

The purpose of post-surgical binder is to reduce swelling and allow your soft tissues to heal properly. It can feel very frustrating wearing a binder after your [top] surgery. *I get it. I've been there. It really wasn't as bad as you'd think. For some of you, it might actually provide some comfort while you heal and adjust to your new chest.*

After your post-surgical dressings are removed on day 7-9, you can put the binder over a t-shirt, a large abdominal pad, or other soft materials. The binder itself is stiff and course, so it can be uncomfortable to have direct contact with your skin. Find what feels better for you. *I used abdominal pads for the first 2 weeks until I feel more solid and confident enough to use t-shirts.*

### Week 1

Do not touch your dressings or remove the surgical binder (unless to adjust)

- Take medication as needed.
- Focus on resting.
- Eat food that is easy to digest & high in fiber (i.e. fruit, cereals).
- Drink lots of water & at least 1 cup/day of stool softener.
- Walk around and use your arms for minimal daily activities.
- Do not lift your arms or try to stretch your upper body at this time.



- ★ Care tip #9: If you have a bathtub, you can have someone wash your hair without getting your body wet. Just lie down on a chair, make sure your back is flat against the chair seat and that your head is sticking out where the tub is. *This activity can get real intimate so just a heads up!*

## Week 2

- You can take a shower 24 hours after the removal of your surgical dressings.
- Increase daily activity but be mindful of your limited range of motion.
- Continue wearing binder 24/7
- Start doing nipple care. (*See below*).
- Still no alcohol or substance use.



### When you are taking a shower by yourself:

Avoid having your incision wounds directly under water until all the stitches/sutures have dissolved, and your incision wounds completely closed. This could take between 30-90 days.

- ★ Care tip #10: Keep your back turn towards the shower head so the water can just run down as you shower. Do not rub your towel against your chest, just let your skin dry in open air for 15 minutes.

### **Nipple Care** (*if applicable*)

- A health care provider should be the one to remove the nipple graft dressings between day 7-9 after surgery. This is when you can start doing nipple care.
- Apply Polysporin ointment to the nipple area twice per day for at least the next 2 weeks. After that, you can switch from Polysporin to Vaseline Petroleum jelly. *Personally, I continued using Polysporin until all the scabs have healed completely.*
- Place a gauze/pad over the nipple to prevent them from rubbing against your binder. You can use medical tape or if you wear your surgical binder tight enough, it should be good to hold everything in place.

## Daily Exercises

- You can start doing these rehabilitative exercises on week 2. This is to prevent tightening of the muscles & soft tissue, which will help improve your recovery.
- Start off slow and gradual. *Do not rush or push yourself too hard.*
- These exercises should be done in a *pain-free* range of motion.

★ Care tip #11: Complete these exercises **3 times/day, 5 repetitions each**. Hold your positions for **30 seconds** or take 3-4 deep breaths.

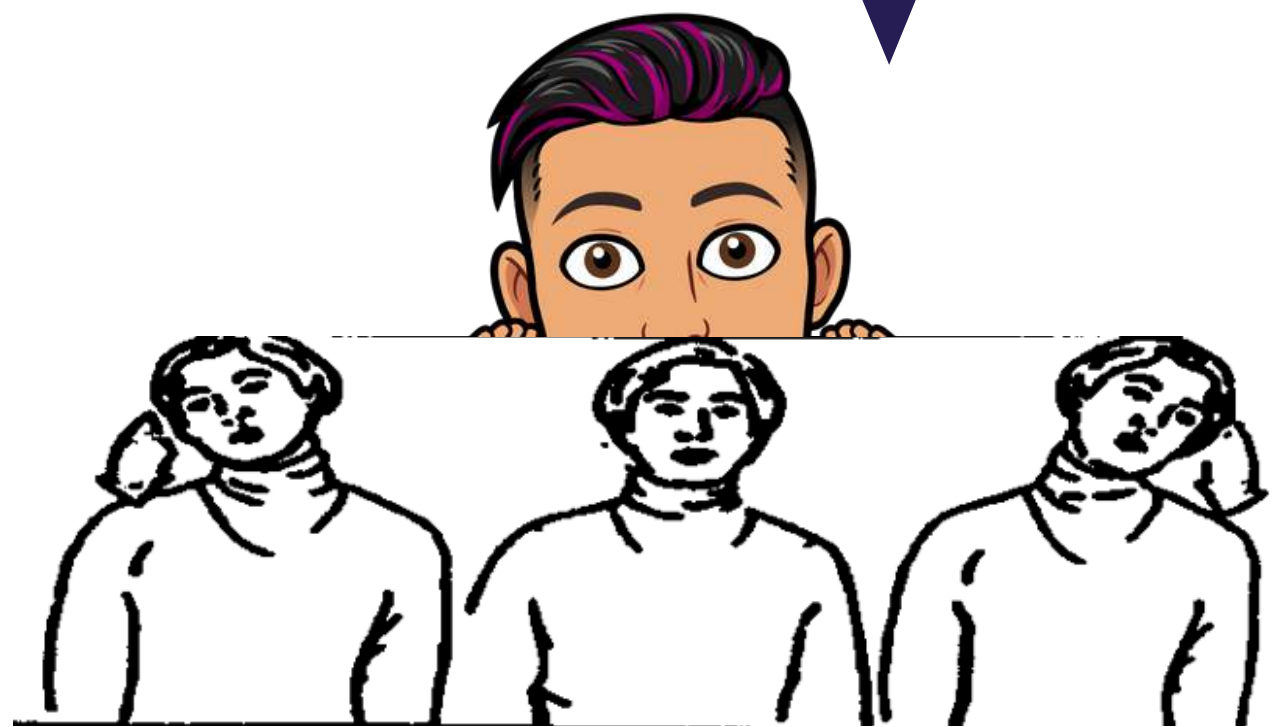
All of the instructions and illustrations in this section are excerpts from Potter, E. (2018). *Chest Masculinization Guidebook: What to expect*. Women's College Hospital, p. 11-12

### Neck stretches

(if you have any neck problems, skip this one)

Bend your head to the side as if your ear is trying to touch your shoulder.

Repeat on the other side.



### Shoulder (shrug) circles

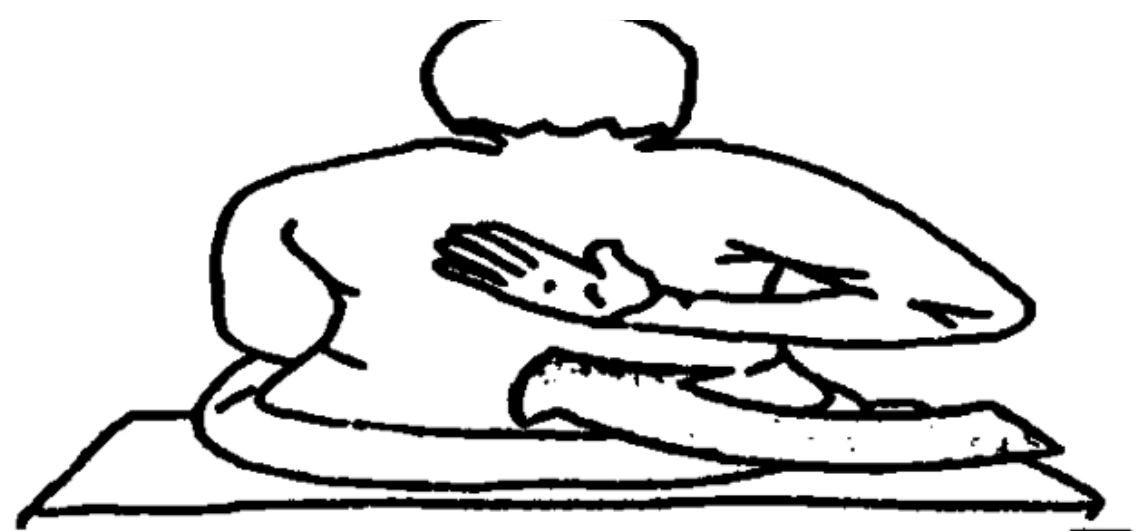
Try to bring your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold for 3 seconds and then relax.

### Hands behind back

With one arm, reach behind your back. Try to slowly bring the hand up the back as if trying to reach the opposite shoulder.

Return the arm to your side.

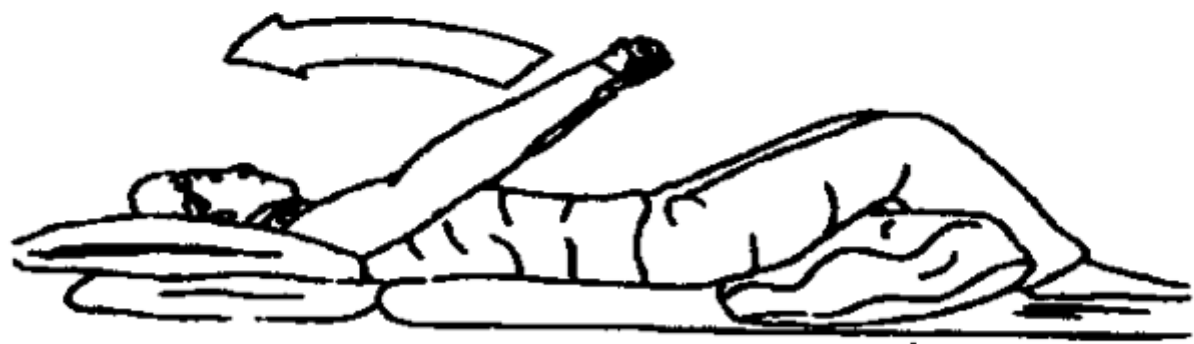
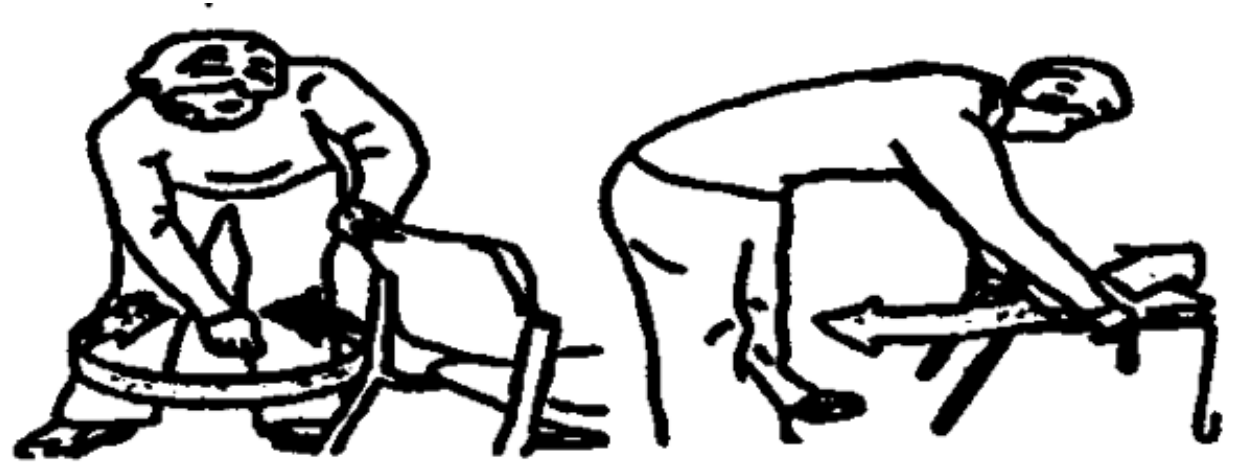
Repeat with your other arm.





## Pendulum swing

Stand or sit leaning forward. Support your upper body with one arm and relax your shoulder muscles. Allow the other arm to dangle freely side to side, front to back, clockwise and counter clockwise.



## Arm forward-assisted lift

Hold a cane or stick with your hands, shoulder width apart. Gently lift the stick up in front of you as high as you can and reach behind your head.

## Snow angels

Pretend that you are making snow angels. Both your arms should be at the side of your body and your thumbs pointing outward. Move your arms upward and away from the body, leading with your thumbs. Do not hike your shoulder, and try to stay in contact with the bed or floor during this exercise.



## Shoulder retraction and depression

Facing straight ahead, arms should be at your side with elbows bent. Squeeze your shoulder blades together and down, bringing your elbows behind you. Tip: imagine that you are trying to hold a pencil between your shoulder blades.

## Week 3

- Begin additional exercises (see below).
- Continue nipple care. *You may switch from Polysporin to Vaseline at this point.*
- Gradually returning to normal activities.



### Wall climb exercise

Stand facing a wall and "walk" one hand up the wall. Lean into the wall while keeping the elbow straight, and try to touch the armpit to the wall. Alternatively, you can continue using the cane while lying as with the first set of exercises, and bring the cane up over your head.



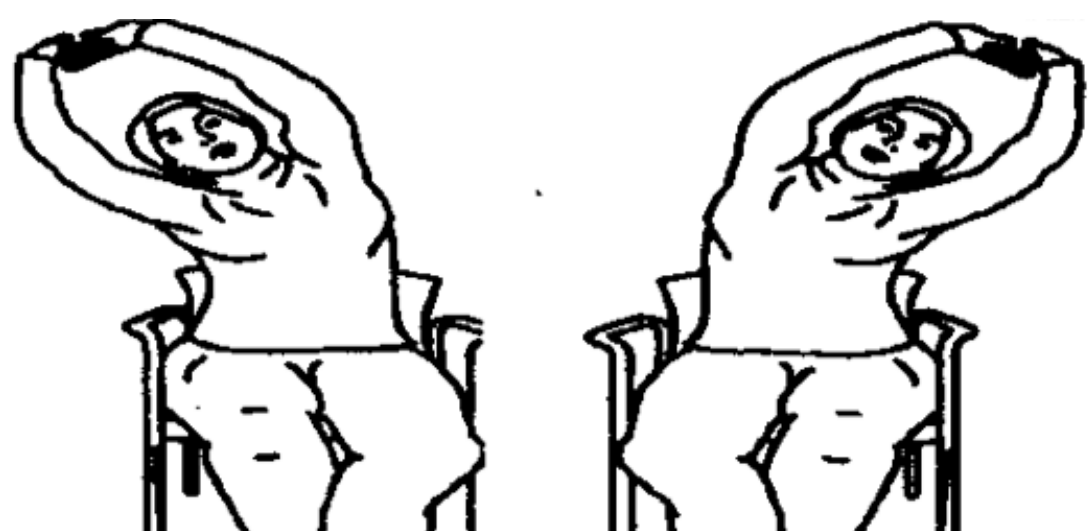
### Doorway stretch

Stand in a doorway and place each hand on either side of the door frame. Slide your hands up to shoulder height. Lean forward until you feel a slight stretch across the chest.



### Towel pull

Hold a towel with both hands behind your back. Pull gently with your top hand toward your head. Reverse arms and repeat.



### Snow angels or side bends

You can continue with snow angels as in the first set of exercises *or* try clasping your hands together overhead. Bend at your waist and move your body to the right, then to the left.

## Week 4 - 5

- Continue doing daily exercises for as long as you'd like.
- Continue nipple care until they heal.
- If your scars have fully healed, you may begin doing scar massages. *This is to ensure that the scar does not attach to the underlying tissue as they heal.*

★ Care tip #12: Apply a small amount of lotion/ointment using your index & middle fingers. Apply a firm but gentle pressure in a zig-zag (*see below*) or circular pattern across the entire scar.



## Week 6

- If you have not already stopped wearing your surgical binder, you can stop at this point.
- You may begin engaging in regular exercise again.
- You may begin to swim or take a bath again!



# Cheers

YOU DID IT!

Well, I guess my work here is done.

Thanks for reading this to the end. I hope you were able to take what you need from this zine.

If you have any questions, comments, or feedback, you can reach out to me at **[enbyjourney@gmail.com](mailto:enbyjourney@gmail.com)**

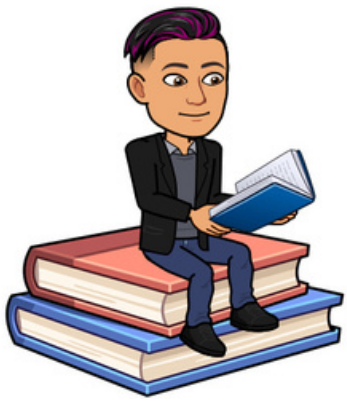
If you had your top surgery and found this zine helpful, please let me know! I would love to hear from you.



# SECTION FOUR



ADDITIONAL  
RESOURCES



## Rainbow Health Ontario (RHO)

For more information and resources on gender-affirming health care you can check out: [www.rainbowhealthontario.ca](http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca) Many health care providers have been utilizing their resources when working with their trans and non-binary patients. Although some information will only be applicable for those who live in Ontario, Canada (i.e. funding from the Ministry of Health may look different; some provinces may cover more gender-affirming surgeries than others).

You can look through their **Resource Library** for useful gender-affirming summary sheets, infographics, reports and more. You can also direct your health care providers here so you don't have to do all the work yourself- *seriously, you deserve to get the care that you need.*

I know that *theoretically*, our health care providers should be more familiar and competent to provide care. Unfortunately, the reality is that we have a huge gap in both education AND health care systems. So it's very critical for all of us to be aware of how trans bodies and experiences often gets erased.



In the summer of 2019, I had the honour of working alongside Trans PULSE Canada's leading team of researchers and 10 fellow Peer Research Associates from all over Canada. This was the first national community-based survey focusing on health and well-being of trans and non-binary people in Canada, *as well as the first quantitative data for some provinces.* You can check out their website at **transpulsecanada.ca** and follow their Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for project updates, and new releases of reports and statistics **@transpulseca**.



As promised, here are some of my all time favourite books. Go check them out! I promise you will not be disappointed!

## **Books on Trans Health Care**

Editor, Zena Sharman. (2016). *The remedy: Queer and trans voices on health and health care*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

S.J. Langer. (2019). *Theorizing transgender identity for clinical practice: A new model for understanding gender*. Jessica Kinsley Publishers.

Editor, Adrian Shanker. (2020). *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists on Health*. PM Press.

## **Voices of Queer & Trans Authors & Activists**

Andrea Gibson. (2018). *Lord of the butterflies*. Button Poetry.

Hana Shafi. (2018). *It begins with the body*. Book\*hug.

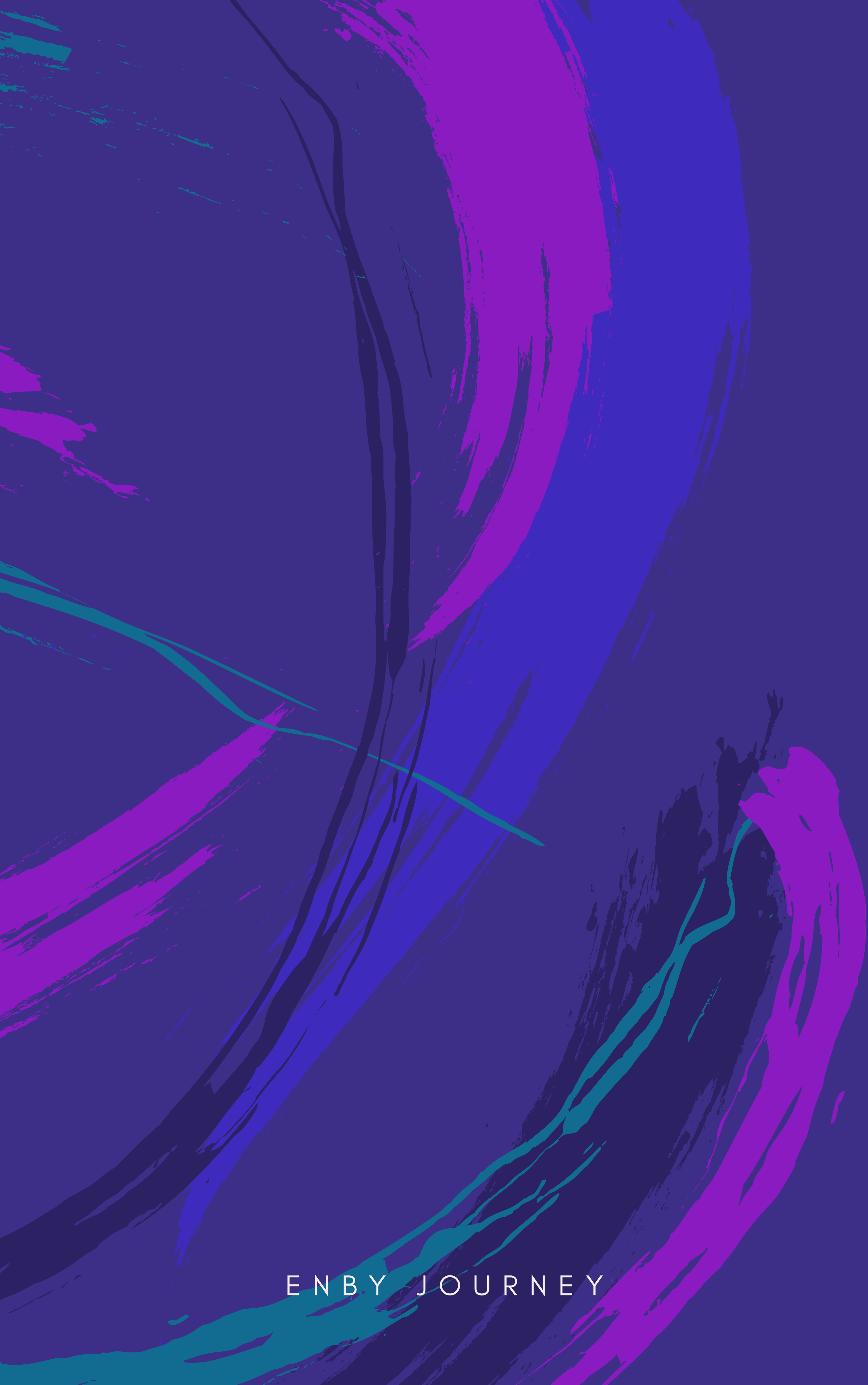
Ivan Coyote. (2016). *Tomboy survival guide*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Kai Cheng Thom. (2019). *I hope we choose love: A trans girl's notes from the end of the world*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. (2018). *Care work: Dreaming disability justice*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Vivek Shraya. (2018). *I'm afraid of men*. Penguin Random House Canada.





ENBY JOURNEY