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# My Breasts Almost Ruined My Life

After spending her teens and most of her 20s debilitated by body-shame and self-hate, Kelly R., 29, took action to correct her congenital abnormality and change her life.

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I'd always known my breasts were weird, but I remember the moment it hit me just how abnormal they were. In eighth grade, I glanced at my best friend as she was changing into her bikini. She had the most perfect boobs — full and symmetrical. My breasts looked nothing like that. Mine were tiny, asymmetrical, and spaced far apart, and while everyone else's had a round shape, mine were pointy and narrow with no underboob and enlarged, puffy areolas. Every time I looked in the mirror, I was disgusted.

To cope with my shame, I convinced myself I was a late bloomer. Even in college, I held out hope that I'd have a growth spurt and get a normal body. One night when I was 19, I Googled *weird boobs* and found pictures of women with breasts like mine. I learned my affliction had a name: tuberous breast deformity (TBD). (It's a congenital abnormality where breasts don't develop normally; the cause is unknown.) It was official — I was deformed. I was so sickened, I didn't Google it again for eight years.

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I became a master at hiding my misshapen breasts with heavily padded bras (no tops fit right without one underneath). I never let anyone — not my mom, sisters, or best friends — see me topless after age 12, even though I'd seen them (their breasts were normal).

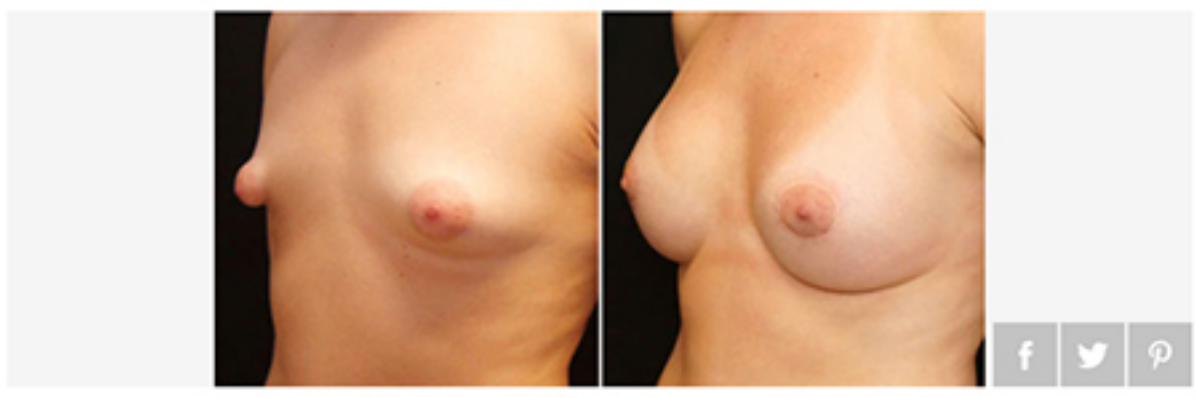
My feelings of inadequacy made me fixate on other women's breasts — not in a sexual way but in a longing way. The image of Phoebe Cates taking off her bikini top in the movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* has been seared in my brain since I was 15. It was meant to be a teenage boy's fantasy, but it was mine too. She was so confident and carefree — everything I was not. I felt cheated out of something basic that every other woman takes for granted, and I was angry and ashamed.

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My deepest bouts of depression came after college, when I realized my breasts weren't going to change. Until that point, I'd felt insecure only about my chest, but soon I felt like every part of me — my personality, my intelligence — was lacking, like I had to just accept whatever hand was dealt to me in terms of jobs or guys because I was damaged goods. One week, when I was 26, I called in sick (I work in fashion) for three days because I couldn't get out of bed. I just lay there and cried — I didn't leave my place for five days. When my friends and family tried to help me, I pulled away even further. Therapy didn't work — I was too ashamed to tell anyone my secret.

My dating life was disastrous. I felt undeserving of love or happiness. Why would someone want to be with me when he could have other girls who were the full package? So I'd have sad, meaningless one-night stands — I could be less inhibited during sex if I knew I never had to face those men again.

Inside, I've always been a sexual person, but my deformity suppressed that side of me. There are basic parts of a relationship that are routine for couples that I could never enjoy: having sex with the lights on, taking a shower together. Instead, I kept my bra on during sex, and the few times a guy managed to coax it off, I felt so humiliated, I wanted to die.



Before and after photos of the author

Everything came to a head in July of 2011 when I was 27. I was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome — my body lacks adequate progesterone, a hormone directly linked to fertility. I was devastated. Not only did I not look like a "real woman," but I may not be able to have kids either. (It's crazy that in 27 years, not one doctor, not even my ob-gyn, ever acknowledged my deformity — now I realize most doctors have never heard of it.) I gave myself a choice: keep hating your body or find a way to rise above your insecurities.

For the next two months, I devoted all my free time to finding plastic surgeons in New York who had experience correcting TBD. Since so few surgeons know about the condition, many treat it like a regular breast augmentation and simply insert an implant, which just leads to a larger, tube-shaped breast — the results are horrific. To truly correct it, a surgeon needs to first score the constricted tissue, rounding out the lower part of the breast. And since there are different degrees of severity of this deformity, sometimes elements of a breast lift or reduction are involved. Sometimes it takes two surgeries, not one. I was becoming more informed, but there was a problem: money. There was no way I could afford to pay for the procedure on my own (I knew it could cost well over \$20,000). I became a regular on TBD message boards and learned that most U.S. insurers don't cover corrective surgery because they consider it cosmetic (unlike in the UK, where the cost is often covered for women).

After researching New York plastic surgeons who accepted my insurance and had experience correcting TBD, I was left with only one doctor. She told me she could make me look "better" but that I could never hope to look "normal." Not a great prognosis, but I was desperate. Unfortunately, all three of my insurance appeals were denied.



This was my lowest point. My mom listened to me cry every night on the phone. She was the only person I confided in, but I was still too ashamed to describe the extent of my deformity or show her. Amazingly, she and my dad insisted on paying for my surgery.

Finally lucky enough to be able to choose any doctor, I spent weeks looking at before-and-after photos and found a leading plastic surgeon when it comes to correcting TBD: Adam Kolker, MD. He has developed new surgical techniques that help patients achieve the most amazing results I'd ever seen, and he trains other surgeons in TBD correction too. Turns out, I needed two operations. In the first, Dr. Kolker implanted tissue expanders (inflatable, temporary implants) to stretch my muscles and skin to make room for the real implants. It was incredibly painful but worth it. I finally had breasts! Three months later, I had a final corrective surgery with silicone implants. My results were better than I'd ever imagined. My new breasts were normal in shape, symmetrical, and natural looking. I couldn't believe it was me.

At 29, for the first time, I feel beautiful. My body no longer holds me back from being the person I was meant to be. I want to share my story to get the word out that this isn't just a cosmetic condition. TBD can destroy a woman's self-esteem and her ability to live a happy life. If even one woman finds comfort in knowing she's not alone or learns that this can be corrected, telling my story will have been worth it.

*\*The writer wishes to remain anonymous.*

This article was originally published as "My Breasts (Almost) Ruined My Life" in the May 2014 issue of Cosmopolitan. [Click here](#) to get the issue in the iTunes store!

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