

Ane...alopecia made me a stronger, more self-secure, happier person

Like some weird response to trauma, I developed alopecia areata almost immediately after suffering an assault at the tender age of about 15. I know, what a way to start my story! But don't worry, this story is not about the dark parts of life; it is about how alopecia made me a stronger, more self-secure, happier person and gifted with the chance to redefine what beauty means to me. This is a happy story, so bare with me.

The first bald spot appeared on the crown of my head and I would do my best to comb back hair from the front of my head so that I could cover it with a pony tail for school. I don't think that it is any revelation that kids are cruel enough without having something as 'strange' and contradictory to socialised concepts of feminine beauty served to them on a silver platter. Overall, however, I think that I generally got away with it. I remember a couple of snide remarks from a few extra vigilant people, but it was never so obvious that I needed to tell too many people about my condition. And so I didn't. I kept it largely secret and instead focused my energies on dealing with the other, intangible consequences of my trauma and its companion, alopecia.

Both events had completely dismantled my concept of myself as a (young) woman and for a long time I was depressed and utterly defeated. When I got older and I started to date, I would memorise the cutting 'jokes' of certain men over the acceptance and love of others (*would you pass this onto our kids? Could I catch it? It's a shame you've got alopecia, you'd be pretty otherwise. What did you do wrong to get it? Etc.*). All of this enforced my perception that I was *less than* and pushed me further into a spiral of self-loathing and vicious comparison to 'beautiful' women.

Over the years the spots became harder to hide as more and more invaded my scalp, but they were never visible enough for me to shave my head. Then in 2012, just as I gave up with the expensive and unpleasant dermatological treatments, new spots suddenly stopped appearing. At this time my sister and I had uprooted our lives in Melbourne and travelled through Europe for the better part of a year, leading to a classic tale of "finding oneself" and truly starting to see beauty through the darkness. I became strong, confident, happy, and started to think that I had cured my alopecia with my newly found positivity outlook.

It was only in September or October of 2016 that my alopecia randomly reared its head during what was one of the happiest times of my life, and took hold of a significant portion of my own head in the space of approximately two weeks. While I was initially shocked and devastated by the sudden loss, and again confronted by feelings of inferiority and a sense of lost femininity, these were now

much less severe. I knew that I was strong enough to deal with it now, and started to see it as a fantastic opportunity to actively confront those baseless beauty standards and to redefine it for myself as a bald woman. Once my very first wig arrived, I partied with friends and family and we shaved off the remaining hair. And for the first time ever, I made my alopecia public in an effort to remove the stigma that I myself had placed on it, and I can truly say that I continue to be blown away by the love and support I've received from people I know and even people I don't.

While I cannot say that I am always strong and happy now, or that I don't sometimes feel inferior or habitually compare myself to other women, I can say that I accept (and in some ways am even grateful for) everything that has led me to this happy space I now occupy. And for the first time in my life I can have the thick, beautiful hair I've always wanted, and I can also choose rock the striking beauty of the bald or the playful diversity offered by headscarves. There is no silver-lining to my alopecia story; for me the whole sky is bright and beautiful.

