

blooming

Exclusive Interviews

The Blooming Ladies
Talk About Their
Experiences with PCOS

An Advocate's Story

An Insight on Trixia Rubillos' Journey on PCOS, Endometriosis, and Adenomyosis

An Open Letter to Myself, The Irony of PCOS, and more

Read stories from women with PCOS



Cover Story

Blooming with Confidence

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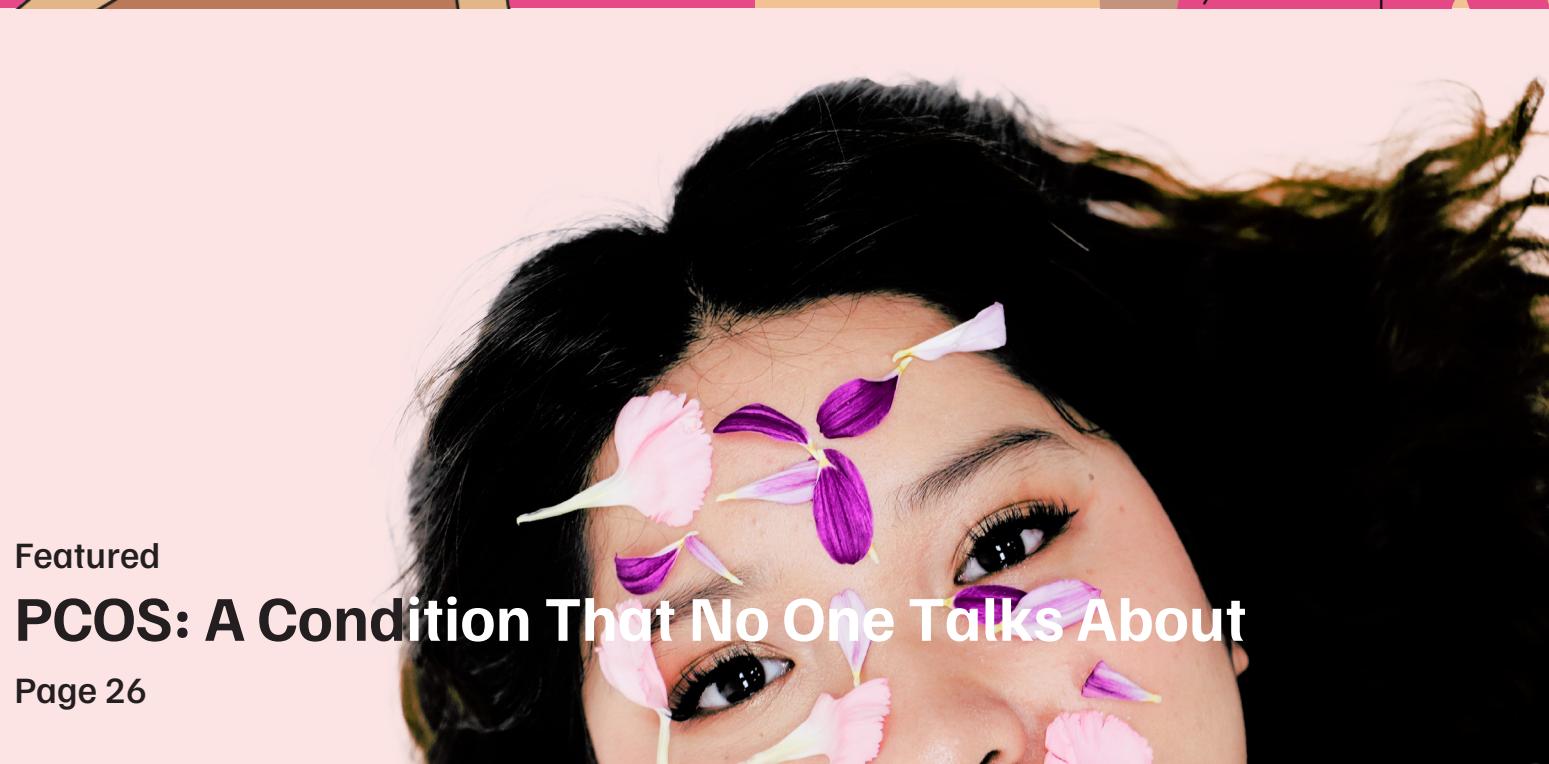
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Acknowledgment

Aiming to create an avenue for women with PCOS to freely express their concerns, stories, and experiences when dealing with their symptoms.

Upon our research, we've come to realize how much pressure women with PCOS go through on top of having problems with their health, but also how their self-esteem, mentality, and overall view of their future are being compromised as well. We want our project to help women with PCOS to connect and share their stories to let others know that they are not alone in this journey or that it is never too late to bloom into the women they deserve to be, despite their existing conditions.

First and foremost, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to our professors, whose unwavering guidance and expertise have been invaluable throughout this project. Their mentorship and dedication have greatly contributed to the success of our project and has helped shaped us into the artists and designers we are today.

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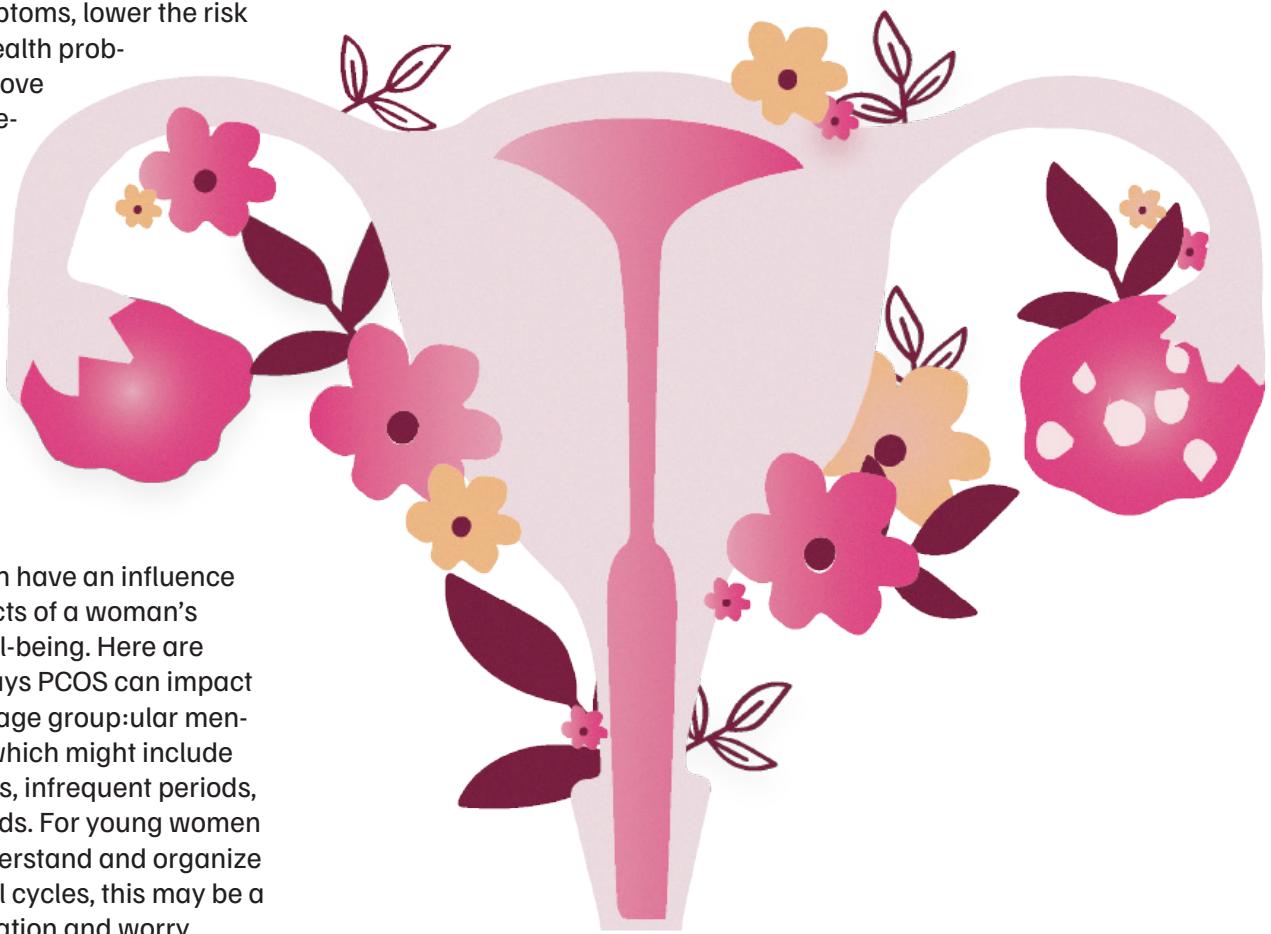
under standing pcos

Written by Angelica Baloloy

Around the age of 20 and 25, PCOS may have a substantial impact on women as this is when many people are in their reproductive peak.

Young women with PCOS must seek medical attention and assistance. Early detection and treatment can help ease symptoms, lower the risk of long-term health problems, and improve general well-being. Treatment may include lifestyle adjustments such as eating a balanced diet and exercising on a regular basis.

Evidently, it can have an influence on many aspects of a woman's health and well-being. Here are some of the ways PCOS can impact women in this age group: irregular menstrual cycles, which might include missing periods, infrequent periods, or longer periods. For young women seeking to understand and organize their menstrual cycles, this may be a cause of frustration and worry.



1 Fertility Issues

PCOS is one of the most common reasons for female infertility. PCOS can make it difficult for women to conceive due to hormonal abnormalities and irregular ovulation.

2 Emotional and Psychological Impact

Dealing with the physical symptoms of PCOS as well as the uncertainties around fertility can have a substantial emotional impact on young women with PCOS. Anxiety, despair, and a lower quality of life can be exacerbated by hormonal changes and the difficulties of controlling symptoms.

3 Acne and Hirsutism

Excess androgens in PCOS can cause acne and hirsutism (excessive hair development on the face, chest, or other regions of the body), which can be especially unpleasant for young women who are self-conscious about their looks throughout their adolescence.

4 Weight Control

Many women with PCOS struggle with weight control. The disorder is linked to insulin resistance, which makes weight gain more likely and weight reduction more difficult. Maintaining a healthy weight is critical for PCOS management.

5 Self-Body Image Issues

When a woman's self-identity and confidence are still forming, the combination of physical symptoms such as weight gain, acne, and hirsutism can have an impact on her body image and self-esteem which may include Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Obsessive-compulsive disorder, Panic disorder, Social physique anxiety and other body image problems.

6 Metabolic Disorders

PCOS is linked to an increased risk of developing metabolic disorders such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Individuals between the ages of 20 and 25 may need to be more cautious about their lifestyle choices to reduce these risks.

MY PCOS

How it all started.

It all started when I was 14 and had an ovarian cyst that was 10 inches in diameter. After a successful surgery, I thought my life would go back to normal after the scars had healed, but little did I know that this wouldn't be the case.

Growing up, I was told by everyone, including medical professionals, that having irregular periods was normal. Given that belief, I thought my 9-month to 1-year delays were normal. I even saw it as a blessing since I didn't have to worry about getting pads or dealing with monthly mess in general. It all seemed harmless until I developed medical depression and anxiety at 17 and started gaining weight almost out of nowhere. At 20, I got bigger despite how much I tried to stay fit and observe a healthy diet.

One day, I noticed several changes in my body: unwanted body hair growth and acne (which was unusual for me). I genuinely thought it was just the stress of corporate life until I finally decided to get myself checked in 2019. I'm glad that I did because I was told that I had polycystic ovaries. When I was first educated about PCOS, everything made sense since it explained a lot about what I went through. Those are common PCOS symptoms.



Photos by Trixia Rubillos

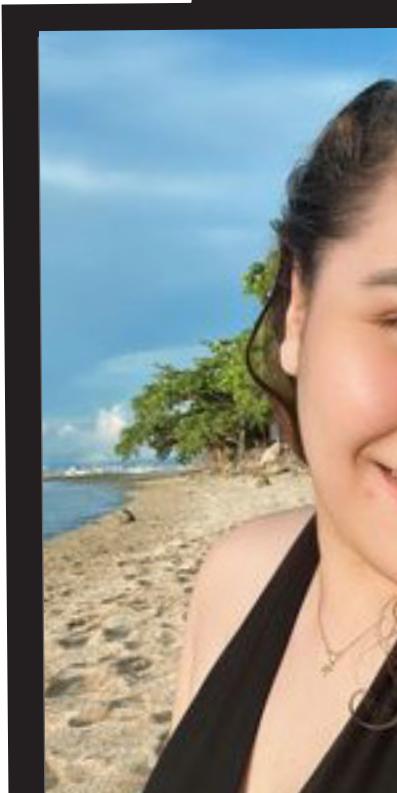
The Reality of My PCOS Journey

My PCOS journey wasn't as smooth as I expected it to be. I thought I was going to be given medicines to get better, visit the doctor at least once a year, and all I had to do was stick with it and rest. I was so wrong.

It turned out to be a journey filled with multiple consultations with different doctors due to a lot of misdiagnosis. There was a time when I was given the wrong birth control pill, which may have been the reason why I developed this painful disorder called Endometriosis and eventually adenomyosis. I took that prescribed medication for a good 6 months.

So because of this journey, I decided to self-educate and advocate for PCOS. It became a purpose to spread awareness and help the PCOS community in any way I can.

The main lesson I learned is that PCOS symptoms have been normalized growing up, all because it's one of the most common yet grossly under-researched disorders in women's health.



JOURNEY

Written by Trixia Rubillos

Adjusting to life with PCOS, one thing that is for sure is that it doesn't go away. There's no concrete answer as to how it goes away, but there are multiple success stories about PCOS, and usually, it is created with a healthy lifestyle. I learned that the best way to stay consistent and realistically motivated to stick with this lifestyle is to practice these two things:



Create a balanced diet that you can realistically stick to.

This means that you don't deprive yourself of the food that you want, but you also consume the food that is right for you. I tried placing myself in a certain dietary box back then. I tried if not all, then most diets: keto, vegetarian, pescatarian, you name it. I find that having a flexitarian diet is the best way to go for me. This means I can consume meat, dairy, and anything I want, but in portions. To me, this is something I could stick to.

Find what workout or exercise works best for you.

I learned the hard way that it's different for everybody. I couldn't do the workout I used to do back then because of my endometriosis, which upset me for a while. I felt weak and negative because I was having a hard time adjusting to my body. Listen to it and don't strain it. Now, I'm getting my strength back little by little because of yoga. There are multiple YouTube videos that certainly help me.



Right now, all I can say is that I'm doing my absolute best to be better. I'm praying I could be a mom someday, even if I have low chances given my PCOS, endometriosis, and adenomyosis.



Top (from Left to Right): Geraldine, Joan, Therese
Bottom (from Left to Right): Mina, Ashley

Blooming with Confidence

Beauty comes in different shapes, colors, sizes, and even stretch marks. Geraldine, Therese, Joan, Mina, and Ashley have three things in common: **Beauty, Confidence, and PCOS.**

PCOS, or polycystic ovary syndrome, impairs the endocrine system and metabolic processes in reproductive-aged women. Women with this medical condition may have a wide range of symptoms, including but not limited to: menstrual cycle irregularity; mood swings; bloating; weight gain; depression; anxiety; and, if ignored, an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

However, PCOS doesn't stop these ladies from blooming into the women they deserve to be.

In between poses for The Bloom Project's Bloom with Confidence Photoshoot, we asked the models about their journey from learning about their PCOS condition to adapting and accepting life despite the ups-and-downs, stigma, and hardships they had to face because of the said condition.

So tell us about yourself.

Geraldine: So, my name is Geraldine but you can call me Gab. I'm 28 years old and I've been married for 7 months na.

Therese: I'm Maria Therese Sonza and I'm 20 years old.

Joan: My name is Joan Jabiñar, 25 years old and I'm still a student.

Ashley: I'm Ashley Flores. I'm 22 years old, currently studying MMA in CIIT Kamuning.

Mina: My name is Mina. I'm 24 years old and I'm a cosplayer.

Can you tell us about your PCOS diagnosis and how it has impacted your life? How did you feel when you first received your diagnosis and what steps did you take to educate yourself about the condition?

Geraldine: Before nalaman ko na may PCOS ako, it was just recently lang kasi. Noong March lang. Back then, hindi talaga regular menstruation ko. So, I [went to see] my OB-GYN para ma-correct. And then, niresetahan ako ng pills pero parang mas lumala lang. Kasi after taking pills for 3 months, wala naman nangyari.

Therese: I was diagnosed last year, around September. Based on my diagnosis, it was a result of my medication for mental health because I have conditions. Grabe pala iyong side effects niya which caused a lot of medical conditions. Before, I was irregular. Noon wala akong pake kasi I wasn't sexually active, so I didn't care. But my mom told me, "Mag pacheck ka na baka kasi fatal pala yan." I said, "Huwag na! Hindi naman ako nakikipagsex." So, noong nagpa-ultrasound, nakita na I have PCOS.

Joan: Before ako nadiagnose medically, napapansin ko na sa sarili ko. Kasi ever since talaga, never ako nagkaroon ng regular period. Super late din ako nagkaroon ng period. I think nasa first year college bago ako nagkaroon ng period. And then after that, nag-reresearch ako kung ano nangyayari sakin. Parang *nagself-diagnose* ako. Year 2021, December. Nagbreakdown ako nang malala. Nadiagnose ako ng PCOS, both ovaries. *Inexplain* ng OB-GYN na more than 12 follicles.

Ashley: At the back of my mind, alam ko na may PCOS ako. Pero hindi pa ako diagnosed talaga. Pero iyong the signs nakuha ng Mom ko when she was diagnosed, iyon din nagyayari sakin. Technically, Mom ko na nagsabi sakin na possible talaga na may PCOS ako. Pero 16 lang kasi ako noon, so hindi ko talaga sineryoso pa. Parang wala pa naman akong nararamdaman na big impact sa life ko. Pero nagbreak out ako ng acne bigla noong nagpadiagnose ako. Naging insecurity ko talaga iyon.

Mina: It was around 2 years ago. I always miss my periods nang matagal, mga 6 months iyong pinakamatagal. Sabi ng mga sisters ko magpacheck na raw ako. Tapos *nagpacheck* ako, nalaman na may 1 cm cyst. Ang daming medications, ang daming changes sa pagkain. Iyon siguro naging affected ako in a way kasi *nastress* ako magbawas kasi ang hirap maghanap ng diet. Hindi rin naman ako malakas kumain pero gain ako ng gain ng weight. Tapos, iyon na pala iyong PCOS. T'yaka yung pimples.

How has PCOS affected your mental health and what strategies have you used to cope? Have you found it difficult to manage the emotional and psychological aspects of the condition, and if so, how have you sought support?

Geraldine: Sobrang obvious talaga iyong symptoms ng PCOS kasi sakin. So parang nung nagkaroon ako ng acne, bumaba talaga self-confidence ko. And actually, until now, nadala ko siya na parang hindi ko nagawa *magselfie*. Kahit sa phone ko, wala kayong makikitang selfies. So, ang ginagawa ko para *macope* [up] ko nalang siya, pinapaalala ko nalang sa sarili ko na I have PCOS, it's normal. Hindi ko naman siya *macocontrol*. Nandoon na ako sa acceptance.

Therese: Before, I didn't have any insecurities talaga. I was raised with full confidence. Pero noong nagkaroon ng medicines for my mental health condition, I gained a lot of weight. Maraming nagsasabi na "Huy, tumaba ka!" Lagi ko naman sinasabi na kasi may PCOS ako. I know it sounds disrespectful to some, pero kasi parang hindi rin naman ako nirerespeto. And another thing about stretch marks, nagkaroon ako ng super dami kasi *nag-expand* talaga katawan ko. Eventually, onti-onti naman nag-gagain confidence na ako. And sabi ko nga, "*Nobody is perfect.*"

NOBODY
IS PERFECT

Joan: I worry about infertility, and dahil doon nagstart doon iyong anxiety. I'm clinically diagnosed with anxiety as well. At first, nagpaconsult muna ako sa friend ko who graduated in Psychology and she told me to get myself checked professionally talaga. Sa sarili ko, hindi ko naisip na effect pala ng PCOS ang anxiety. Ang ginawa ko, ang coping mechanism ko that time, bumalik ako ng school. Nagstop kasi ako for six years. Bumalik nalang ako ng school as a coping mechanism. Ang mindset ko noon ay "*Kung hindi ako magkakaanak in the future, at least may diploma ako.*"

Ashley: Siguro noong time na 16 ako, hindi ko pa maisip kung ano talaga nararamdam ko noon. Wala pa akong pake sa mental health ko noon. Alam ko lang may sakit ako, need ko uminom ng pills for 21 days. Naging routine ko nalang iyon. Hindi ko iniisip ano effect noon sakin. Dati sinasabi ko pa sa Lola ko na ayoko pumasok kasi nahihiyo ako. Iyon pala dahil sa pills ko 'yon. Pero noong nalaman ko na ano talaga effects ng PCOS, doon ko nagets na kaya pala moody, lagi akong *nagkakanausea*, parang iyong rage ng emotions mo hindi mo alam kailan ka magiging masaya o kailan ka magiging malungkot. Coping mechanism ko naman ngayon is working. Pangit man pakinggan, masaya ako sa ginagawa ko. Focused ako sa trabaho ko qanon.

Mina: Kasi noong una, when I started medication, kasi iyong side effects bigla nalang sumasakit ulo ko tapos minsan nasusuka pa ako. Tapos syempre, nagadjust parin ako hanggang sa nasanay ako. And as a gamer, laro lang ako nang laro para hindi ko maisip iyong mga bagay bagay.

ODM
EFFECT



YOU ARE NO LINE
JUST 'CAUSE



MISS OF A WOMAN
YOU HAVE PCOS.



In what ways has PCOS impacted your relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners? Have you faced any stigma or discrimination as a result of your condition, and if so, how have you dealt with it?

Geraldine: So far, the good thing about doon sa [my] relationship with people, wala naman akong karanasan na discrimination na hindi ka rin nila naiintindihan. Kasi I explained it to them na ganito iyong possibilities na maging behavior ko. Kasi kapag mag PCOS ka, mababa talaga energy mo minsan.

Therese: Wala naman masyadong nagbago. Hindi ko nga alam kung bakit sa akin walang impact ang PCOS as much as with other people na kilala ko. There are some people I know have changed their behaviors talaga. I don't invalidate their feelings, but you really have to live your life to the fullest.

Joan: May mga naririnig parin ako until now iyong *pag-gain* ko ng weight. Lagi nilang napapansin na parang "napabayaan" ako sa kusina. Kahit na aware naman family ko na may PCOS ako, parang nawawala din sa isip nila minsan na kasama talaga iyong pag gain ng weight. Noong una, parang nahihiya din ako magpost ng selfies ko. Minsan lang talaga ako magpost na kasama iyong body, kasi natatakot ako sa mga sasabihin ng iba. Feeling ko ang pangit-pangit ko. Maraming nagrereact noon sa My Day ko na "*Parang lumolobo tayo ngayon ah*". Kaya marami din talaga ako na unfriend and block before. And ito nga sa Bloom Project, kinoconsider ko ito kasi in-encourage ako ng friend ko.

Ashley: Ay oo naman. Noong nag gain ako ng weight, bandang pandemic iyon, doon ko lang nakita ulit mga relatives ko or friends ko, tapos bungad talaga sakin noon "*Oh, ano nangyari sayo? Bakit lumaki ka nang ganyan?*" Pero para sakin, parang hindi naman ganon ka drastic. Looking at it, kapag tumitingin ako ng old photos, talaga palang ang payat ko dati. Parang gusto ko nalang talaga magtago noong time na iyon. Ayoko pumunta ng mga family gatherings kasi ayoko talaga makarinig ng mga ganon. Paulit-ulit nalang din kasi, pagod na ako magexplain dahil sa PCOS ko. Hindi dahil lagi akong tulog, hindi dahil lagi akong kumakain. Lagi nalang nila sinasabi na "*Magpapayat ka lang!*" pero hindi naman ganon kadali iyon, diba?

PCOS ka, may certain exercises lang. Hindi ka pwedeng magpapagod lagi dahil din sa insulin resistance. Hindi ko talaga siya alam paano i-explain sa mga tao that doesn't sound like I'm only making an excuse.

Mina: Dati kapag bata ka, may mga pajoke iyong mga kaklase mo na "*Huy, tumaba si Ano. Baka buntis iyan.*" Pero kapag sa friends naman, naiintindihan naman nila kung bakit nangyayari sayo 'yan. Kapag boys, hindi masyado. Makikita nila na tumaba ka, tapos ayon na. Sa family naman, hindi ko masabi agad kasi ngayon nags-stay ako sa house na puro brothers ko lang and father. Lahat ng sisters ko nakabukod na. So, it's hard to open up to my family right now. But I don't experience any discrimination or see any changes, pero hindi lang ako makapagopen up kasi feel ko hindi nila maintindihan itong condition ko.





What advice would you give to other people with PCOS who may be struggling with self-confidence or body image? How have you learned to accept and love your body despite the challenges that PCOS can present?

Ashley: I think ang advice na mabibigay ko is to take your time. Kasi minsan iyong emotions mo, dinidiktahan ng ibang tao. *“Bakit ka malulungkot? Kaya mo naman gumaling, kaya mo naman pumayat. Kaya mo naman uminom ng gamot.”* But it shouldn't be like that. It's okay not to be okay— kahit sobrang gasgas na iyon. Totoo iyon. You have to take your time to feel the sadness or the emotions that you feel. Kailangan mo talaga siya maprocess muna kasi hindi ka magheheal kung hindi mo naramdam an iyong pain. Sa body dysmorphia naman, I just had to accept na andito na tayo. Hindi ko naman siya mababago in just a snap or overnight. Take your time lang talaga.

Mina: Love yourself talaga. Lalo na, I'm in the cosplay community and it's becoming a norm na talaga na that there are plus-sized cosplayers. Kasi everyone can cosplay. At the end of the day talaga, it's still you. There are people who are also insecure about themselves, but you don't need to be like that to yourself.

What do you wish more people knew about PCOS and the challenges it presents? Are there any misconceptions or stereotypes that you would like to dispel, and if so, how do you think we can raise awareness and promote a greater understanding of the condition?

Joan: First misconception is pag-gain ng weight ng mga women. Sinasabi nila na walang kinalaman or wala naman PCOS before, so parang kasalanan natin kaya tayo lumalaki. Hindi nila alam na nasa genes ito, puwede itong mamana. Second is iyong infertility. Since bago sa pandinig ng iba ang PCOS, ang unang pumapasok sa kanila is infertility or hindi na magkakaanak, which is hindi naman talaga. Mahirap, pero it's possible.

IT'S OKAY NOT
TO BE OKAY
KAHIT SOBRANG
GASGAS NA 'YON .

Can you share any lessons or insights you've gained from living with PCOS that you think could benefit others? What have you learned about yourself, your body, and your relationships as a result of your experiences with the condition?

Joan: A lesson that I've learned during my PCOS journey is acceptance, kasi of course there are a lot of worries. Pero kapag *na-accept* mo na iyon, magtuloy tuloy na siya. It's like a domino effect. Ma-accept mo na may ganon kang condition, mas lalo mong maiintindihan sarili mo. Iyong mga mood swings na akala mo tinotoyo ka lang dati, mas maiintindihan mo na kasama 'yan sa condition.

Ashley: I think iyong lesson or nakapagpamaintain ng healthy lifestyle is green tea or matcha. Sobrang ganda pala ng matcha for PCOS. And I personally chose a more natural remedy now to help my condition.

Mina: To know your body more. Kasi mafefeeel mo naman iyong changes. Mamomonitor mo din sarili mo kasi if something wrong. It's important to get yourself professionally checked and not rely on self-diagnosis lang.

How has your experience with PCOS shaped your goals and aspirations for the future? Have you made any changes to your career, relationships, or personal life as a result of your condition, and if so, how have these changes impacted your overall sense of happiness and fulfillment?

Geraldine: After I was diagnosed, I thought I was pregnant. After taking pills, na-regulate na kasi menstruation ko. The month after, I didn't take the pills. So akala ko, baka pregnant na ako. So syempre, parang we're excited about it. Feeling ko din na-correct na menstruation cycle ko. So, noong time na nag pregnancy test na ako, sobrang nakaka-down na makitang negative iyong test. Sabi ko, "Bakit ganon, sinunod ko naman lahat? Iniwasan ko naman mga ganitong pagkain?" Nagtake ako ng pills every day. Never ako nalate ng isang minuto. So parang, siguro naging impact talaga sa aming mag-asawa, parang wasted effort. So, right now accepted na namin na may PCOS ako, nag-start na kami mag-pon. Maybe this isn't the right time to have a baby para kay Lord. It doesn't mean na may PCOS ka, you don't have a chance to give birth. It's hard, but not impossible. Baka this is the best time to save para kapag binigay na siya ng Lord, ready na kami. May savings na kami.



Therese: Medyo funny iyong sakin kasi, iyong parents ko sabi nila sa aming magkakapatiid na dapat bigyan sila ng apo. Tapos noong na-diagnose ako, ayon! Natuwa ako kasi hindi ako! (laughs) Kasi ayaw ko pa muna talaga magka-anak. Kasi may iba na gusto talaga magka-family, pero for me, ibang iyong mindset ko. Siguro dahil bata pa kasi ako, kaya hindi ko siya iniisip.

How do you envision the future of PCOS research and treatment, and what changes would you like to see in the medical community's approach to this condition? Are there any breakthroughs or developments in the field that you are particularly excited about, and if so, why?

Geraldine: I do have high hopes that there's a big chance na magkakaroon ng medication or the best treatment na hindi lang pills, exercise, or diet. Kumbaga talagang cure na siya for PCOS.

Therese: Kasi ang youth ngayon, mga nag-aaral, sobrang advanced nila to the point na walang sagot pa dito sa problemang ito, pero may mga nakakatuklas na. I have high hopes na iyong mga susunod na medical-related papers specifically for curing PCOS ay talagang hindi siya impossible or malayo na magkaroong ng cure talaga. Sabi ng mga doctors there's no cure, but there are preventions. Pero dahil matatalino na mga tao ngayon and innovated na mga technologies ngayon, so I know magkakaroon ng possibilities in the future for cures.

Joan: Actually, for OB-GYN, sabihin na natin na professional doctors sila, it still takes 2-3 or even more opinions bago mo makuha ang sagot na gusto mo. Mayroon kasi mga doctor na reresetahan ka lang ng gamot or sasabihin ka lang na magdiet ka. I'm looking forward for the future na mas lalo nilang mapaintindi at mabigyan ng tamang guidance ang patients. Kasi hindi lang naman siya basta-basta pangdietet. Sana magkaroon pa ng more tests para sa mga patients as well.

Ashley: Para sa mga doctors kasi, as in lahat ng napuntahan ko, inadvice lang ako na uminom ako ng ganitong pills or magpapayat ka. Pero hindi lang talaga siya nagwowork for me. Pero may mga dieticians naman online, mas natulungan nila ako on how to have a healthier palette. And I think sana malawakan pa iyong studies on PCOS, na sana they touch on other subjects such as mental health kasi it's not just about weight eh. That's the change I want to see in the future. Women should be able to open about PCOS without the fear of discrimination.



Mina: Para sa mga taong natatakot magpacheck, the more na hindi ka nagpapacheck, baka mayroon na palang mas malala pang sakit. Even if minor changes lang sa katawan, dapat magpacheck parin sila. Kasi iyong iba takot na takot magpills. So rather than overthinking, mas maganda nang sure ka. With regards naman sa doctors, marami narin mga procedures sa medical labs na complete talaga. Complete na yung ipapatest sayo. Tapos mabibigyan ka agad ng medication kaysa ginogoogle mo lang mga sagot.

How has your experience with PCOS impacted your view of yourself and the world around you, and how has it influenced your journey of blooming into the person you deserve to be? Have you found any silver linings or positive aspects to your journey with this condition that has helped you to grow and thrive?

Geraldine: I tried not to be pessimistic as well. I took it in a positive way. I always thought that maybe this is my soon-to-be testimony. Maybe sa test na ito, magiging testimony namin siya soon. Sakit lang ito, mas malakas paniniwala ko sa Lord. The silver lining is nabigyan kami ng time na kaming dalawa lang muna ng asawa ko.

Therese: Some people might become more pessimistic about having PCOS, pero noong nadiagnose ako, I realized na I have a lot of things to do parin to become the best version of myself. I don't see PCOS itself as my "kalaban" but as my motivation to do and to strive harder to be healthier. Lahat kasi sa katawan natin connected or intertwined. For me, gusto ko magpagaling talaga mentally and physically. As much as possible, gusto ko rin *i-treat* PCOS ko naturally.

Joan: Before I was diagnosed with PCOS, napakajudgmental kong tao. Kada may nakikita akong plus-sized women before, ang bilis kong i-judge before na parang ang "takaw". Parang iyung naexperience ko sa mga tao noong bagong diagnosed ako with PCOS, ganun na ganun ang mindset ko before. Then, noong napunta ako sa situation na ako naman iyong na diagnose ng PCOS, mas lumawak iyong understanding ko doon sa mga nakapaligid sakin na hindi nila ginusto iyon, hindi nila kasalanan iyon. Talagang there's a condition that comes with it. And also sa mental health, iyong bukambilibig kapag may naexperience ako na friend na may mood swings, sinasabi ko na "tinotoyo ka nanaman". Pero because of PCOS, naintindihan ko na lahat ng naexperience ng mga tao na hindi lahat ng mga bagay is gawa-gawa lang. There is a reason behind it.

Natuto rin akong mahalin sarili ko kasi wala naman magaccept sa sarili ko kung hindi ako ang unang magaaccept sa sarili ko. Self-love talaga.

Ashley: Ako kasi, I have always been [an advocate] for women empowerment or body empowerment. Parang dati hindi ko naman nakikita sarili ko na nakakapagpabago or change ng mindset ng ibang tao. But recently, I was able to post something online that said "*Today, I am reclaiming myself and my belly. And I want to silence the voice of body dysmorphia.*" Habang tinatype ko iyon, I felt very empowered. I want to show the world that this big body can do anything she wants. Iyong change na nagawa ko para sa sarili ko is to accept myself and love myself with the body I have right now. **Love starts with yourself.**

Mina: Confidence talaga. Dati nahihiya ako kasi ang laki ng braso ko. Pero ngayon, kahit ano kaya ko nang suotin. It's a good feeling that you can express yourself freely without any restriction on yourself.

Models: Geraldine Irasga, Therese Sonza, Joan Jabinar, Romina Quitco, Ashley Flores

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"TODAY, I AM RECLAIMING
MYSELF AND MY BELLY.
AND I WANT TO SILENCE THE
VOICE OF BODY DYSMORPHIA."



empty



Last night, I bundled my blanket
in the shape of sourdough bread
tucked the fabric beneath my shirt
felt an emptiness in the area tread

I then cradled my blanket
in the shape of a newborn baby
and whispered “I’ll probably never be a mother”
while holding it to my heart tenderly

I promised I’d never
participate in hook-up culture
or any loveless endeavor
I’m too traumatized
and, undoubtedly, preoccupied

But people still raise assumptions
countless times whenever I wear
skin-tight clothing
associate my plump physique with
stereotypical fashion
“You’re pregnant.”

oven.



In a fit of annoyance
I could've been just like my mother
in her youth or as a young adult
far from realization or awakening
imitating her acts of rebellion
succumbing to nightly pleasures
then break the news
“I don't know when it's due.”

But that's far from my truth
It wouldn't sit well in my heart
nor wouldn't have felt right
the guilt of implying I slept with a
man
even before my wedding night

Mother made sure her
daughter would never follow
a path that would turn her
soul into a husk
ashamed and hollow
doing all that she can
so her daughter won't settle for less

Submitted by Patricia Batenga

An Open Letter To

MYSelf

Submitted by Andromeda

With someone as young as I am, who has just reached the ripe age of a quarter of a century, plus-sized, and never used to displaying too much skin, one would assume that I had become used to all of the incessant, criticizing sounds that I have been hearing since I was a child. Living in a Filipino-Chinese environment felt like living under a microscope—and it still is. Always twice as much stress, twice as much despair, and Hell, it was probably why I also doubled in size as I got older as a result. Eating food in front of people used to feel like a sin and I was waiting to be condemned for it. When being chubby was only cute until I was in sixth grade, that's when people started to be concerned about my size. I couldn't remember when I started getting used to the nightmare of my every day.

When I was younger, I had no one but popular strangers online to look up to for even an ounce of body-positive messages. The people around me, bless their hearts, were always adamant to prove that they were only looking out for me when they picked on my size, laughed whenever they see the fat kid during P.E., or gave me backhanded compliments about how "confident"

I seemed to pursue singing and dancing when they were actually just trying to make me feel bad about myself for being something they themselves could never be. This stretched onto older relatives and family friends who still—to this day—equate being beautiful to being skinny—not healthy, just skinny. Because being skinny gives you privileges, they say; while I know that wasn't the case for everyone.





Being in college was an eye-opener for me, especially being a student from DLS-CSB, wherein we pride ourselves for being inclusive. I was finally able to feel a good amount of confidence in a place full of extraordinary and creative people, despite going home to a nest filled with overdue trauma and a periodic sense of melancholy etched in the walls of my room.

Unfortunately, my health started deteriorating slowly, but not in a way you think would go first. It started with my mental health, and I proceeded to fight one of the longest battles I have ever gotten to face. Near-death experiences that may or may not have been self-force; voices in my head that unceasingly pursued to shatter me into pieces; having to stop my schooling for a while just to recover from the intense relapses. I was too focused on my mental health

that I didn't even know I was physically-deteriorating as well. I started to hate my body and, from time to time, I thought starving myself would have been a better option. I thought that was the only way to get everyone to believe in me or my capabilities. I thought that was the only way to see me for who I truly was and

what I had to offer. I thought that was the only way for people to love me for me.

I hid away all of my desires to dress up nicely, do certain interests I've always wanted to do, eat what I wanted to eat, all the while feeling that I don't deserve to do any of those things at all.

Late 2019, I was diagnosed with PCOS. It took me a while to conquer my fear of finding out what was happening to my body; and it was only then everything started to make sense to me. I wasn't even thinking of the possibilities of not getting pregnant in the future, yet I was relieved for the most part. I was relieved because I finally heard the words I was so desperate to hear for the longest time:

“It’s not your fault.”

Words that helped patch up every wound and cover up every crevice that made me believe everything was my fault. For the longest time, I was silently taught to blame myself for everything that's happened to me and there's truly no other way around it. I just need to suck it up, lose weight, and see if I still get a couple of years left to live.

However, that wasn't the case anymore. I knew it would take years to break down my walls of insecurity and self-loathing, but this time, I held the cards in my hand. This was my way of taking back control over my life.

Today, I'm an advocate for body positivity, PCOS, and mental health. Therapy did wonders to me and I'm learning new things about my body and myself. I know I still have a long way to go, too. I still eat carbs and sweets, and I still feel bad about the next day. I still don't wear clothes that expose my beefy arms, but I can definitely rock a cute top and a cute pair of shorts whenever I feel like it. I use my voice— not to argue— but to educate those who use their words against my own body.

I have learned and will continue learning how to love myself and my body without restrictions.

FINDING Strength IN STRUGGLE

Written by Monica Kua

A strong, empowered woman through and through, even after storms of raging hormones and disappointments rain down her life. We met up with Trixia Rubillos, the founder of The Cysterhood Philippines, to talk about her experience with PCOS. At the tender age of 14, she had already started developing symptoms that lead to the condition, but was only diagnosed officially at the age of 21. After years of misdiagnosis and trying on different types of exercise regimens, she discussed how the journey was never a point-to-point, one-size-fits-all path to losing PCOS.

Can you share your PCOS journey and how you became an advocate for PCOS awareness? What specific moment or experience that inspired you to become one?

A lot of women who I talked to in regards to PCOS are mostly misdiagnosed a lot. Even some doctors were normalizing the irregularities of PCOS. That it's normal, even though it's not. It's your body telling you that something's wrong. Since a young age, I grew up thinking that I'm either categorized as a woman who has normal period cycles vs a woman who has irregular period cycles. Parang 'yan lang ang two boxes, but those two types are normal. But by doing a lot of self-research, I found groups of women in the States, in the Philippines— actually everywhere. When we actually talked about it, we thought, "*This is not normal.*" Awareness [about PCOS] really started around 2018, this was when people started talking about PCOS more. So we realized that there was something wrong. We were right all this time. There was something wrong with us, but some doctors weren't listening to us. I became an advocate for PCOS. In order to advocate for something, you yourself should be passionate about what you're advocating for. I'm a person with three different advocacies: Women's Health specifically for PCOS, Endometriosis, and Adenomyosis; Mental Health, because it ties along with PCOS; and Education. Since PCOS is still grossly under-researched, I'm really glad that there are people from the younger generation who are trying to make a change.

A PCOS
ADVOCATE'S
STORY



What were some of the biggest obstacles you faced in managing your PCOS and how did you overcome them? How has PCOS affected your mental health and what steps have you taken to improve it?

So, growing up, I just thought it was a teenager thing because that was how the older generation explained it to me. That I was a growing teenager so I have all these hormones and changes [going through my body], but I knew that wasn't it. I was just confused about a lot of things. I tend to overthink. And I don't know why compared to everyone else, I feel things deeper and there are days wherein I have overwhelming emotions. Later in life, it built [into] my MDD (Medical Depressive Disorder). The doctor said it was a chemical imbalance. At that time, I didn't understand what they were saying and I was even more confused. Ayon pala, when you have PCOS, there are different hormones that get affected or triggered. So for those who have PCOS, because their physical appearances change a lot, we tend to feel like "*What's happening to me?*" So it does play a big effect as well with one's mental health. And keeping up with that is hard, especially when you are told that you are sick.

How do you stay motivated and confident while dealing with the challenges of PCOS?

I have always been aggressive with awareness. I make sure to tell women they shouldn't be scared to get themselves checked. I always do my best to spread the word that PCOS isn't too scary. That's what most women are afraid of, especially pag Pinoy diba. Some think PCOS is equal to death. It's exaggerated, but it's true!

How do you approach conversations with healthcare providers about PCOS and ensure that your needs are being met?

I'm not gonna lie, unfortunately, they are what you call "cold". There was a time, the first time I found out about PCOS, the doctor told me walang cure. So, of course I got overwhelmed and scared, then they prescribed me with pills and all that. They also said that if it didn't work, they were going to prescribe me another set of pills. When they explained why I needed to try different pills, they said that it was because it was to provide for different types of hormones—which was still overwhelming information for me. It's only later that I found out that the pills were temporary pala. I eventually sought out 7 doctors, and one even told me I had endometrial cancer. The delivery was so coy, so straightforward, no emotions, no nothing. When I asked if there was any cure for it, they just told me to take the pill, eat healthy, and exercise.

Much like other testimonials, Trixia had expressed their concerns when it came to their condition, but was unfortunately met with repetitive results and answers from doctors and people around her. She shared with us her trial-and-error phase with dietary plans from being vegan at one point to eventually settling down to being a flexitarian, which means she consumes food that she wants but in moderation or in portions. She also discussed how she went from trying out different exercises and doing everything she could do to reduce the risks from having PCOS, but was met with disappointments and helplessness when it backfired and made everything worse for her journey midway. By the 7th doctor, Trixia was diagnosed with Endometriosis and Adenomyosis; which unlike PCOS, pain can be felt with the two conditions.

In your experience as an advocate, what are some common misconceptions about PCOS that you've encountered and how do you address them?

First, when you're feeling any sort of pain when you're bleeding or not bleeding, **you need to see a doctor.** Feeling pain is your body's way of telling you that there's something wrong with your system. Don't ignore your pain. Second of all, if you are experiencing unwanted hair growth, and even if people tell you that it's genetic, you should still have it checked because it could possibly be a hormonal imbalance. **Overall, it's the pain talaga that I don't think people should ignore.** Don't follow the usual mindset of the Philippines na you should only go to the doctor kapag malala na ang sakit.

I HOPE
PEOPLE
PRACTICE
TO BE KIND.

How do you think society can better support and empower women with PCOS?

First, spreading awareness is really how we can support each other. The little ways that could affect others big time is being gentle and being kind to somebody. With PCOS, there are women who are not affected with the metabolic aspect, but like me, I was always large and in-charge. I used to be thinner back then and nothing changed in my appetite, but I just grew bigger. I just didn't know PCOS could make it harder to lose weight. Even though you have the same eating habits as you [had] when you were smaller, you just gain [weight] for some reason. Yet, you can still encounter people who are insensitive and would call you out on your figure or how you look. It takes a toll on one's mental health, really. I hope people just practice to be kind. No need to comment about their looks or anything about their personal life.

Trixia created an advocacy page dedicated to women with PCOS called **The Cysterhood Philippines**, formerly named PCOS We Are Strong. This group not only has women with PCOS as followers, but there are tons of husbands and boyfriends of women with PCOS who are now closely following and supporting the group as they continue to be educated about the condition.

How do you think technology and social media have impacted the PCOS community and advocacy efforts?

So, when I started looking for groups— and I meant I literally scoured for groups— the oldest I found was a group from 2010; however, it's always been medically-adjacent or heavy on medical-related topics. Then on Tiktok, I came across multiple people on Tiktok that talk about PCOS. People are engaging with the videos on the comments, people are actively inquiring or asking about PCOS. They're really learning more about PCOS thanks to social media. It's educating a lot more people compared to other social media platforms.

What would you like to see happen in the future for women with PCOS, both in terms of research and advocacy efforts? What are some future directions or goals you have for your PCOS advocacy work?

I want healthcare for women like us to be easier and more convenient. I'm actually the first woman to start a petition to have PCOS, Endometriosis, and Adenomyosis to be part of the PWD system here in the Philippines. I also didn't know I was the first. I'm not only an advocate, I also want to see changes in the system. The 20% discount could really help a long way for many women who have PCOS. Awareness efforts as well. So, when we mention PCOS, people would already know about it. No more 'Huh? What's PCOS?' moments.

Is there anything else you would like to add about overcoming obstacles or life with PCOS in general?

I call PCOS women PCOS warriors. To all PCOS Warriors, you are beautiful, you are strong, and you are mighty. Live your life the way you want. Don't second guess anything. What you feel is what you feel, what you have is what you have, but it does not define you. You define you, no one else does. Eventually, we are going to see a cure soon. So, keep calm and soar as you're meant to soar. You're meant to achieve great things, so don't let PCOS stop you.

**WHAT YOU FEEL
IS WHAT YOU FEEL,
WHAT YOU HAVE
IS WHAT YOU HAVE;
BUT DON'T LET IT
DEFINE YOU.**

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome

A Condition That No One Talks About...



Upon

growing up, all I wanted was to fit in. Not to be at the center of attraction, but to blend into the blurry background of society. It was hard enough to do so being queer so I valued every attempt at normality. I took pride in having a normal body that functioned well undeterred by my own mistreatments at times. I was hefty in size yet I felt comfortable in my own skin, in disregard of the constant mockery of adults much to their chagrin. The vicious reminders of untimely death and the overused threat of being unlovable, those were always the scenarios spun according to their narrative. Despite that, my body was still normal. I know so like the back of my hand that I had come to wipe my tears with at the times I would get angry at people for projecting their silly standards onto a developing teenager.

Being a medical student was a double-edged sword with a blessing on one and curse bore on the other. It was a blessing that I learned about my body more than the average person—how it functions, how it responds, and what is normal. The curse, the heaviest burden was that I became aware of how my body began to deteriorate in front of my eyes. First was the unmanageable weight gain, my weight had loved me more than past lovers as I say in jest. Next was the hair that I loved the most. Although short, I had adored its lustrous appeal and yet no matter how brilliant it was, it slowly fell. With a single tread, it began to fall in the spaces of my fingers and settled in between. Third was the insatiable appetite for all things sweet and confectionery, an odd ball that became an inkling because I was never fond of it at all in my life but I found myself snacking on them for comfort. Perhaps the most glaring sign, an unmissable, was that my period became erratic. It was no longer a cycle that I could even anticipate just by looking at the calendar. What was once a predictable schedule became some kind of waiting game for me. As much as I'd like to deny, there was truly something amiss and the sinking feeling of knowing made it worse.

A doctor's visit in 2022 confirmed the conjecture in my thoughts for over two years. As much as I loved being right, oh how badly did I want to be proven wrong in that very moment. A thousand second opinions cannot guarantee a changed result and I disliked that there was no better explanation other than I had PCOS. How could I love the idea of my hormones interfering with my life, like a walkie-talkie programmed in the wrong channel? All I wanted was to be normal—to feel normal; rid of the pain that was taught to us women to be a sign of the miracle of life yet made me feel like my life was anything but a miracle. The mere thought of women's pain being undermined into irrationality was a horror that I do not wish upon any person. Having PCOS meant your body was a maze more than it ever was, unable to find its bearings; even so people were quick to put the blame on you. You have been dismissed one too many times for dysmenorrhea with voices dictating that it was common, but the truth could not be any further from it. The scale always dwindles, not knowing which side to favor yet most often not, it wasn't on yours. Hopes of motherhood are crushed while you are left insulted and your womanhood diminished into being a subservient barren.

As the journey continues, I am proud to say that while PCOS may persist, so too I shall resist. No amount of deterioration can measure my worth, nor can it take it away from me. For every cysts that take root, strength and grace will emerge as its fruit. Let it be known that in this battle, you are not alone; we will walk hand in hand through the unknown. Even in pain we will stand tall, as we regain all control. Warriors united by a cause, to rebel against PCOS at all cost. And when the world tells you otherwise, remember: **You are a woman empowered, in the face of adversity you shall bloom like a flower.**

Submitted by Olive

SPEAKING OUT ABOUT PCOS



Written by Angelica Baloloy

T

alking openly about your health issues can be difficult especially when it comes to PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome). Especially considering multiple cultural settings owing to issues including stigma, privacy concerns, and ignorance. Like in many other locations, there can be factors in the Philippines that influence how women approach talking about their health.

According to Dr. Maria Christian Abalos, who is an OBGYN for 23 years, having PCOS's symptoms like irregular menstruation, acne, hirsutism, and even infertility may experience shame or embarrassment regarding medical disorders.

You may be discouraged from seeking assistance sometimes. We understand that there are women who have limited access to healthcare services, particularly specialists who offer a safe space for them to open up about PCOS. We are hoping that medical fields will help promote better healthcare services and resources for women with PCOS.

As much as we are privileged of having easy access to information, Dr. Abalos sees that most women often get caught up with their misbeliefs on their condition. Having the most efficient and reliable healthcare professional will help you realign things together.

"Tapos yung mga nandito [within the city] minsan don't know what PCOS really is, kasi minsan nagkakaroon ng imbalance ang kanilang mga beliefs regarding PCOS."

Dr. Abalos shared some factors that could prevent them from fully opening about their condition. These are cases where women who may lack financial resources There are scenarios where they are having this problem but they cannot seek medical help because of distance also financial. So if they cannot reach us, we could not reach them. Information Dissemination plays a significant role.

Although it can be difficult to talk about health problems, it's important to remember that you're not alone and there are resources available to help. Speaking to understanding healthcare providers can create a safe space for women to share their experiences with PCOS.

How do you think the medical community can improve their understanding and treatment of PCOS?

With regards to management, we need to manage the case if it is properly diagnosed. Yung iba kasi kumbaga they're already treating without proper diagnosis, so paano yun? So how do we diagnose, stick with the rotterdam strategy. Ang pinakaimportante kasi dun ang ultrasound findings. I think it would be much better mas confirmed kung ang maguultrasound ay OB-GYN. We call them OB Gyne sonologists because they follow the criteria.

By encouraging open discussion and improving healthcare resources, we can break down the barriers that prevent women from seeking treatment and reduce the stigma surrounding this disease.

Dr. Abalos have seen cases on medical services in the Philippines particularly, the women's health which are concentrated within NCR. Residents in remote areas need the information, as a whole on what it is, what are we going to do about it.



The MROON of Living With PCP



Submitted by Alaina De Luna



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Truth be told, Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome is not being taken seriously despite how common it is among women and its impact in our lives. We were often told to just have a balanced diet and lose weight, in order to overcome its effects in our health. However, it's not as easy as it sounds.

Back in December 2021, I was diagnosed with PCOS at the age of 18. What prompted me to finally visit the doctor was because I did not have my period for 9 months. I was used to not having periods for 3-5 months even back then. So, when it lasted that long, I finally had courage to have a health check up.

Why did I let it last that long? Well, it was a very confusing time for me. Because all along, I was exercising one hour every single day, doing HIIT workouts. I did it for more than 3 months with no fail. My lifestyle was better than how it was before the pandemic started. I was doing everything to be healthy. However, my period still didn't come every month and I was losing less weight than I should've been if I worked out that hard. I still had bloating and for some reason, it always happens every after workout.

My situation took a toll on me. I was constantly asking myself what was wrong with me. Then, I definitely knew that it was not just an irregular period that would fix itself sooner or later in my life. Upon doing a little research, I realized that I might have PCOS but of course, I didn't want to self-diagnose. However, even after I was diagnosed with PCOS by a doctor, I was given the same answer as what I saw on the internet on how to treat it: Take pills, have a balanced diet, and exercise regularly.

Eventually, I realized that I was still left confused and I was left with so many unanswered questions. Just like, how can I workout and lose weight when the last time I did it, I might have made my PCOS worse because of the constant spike in my cortisol levels? How can I treat my PCOS by having a balanced and healthy meal as a woman in a lower-middle class, when I could only afford to eat what's on our table?

Until I found people in social media who advocate for PCOS awareness, as well as support groups where women share their experiences. I realized how complex PCOS is and how it could vary among women who have it. I was glad upon knowing that I found people whom I could relate to and there are so many of them.

Though, at the same time, I was sad with the fact that despite how common PCOS is, women who have it are still not educated well with how to treat their condition by healthcare professionals. We are given band aid solutions just like taking birth control pills and worse, surgical removal of ovaries. Aside from that, women with PCOS are still very much stigmatized and shamed, especially for its physical manifestations. In the Philippines, there's a staggering estimate of 4.5 million women with PCOS. With this great deal of numbers, it is very alarming that the public are not as aware with this disorder as one may think and it's not given enough attention by the country's healthcare system.

I hope that one day, people will be educated with PCOS as a serious condition, as much as they stigmatize women who experience it right now. Women deserve more options when it comes to healthcare regarding this reproductive disorder.

**Every woman deserves to
bloom **freely and confidently**,
despite the challenges they're facing.**

This project was made by students of
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