

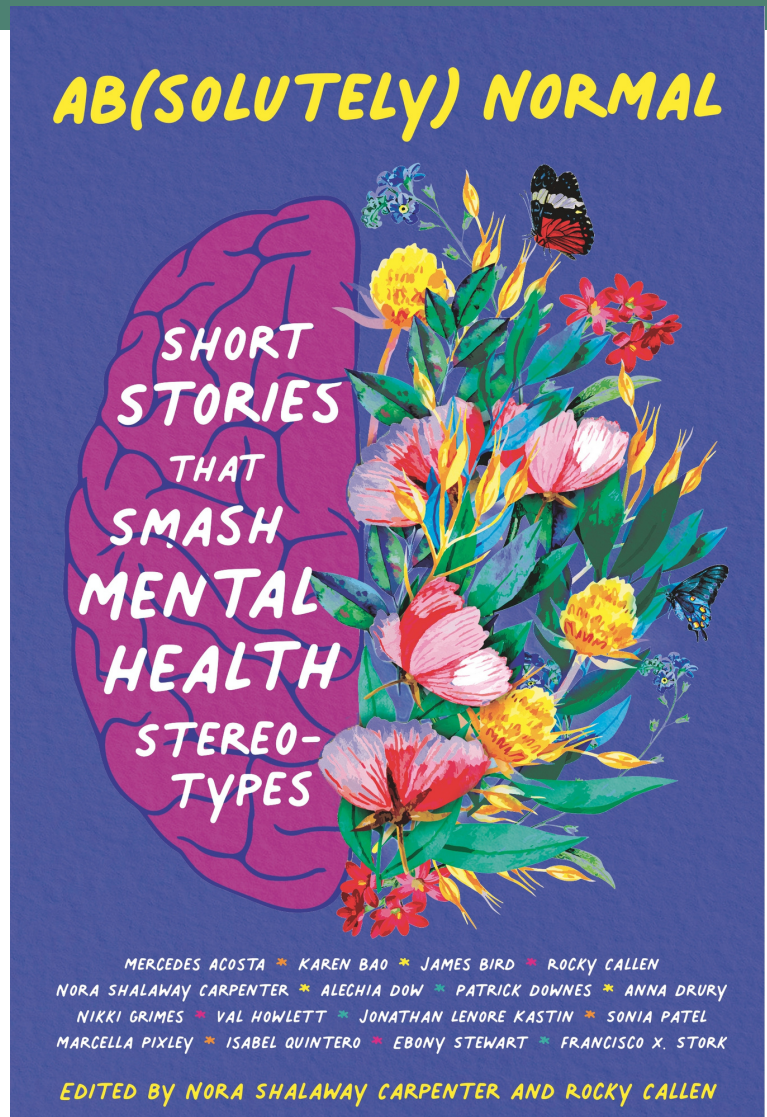
## About the Book

A teen activist wrestles with protest-related anxiety and PTSD. A socially anxious vampire learns he has to save his town by (gulp) working with people. As part of her teshuvah, a girl writes letters to the ex-boyfriend she still loves, revealing that her struggle with angry outbursts is related to PMDD. A boy sheds uncontrollable tears but finds that in doing so he's helping to enable another's healing.

In this inspiring, unflinching, and hope-filled mixed-genre collection, sixteen diverse and notable authors draw on their own lived experiences with mental health conditions to create stunning works of fiction that will uplift and empower you, break your heart and stitch it back together stronger than before. Through powerful prose, verse, and graphics, the characters in this anthology defy stereotypes as they remind readers that living with a mental health condition doesn't mean that you're defined by it. Each story is followed by a note from its author to the reader, and comprehensive back matter includes a collection of relevant resources.



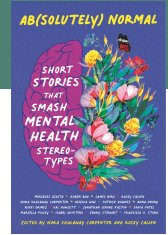
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Nora Shalaway Carpenter is the author of *The Edge of Anything*, a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Young Adult Book of the Year and Bank Street College Best Children's Book of the Year. She is the contributing editor of the acclaimed anthology *Rural Voices: 15 Authors Challenge Assumptions About Small-Town America*, which was named an NPR Best Book of the Year and a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selection, among numerous other honors.

Rocky Callen is the author of *A Breath Too Late*, which was named a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Young Adult Book of the Year and a Chicago Public Library Best Book and was featured in The Mujerista's 2020 list of the ten best young adult books by Latinx authors. A former behavioral coach, she founded the HoldOn2Hope Project, which unites creatives in suicide prevention.



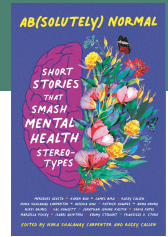
## Discussion Questions

1. The contributors to this anthology wrote their stories with the mission to "break the silence and stigma around mental health care." Take time to discuss "stigma" and how mental health is presented within popular media. In what ways are your shared examples problematic or inspiring depictions of mental health? In what ways are these examples of mental health and mental health care stigmatizing or non-stigmatizing?
2. "I choose me.  
I choose me.  
I choose to love life to the fullest."  
Ebony Stewart's words from "A Body With Wholes" echoes throughout the anthology as characters choose to love themselves and purposefully love others. Examine the role of "self-love" and love of others as it relates to the stories shared within the anthology. What form does this love take within each story?
3. Much like we may call upon loved ones and trusted adults for support, the characters featured in this set of stories often rely on trusted friends and family in times of need. Whether it is a best friend, parent, or coach, the characters demonstrate ways in which others aided them in navigating through difficult circumstances and experiences. Recall one or more of the stories from within the anthology, and identify a character who served as a support system. Discuss ways today's adolescents can seek mental health support in times of need. Collaborate to identify supports located within your own community.
4. Throughout the anthology, authors reveal the theme of hope and recovery, as opposed to a message of despair or a "magical cure." Discuss the ways in which hope and recovery are represented within the stories.
5. The contributors utilize a variety of genres. This anthology includes poetry, graphic text, letters, transcripts, plays, and more. In what ways does this variety of artistic medium serve to enhance or support each author's message and storyline?
6. In what ways do the stories reveal or challenge gender roles and stereotypes?
7. Several characters depict their mental state as a "superpower." In what ways do these depictions "disrupt the narrative" about mental health that is often inaccurately portrayed in books and popular media?



## Discussion Questions continued

8. “Self-care” is a strategy used as a means to maintain positive mental health. A “coping strategy” is used to manage emerging symptoms or mental health issues. Throughout the anthology, characters share ways in which they find outlets or routines that serve as either self-care or coping strategies. Identify specific characters from the anthology. Discuss whether you believe the characters are engaging in self-care, personal coping strategies, or both. How might such routines serve as a positive outlet for each character’s mental health? What are your own means of self-care?
9. Nature plays a vital role in a variety of ways throughout the anthology. How do these forces or representations of nature speak to the characters or themes of the stories? How do they reflect the behaviors or thinking found among the characters?
10. “Avalanche” is a unique contribution to the anthology in that the author shares the perspective of a character who navigates her own declining mental health as well as her relationship with a parent experiencing a mental health disorder. Discuss the similarities and differences in which characters experiencing mental health needs, and those navigating the mental health of a loved one, engage in self-care practices and/or coping strategies.
11. Just as characters throughout the anthology choose to reveal their truths, either in confiding through spoken word, letters to a friend, or confiding in a mental health specialist, the authors of each story have elected to shine light on their experiences with the reader. Discuss the value in speaking one’s truth. What is the significance in the authors and characters choosing to reveal their experiences with others?
12. In “My Sister Rafaela is a Good Person,” Mama Hilda says, “To be truly wise is to accept all parts of you, the dark and the light, and allow them to heal together.” Discuss the significance and/or importance of this quote and how it relates to the stories throughout the anthology.
13. In “Back of the Truck,” Marichu’s grandmother proclaims, “Therapy ain’t just for white people.” Stories throughout the anthology substantiate this claim as they depict mental health needs and supports through a diverse array of voices and experiences. Discuss the cultural nuances of mental health and mental health support as depicted throughout the collection of stories.
14. Language is powerful. Throughout the stories, characters reference a need to change stigmatized terms for mental health disorders and reconsider word choice. Discuss the impact of language on deconstructing stereotypes and stigma surrounding mental health.



## Discussion Questions continued

15. Using several characters throughout the anthology as a guide, discuss how numerous influences (biological/genetic influences, cultural and family dynamics, psychological stressors, and one's social environment) may intersect to contribute to the shape and presentation of a character's mental health struggles.
16. In "We are Stardust," the narrator states, "Life is a struggle, but I am strong enough for the fight." Choose two stories and compare the ways in which their protagonists have elected to continue in their fight. How do they demonstrate strength or resiliency in the face of potential adversity?
17. The editors placed "The Call: A One Act Play" as the final story within the anthology. Discuss the ways in which this story serves as closure to the anthology. How do the themes in this story connect to major themes that carry across the anthology?
18. Discuss the ways in which the authors' notes added to or enhanced your understanding of each of the pieces. How did each note contribute to the overarching goals of the text?
19. Consider the title of the anthology, **AB(SOLUTELY) NORMAL: Short Stories that Smash Mental Health Stereotypes**. Discuss the ways in which the characters and stories depicted throughout the anthology connect back to this title. In what ways do these stories serve to "smash mental health stereotypes"?
20. After reading the stories throughout the anthology, how might readers follow a call to action? What are some steps readers can take to further the conversation surrounding mental wellness?

## About the Guide Authors

**Susan James, PhD**, is a former ELA teacher and current Associate Professor of Literacy at the University of West Florida. Susan is the Director of the Emerald Coast National Writing Project and is known as The Book Dealer due to her expertise in middle and Young Adult Literature.

**Brooke Eisenbach, Ph.D.** is a former ELA teacher and current Associate Professor of middle and secondary education at Lesley University. Brooke's research interests include aspects of middle level education that encompass mental health literacy through adolescent literature and teaching and learning within the virtual classroom and community.

**Jason S. Frydman, PhD, RDT/BCT, NCSP** is a registered drama therapist, nationally credentialed school psychologist, and an assistant professor of expressive therapies at Lesley University. Jason's research interests include the use of creative arts therapies in the schools, trauma-informed approaches to school-based intervention, and adolescent mental health literacy.