

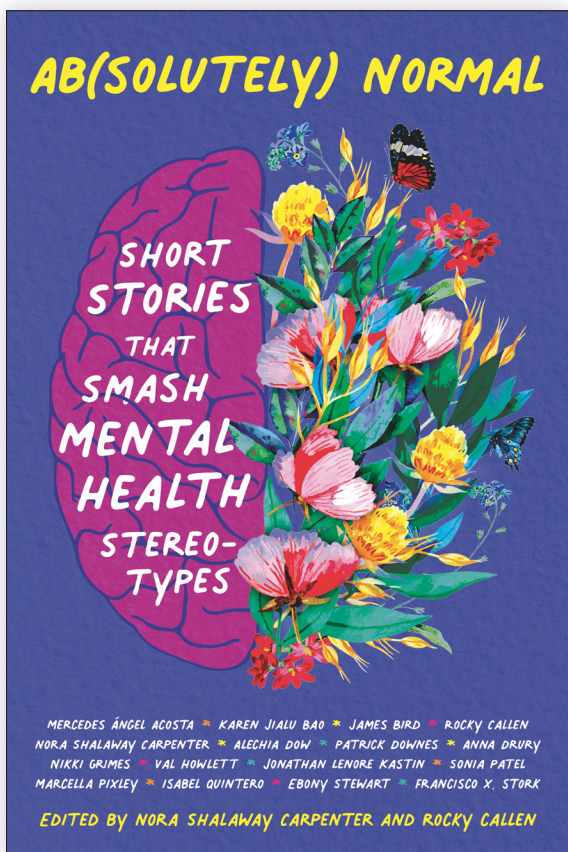
Talking About

AB(SOLUTELY) NORMAL



with Your Teen

Welcome to this extraordinary collection of stories focusing on young people and their mental health. We hope you'll be inspired to learn how this book can serve as a bridge for important conversations in your family, especially with your teens. Reading and then talking about stories can make it easier for teen readers to express their own experiences. They can learn valuable problem-solving skills from the characters' struggles and successes, and they can see that they are not alone. We adults can also benefit from the experiences of the young people on these pages. We hope the following suggestions will spark new possibilities for connection and meaningful conversation.



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- * First, take time to read the book by yourself, then think about the stories and themes. What do they mean to you, your teen, and your family? There may be parts of the stories that have great significance for you and are worthy of self-reflection.
- * Decide how you will approach bringing the book into your teen's life—will you read it together or separately and then talk about it later?
- * Be open and allow young people to find their voices and tell you what they think. Remember that there isn't a right or wrong way to interpret the stories. Teens may find it difficult to express their own emotions and thoughts. Often, it's easier to have a conversation about the characters' emotions and dilemmas rather than trying to make it about the specific people in your life.
- * What experiences in the book are similar to those in your family? Think about how the characters are like or not like the young people in your life. Like most experiences and people, they are probably a mix.
- * Ask yourself what you—and what might your teen—have learned from a specific story, its protagonist, their friends, and their family.
- * Listen to your teen without interruption, then share as much as you can. Sharing our stories can be fraught with shame, embarrassment, and even fear, but in the sharing, we can find support and connection.

The questions and suggestions that follow can help you explore these stories with the young people in your life and hopefully lead to more in-depth discussions. Think of them as invitations to explore rather than as a set of directions.

Shall we begin?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

1. A. In “They Call Me Hurricane,” Aida sees herself as a storm who directs her sadness and anger into boxing. She understands that medication, exercise, and support are keys to her well-being, and she knows how to calm herself with breathwork. When you hear your teen engaging in negative self-talk, encourage them to try a different approach. Ask your young person, “What strategies have you tried to calm and slow your own breathing? What practices have helped you shift out of distressing emotions?” If they come up empty, that’s an opening to look for some new self-calming tools.
1. B. Grief and loss have been present in Aida’s life since the death of her father. She uses rituals to honor and grieve him. What are the ways that you or your young person grieve?
2. A. The narrator in “A Body with Wholes” knows a great deal about her body. She recognizes that it is “perfectly imperfect” and says, “I kinda love it” (page 17). Social media has done a disservice to young people. Awkwardness and discomfort with body changes during adolescence are universal phenomena, and yet these topics are often driven underground or airbrushed out of view. Invite the young person you care about to go through advertisements on social media specifically looking for the objectification and artificial “editing” of bodies through airbrush filters, lighting, and makeup.
2. B. So many things change during adolescence—voice, skin, hair, shape. Try to normalize these experiences. When a teen is questioning their body, clothing can be a starting point. When your teen is trying on clothing, avoid leading with observations of clothing being “too tight,” showing too much skin, or not fitting right, which can be experienced as critical. Instead, try something more neutral, such as “What do you like best about these pants?”
2. C. Ebony Stewart’s “Breathe” highlights the importance of breathwork, which is mentioned over one hundred times throughout this book. It is a valuable strategy you and your teen can keep with you at all times. Why is breathwork so effective? It’s a one-size-fits-all tool for calm, relaxation, and reducing anxiety. It’s also free. Add mindfulness and the positive effects will last beyond the breathing practice itself. Have you tried breathwork? If you are new to this natural practice, you may want to begin with this breathing exercise: First, take a slow, deep breath in through your nostrils and allow your belly to fill with air. Hold your breath for a moment or so, whatever is comfortable for you. Then slowly and gently release the air through your mouth. Try doing this for one minute straight and notice what sensations you feel in your body. There are many breathwork exercises on the internet, with different versions for all ages and interests.
2. D. Ebony Stewart points out in “Note to Self” that self-compassion is the foundation of our well-being. When a teen practices self-compassion, they recognize they are not alone in their struggles and that there is a shared humanity. Remind young people that when mistakes happen—and they happen to all of us—we can learn from them. Many accomplished and successful people talk about how they’ve learned from their mistakes. Stay away from that well-worn saying “It’s not the end of the world,” because it might feel to your teen like it actually is. The key message is how important it is to be kind to yourself.
3. In “Spidey Sense,” Flor is keenly aware of her obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) behaviors and how others might react when they see her. She does discuss her OCD and her medications with her mental health team, but she wrestles with whether and when to share her thoughts with her best friend, Jax, fearful she will lose his friendship. When a parent notices a young person exhibiting unusual behaviors, a possible conversation opener might be “I noticed that you are doing a lot of checking [or washing, physical tics, counting, touching, whatever the repetitive behavior is]. Please tell me when it happens. There are mental health professionals and medications that can help you with those symptoms. Why don’t we get more information?” Another takeaway of “Spidey Sense” is that sometimes teens have difficulty opening up to the people they care about the most for fear of being judged. Often, they need parents, caregivers, and friends to come to them.
4. As Vijali points out in “Nothing Feels No Pain,” adjusting to a parent dating a new person can take time. Vij has a number of tools that help her cope—music and, for a time, her friend Nari are comforts for her. Some of her other coping mechanisms are unhealthy and hidden—like her cutting. Vij’s story shows us how our bodies remember experiences that may have happened to us before we had words to describe them. As Vij’s mother did, parents and caregivers often try to protect their children from traumatic memories. When her mother finds



Vij cutting, she can only utter the words “Why? . . . Why didn’t you come to me?” (pages 62–63). But the “why” question feels accusatory. Instead, parents and caregivers can take their time, be present, and sit close to their teen, perhaps leading with something like “I am so sorry. Help me understand what’s going on . . .”

5. In “Peculiar Falls,” seventeen-year-old Max is quiet and doesn’t talk very much. He’s teased because he’s different. Max admits that even a vampire can find people terrifying. Although this story has supernatural elements, there is a lot of reality in Max’s situation—that of a young person who feels grotesque and is unable to connect with peers, a friend who feels invisible and not heard.

Teens don’t always tell parents and caregivers they are struggling. Sometimes we need to use our powers of observation. When beginning a conversation, there’s no need to interpret, label, or judge their behavior. When in doubt, make an observation: “I’ve noticed that you’ve been quiet. Can you tell me what’s going on?” If the answer is “It’s nothing” or “No, I don’t want to talk about it,” follow up by offering your presence: “I’m here to listen whenever you want to talk.” It’s natural to ask what’s wrong. Adults want to fix things right away for young people, or at least have them feel better. And we often make the assumption that sadness is an emotion that should be erased as soon as possible, out of our own discomfort. Sometimes, sadness deserves a place in our lives and can’t be denied as an authentic response to life events.

6. In “Avalanche,” Shanti Glover is coming to terms with her mother’s schizophrenia and how it has required her to take on much more responsibility than many teens. Shanti is so overwhelmed by holding her life together that everything begins to fall apart—grades, work, relationships. Her friend Gloria is steadfast but understands Shanti needs help. But what is help? Shanti can’t imagine what help looks like, and she is not alone in her confusion. Offering help might seem easy, but asking for (and accepting) help is much more difficult. Communication will be easier when caring adults say *and* show they are available and want to help. It may take some exploration and even trial and error to figure out what might be needed for a particular person at a particular time. Shanti’s story helps readers understand that strength means looking at yourself with courage, honesty, and the knowledge that you don’t have to go on your journey alone.
7. In “Beggars Would Ride,” Kayla takes a risk and tells Emma about her PTSD-ADHD diagnosis and treatment. At first,

Emma appreciates Kayla’s courage and honesty, but then she makes light of her diagnosis, which leads to an erosion of trust in that friendship.

Often, teens can’t tell a friend the real reason they’ve made a specific choice, as when Kayla turns down an invitation for an anxiety-inducing sleepover. When friends push back, asking difficult “why” questions, a wedge may be driven in the middle of that relationship. Parents and caregivers can suggest that their teen doesn’t have to tell every detail of their life but can share that they have a personal reason behind a decision. Adults can also suggest gentle words for letting a friend know they are important, such as “Thank you for the invitation to sleep over at your house, but I’m not comfortable any place but my own bed. I want to tell you the backstory, but just not now. I need a bit more time. Please be patient with me.”

8. In “My Sister Rafaela Is a Good Person,” we meet Ana, who has rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD). It is not a medical diagnosis but a way of describing certain symptoms associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Ana works diligently to find healthy ways to cope, but sometimes those closest to her make getting well even more difficult. Her aunt challenges her doctor’s recommendations to cut back on caffeine. What do you say when relatives or friends question the mental health care your teen is receiving? Begin with acknowledging their concern so they know you heard them, then emphasize the importance of the decision to seek care. Those who minimize or poke fun at mental health care may do so because they don’t understand it. Ana’s doctor clearly demonstrates the essential elements of a therapeutic relationship, one that is characterized by empathy, respect, and trust. He compliments Ana on her progress and the way she protects herself from those around her. Sometimes you might need to protect your teen from judgmental family members, even if that means limiting contact for a while. As Mamá Hilda says, “Fears can take away our wisdom. To be truly wise is to accept all parts of you, the dark and the light, and allow them to heal together” (page 145).
9. In “Verbatim,” the death of Abe’s brother from brain cancer has left a hole in Abe’s life that’s bigger than he could ever have imagined. His world has fallen apart. His grades have plummeted. People of all ages often struggle with guilt, wondering if there is something they could have done to change circumstances or even to prevent a death. They also think about what they wish they’d said or *not* said before a loved one died.



When a freak accident lands Abe in the hospital, he meets Chaplain Julius. For parents and other adults unfamiliar with counseling and psychotherapy, the conversation between Abe and Chaplain Julius captures the essence of a professional caring relationship. The counseling process is a delicate collaboration between the patient and the counselor—listening to each other, being present, reflecting and exploring thoughts and emotions connected to one’s most significant life-altering experiences. Chaplain Julius suggests Abe write down his thoughts. Research and experience have shown that writing can be healing, opening new possibilities for insights, shifts in perspective, and new ways to continue the conversation with a trusted person.

10. In “Back of the Truck,” Isabel Quintero’s character Marichu knows the feeling of anxiety and panic attacks, but doesn’t know what to call them. Her family doesn’t want to acknowledge the panic and anxiety, for fear that Marichu is “crazy” (page 187). So often, family and friends try to explain away frightening behaviors with expressions such as “She just freaked out,” “She wasn’t watching where she was going,” “She was having a moment,” or “She was being dramatic.” Often, people try to explain away symptoms because they are afraid. In this story, Marichu’s mother tries to prevent an emergency room doctor from talking to her daughter. It’s not unusual for parents and caregivers to hesitate to leave their teens alone with a mental health professional and worry about what their young person might say. When Marichu tells her doctor what she couldn’t tell her mother, her mother feels betrayed. Even though these moments can be frustrating, they also present opportunities to rebuild a relationship through timely, honest communication, admitting when you don’t know what to say or do, and offering to problem-solve together.

11. In “Don’t Go Breaking My Heart,” Emma’s rage and destructive behavior from PMDD were on full display in one explosive moment. Everyone witnessed her thrashing and screaming. She was mortified and ran away from her peers and from Gabe. Desperate and confused, Emma cannot understand what was happening to her body, psyche, and soul.

Understanding strange thoughts and feelings can be daunting. If you or your young person’s symptoms are mysterious or confusing, talk about them and write them down and share them with your healthcare provider. It’s often easier if you’ve organized thoughts and questions before an appointment begins. Emma sought treatment and admits to Gabe that she didn’t know how to talk to him about her feelings. The inability to describe one’s feelings can be frustrating. Some

people find it helpful to write their feelings down in a journal or a letter, just as Emma does. Parents and caregivers can suggest this approach to their teens as well.

12. A. “We Are Stardust” is a story that is at once an ethereal fantasy and a story grounded in the reality of what it means to ask for help and open yourself to change. It is a metaphor for self-discovery. Gaining self-awareness often entails asking another person for help, building trust, yet not being entirely sure of where you are heading. But Nova is learning. When stuck with challenging self-doubt, parents and caregivers can help their young people practice *reframing*, a way of looking at something completely differently. Instead of saying “I have nothing,” suggest they try “I am grateful for . . .” (answers might include “clean water,” “a walk,” or “fresh air”). Instead of “I am no one,” try “I am from . . .” Instead of “I am worthless,” try “One of my strengths is . . .” Modeling the skill of reframing yourself is even more helpful.

12. B. There are times when Nova berates herself with insults and criticisms. She calls herself “useless” and “worthless” (page 230). It can be hard for parents and caregivers (or anyone!) to listen to a loved one use such harsh language to describe themselves, but sometimes being present (and showing that you won’t reject them even in their darkest moments) is the best way to help someone through a spiral. The author reminds us of a vital and helpful point: “There’s beauty in difference. There’s beauty in how our stardust combines” (page 233).

13. In “River Boy,” Hank endures name-calling about his ethnicity and his tendency to cry. Eve, who has her own struggles with ADHD, is his unlikely friend and the coolest girl Hank knows. She doesn’t mind Hank’s tears and gives him a few catchy phrases, like “Let it out to get it out” (page 238) and “Tears over fears” (page 248). Such short sayings, or mantras, can help people of all ages endure a hard moment and even propel them through it. Parents and caregivers can tell their teen, “When we’re extremely anxious, it’s hard to do our best thinking, so it can be very helpful to have a phrase to repeat, to help steer you, to calm you.” Eve’s words provided a resource to Hank. Parents and caregivers can ask, “What phrase helps you?” or “What phrases have you heard others—like your grandparents, teacher, or neighbor—use?”

14. When a teen tells a caregiver that they have been sexually assaulted, both teen and caregiver can be overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. What would you say to a young person who tells you that “something bad” happened to them? Know



that they may not be able use the word *rape* or *sexual assault*. In many cases, young people aren't sure how to describe what happened. Talking about it helps them gain clarity. Instead of asking blame-filled questions like "How could you let that happen?" or "Why did you go to his apartment?" sit next to them in a quiet place and try "I am so sorry. Tell me what happened—I am here to listen." Or "Let's talk about what happened. Take your time—I'm here."

As with Ray in "A Bridge Over Silence," some teens will see an assault as the defining event in their lives, separating their before-the-assault selves from their after-the-assault selves. With healing, it is possible to place the assault in the broader context of their lives. It will never be forgotten, but the pain and memories will lessen.

15. A. Claude Bergman is recovering from COVID-19 and dealing with preexisting OCD in "Almost Beautiful." Claude's older sister, Sophia, and Dr. Sokol are her resources and supports. But as her mother is hospitalized and about to be put on a ventilator, Claude says, "It is all my fault" (page 281), and she doesn't respond to Sophia's calls and texts. So many families have dealt with similar situations. If a family is in the midst of a crisis (illness, hospitalization, pandemic), how can parents convey the importance of communication to a teen? Instead of sending a text or voice message demanding "CALL ME BACK NOW," try setting up a communication plan so you both agree how often you'll check in with each other and how you'll communicate.

It is our hope that the collective efforts on this book and discussion guide will allow readers to feel less alone and find comfort in its pages and the ensuing conversations.

15. B. Claude knows the value of nature and how it calms and soothes her. It is a lesson we can all learn from. When Claude sees the fox and her kits near the fallow vegetable garden, she writes down all she sees—their beauty, their loving connection to each other. As she writes, the panic drains from her body. Families can integrate a nature plan into their lives even if they live in the city. Green spaces, blue spaces, sunny windows, walks, and growing plants will let nature in to work its magic on their souls and psyches.

16. "The Call: A One-Act Play" reminds all of us—parents, caregivers, teachers, and teens—of the importance of asking open-ended questions and prompts that facilitate conversation, not stop it. Simple phrases such as *go on*, *tell me more*, *try to explain it*, and *I'm listening* tell the person suffering that you are present and holding space for them. Even though they haven't spoken in a while, by listening and not hanging up, Ellie helps Liza hold on to hope. She recognizes and reframes Liza's dilemma when she tells her, "If you want something from another person, if you're still looking for something, then you're not in the place of no return" (page 303). Ellie also explains that "wanting to give is the same as wanting to live" (page 303). Ellie speaks with empathy, not sympathy, and offers kindness rather than advice. So much depends on the tone and spirit with which guidance is shared.

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