

Educator Guide

AB(SOLUTELY) NORMAL



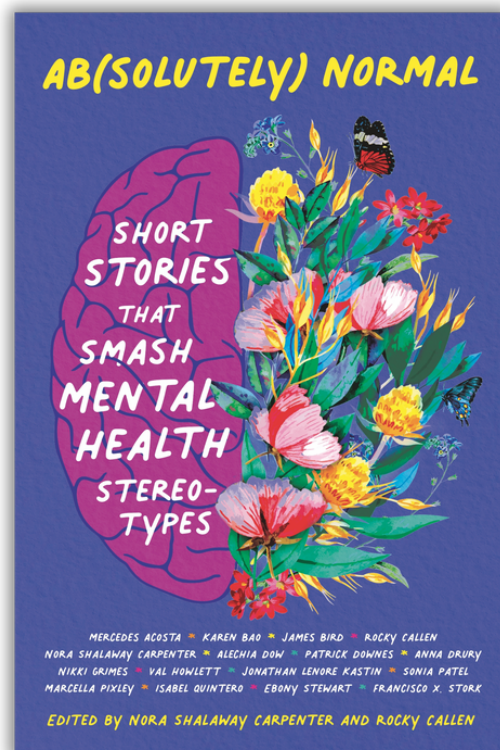
Edited by Nora Shalaway Carpenter and Rocky Callen

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- * 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?
- * "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?

- * 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.
- * In what ways do the stories reveal or challenge gender roles and stereotypes?



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- * 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.
- * 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?
- * 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?
- * “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?
- * 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?
- * “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.
- * 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.
- * 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?
- * 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.

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- * 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.
- * 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.
- * 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?
- * 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?
- * 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?
- * 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”?
- * 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

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