You're More Normal Than You Think

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This book shares general ideas and is not medical advice.

First edition, 2026.

Dedication

For the ones who look at the stars and still feel small, but try anyway.

For those who are tired of fighting, but refuse to lay down their weapons.

For the quiet ones who hold the world together while breaking in silence.

For anyone who had to grow up too fast, and is now trying to find their way back to being a child.

For the version of you that you had to leave behind to survive.

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Introduction

Read this first

When I was young, I was sure I wasn't normal.

I didn't mean it as a boast. It felt more like a diagnosis. Other people seemed to get through their days in some ordinary way, and I seemed to be running a different, stranger machine. What I went through, how I handled my feelings, how I reacted to things: nobody else did that. So I couldn't ask for help, because I couldn't think how to explain it. Who would understand a problem that only one person had?

That belief shaped years of my life.

It was wrong. It took me a long time, most of it spent badly, to find out how wrong. The worry that wakes you at 2 a.m. The comparing. The voice in your head that talks to you in a way you would never talk to a friend. The feeling that you'll be found out. The shame about crying, or about needing anyone. I have lived every one of those, all twelve that are in this book. Life made me go through them. If those years were good for anything, it was this: I know these feelings well enough to write them down, so you don't have to go through them alone and in the dark.

I should be honest about the bottom of it. For a long time nothing helped. I came out of those years completely broken. I questioned my own existence, the purpose of it, life itself. What finally made

the difference was a plain discovery: I was just like you, and like almost everyone else. The people who looked fine were running the same sum I was.

I found it through the people who had been around me all along: friends, family, even strangers. I had just never wanted to ask.

After that I went looking for what other people had been through, and what they had done about it. I went through the studies, the real ones, not the slogans, to find what holds up and what doesn't. This book is what I found, put in the order I wish I'd been given it.

The word that matters most in this book is normal.

I wrote it for people who are trying to get through a Tuesday, keep their promises, not snap at someone they love over the washing up, and feel all right about themselves by the time the lights go off. Whatever age you are now.

It's also for you if you keep things to yourself. If you read more than you talk. If you've wanted to say how you really feel and haven't found anyone you trust enough to say it to. Think of these pages as that conversation, with one difference. The friend speaking is the clearest-headed version of you, not tired or comparing, the one who already knows most of this and only needs it said out loud.

How to use this book

Each chapter ends with a short exercise and four lines to carry into the evening. Longer writing pages and three running lists live at the back of the book; the chapters will send you there when it's time. You don't have to read it in order. Start where it hurts.

For the heavy nights

Some nights are heavier than usual. That says nothing bad about you, and a few small things can lower the weight before morning.

Breathe in through your nose, then take a second short sip of air on top. Let it out slowly through your mouth. Do that for up to five minutes, and stop and breathe normally if you feel dizzy. A long out-breath helps the body settle.

Look for five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear. Say them out loud if you can.

Drink a glass of water. Eat something, even toast. Turn a light on. Put your shoes on and stand at an open door or window for two minutes.

Then write one sentence to tomorrow's you: "Last night was hard. You got through it." Leave it where you'll see it. Your Proof list at the back is the place for it.

Don't decide anything big tonight. Heavy nights end.

One promise: nothing in here asks you to become someone else.

Ahsan Raza

CHAPTER 1

Why It's Normal to Feel Not Normal

> *"I am a man, and feel for all mankind."*
>
> *Terence, The Self-Tormentor, Act 1, Scene 1 (translated by George Colman, 1768)*

You know the feeling. Everyone else seems to have been handed the instructions, and you were out of the room when they went round. Other people look calmer and further along, and you're the one keeping up appearances. It turns up in a crowded room, or at 1 a.m. when you should be asleep and are reading the reviews of a toaster you don't need, and it rarely has a reason you could point to.

You're at a family dinner, or the office on a Monday. Someone asks how you are. "Good, busy," you say, and you smile at about the right moment. On the drive home one thing you said comes back, and you replay it past the garage and the roundabout and most of the way down your own road, because you weren't really there for any of it, you were doing an impression of yourself.

Later, in bed, a quiet question. What is wrong with me?

Probably nothing.

Two versions of you

Most of us live as two people. There's the one people see: the reliable colleague, the son or daughter who never worries anyone, the friend who's always up for it. And there's the one who only comes out when the door's shut, still in work clothes on the edge of the bed, scrolling without reading, a bit lost, sometimes sad without being able to say why.

The first version isn't fake. It's how anyone gets through the day. You can't tell your manager, your in-laws and the man at the corner shop exactly how you feel every time they ask. Playing a role is partly good manners and partly survival. It starts early. Somewhere around the school gate you work out which bits of you get a smile, and you show more of those.

The trouble starts when the gap between the two gets wide. You spend so long being the one who's fine that you start believing everyone else really is fine, and you're the only one pretending. You're holding your inside, all of it, the whole messy drawer, up against everyone else's outside, which is all you ever get to see.

That comparison is never fair. You know about your 2 a.m. worries, the bill on the fridge, the thing you haven't told anyone. You don't know about theirs. So you lose. Every time.

Feeling not normal is about as normal as it gets. The people around you are doing the same comparison. They look across the table at your calm face, the one you put on in the car park, and some of them think you've got it all worked out.

Being ordinary is not a failure, or a consolation prize for missing out on brilliance. The tired person, the person who still hasn't

done what they planned at twenty: neither is a broken version of a human. Up close, that's what humans look like.

So what counts as normal? More than you've been told.

Crying is normal, and not only at funerals. In the car, over an advert for building society loans. Asking for help is normal, even when you're usually the one people ask. Feeling stuck for weeks is normal. So is losing interest in something you used to love and finding it again a year later at the back of a cupboard. Thinking the worst is normal too. Your mind is trying to get you ready for bad news before it arrives. It overdoes it, badly, but it means well.

None of this gets shared. Nobody posts "had a quiet cry in the car park, then bought bread." It happens anyway, to people you know.

Why do we hide it? Mostly because we think we'd be the only one. If everyone else is fine, then showing you're not feels like admitting there's something wrong with you. So you keep it in, and because you keep it in, the next person thinks you're fine as well, and on it goes, round the whole office, round the whole family, everyone protecting everyone else and getting lonelier doing it.

There's a cost. Holding a role all day wears you out, and not only in the body. You can come home from a day where nothing went wrong, drop your keys in the bowl, and feel wrung out, because you spent eight hours being someone slightly to the left of who you are.

And the hiding takes the very thing you wanted. If nobody ever sees the second version, nobody can comfort it. The friend who would have said "me too" never gets the chance. So you go on

believing you're the only one, partly because you made sure nobody could tell you otherwise.

This doesn't mean telling everyone everything. Some people haven't earned your full story, and your cousin's new boyfriend is one of them. But it helps to know which bits are the role and which bits are you, and to have one person, or even one page, where the second version is allowed out.

A book can be one of those places.

Everyone is doing the maths

None of this is a personal flaw. People are built this way.

When there's no clear way to measure ourselves, we look at other people. The psychologist Leon Festinger set this out in 1954, in a paper called "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes" in the journal *Human Relations*. Am I doing all right? Further along than her, behind him? There isn't a ruler for that, so we glance round the room.

So what are we glancing at? In 2012, Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge surveyed 425 university students and published the results in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. The students who had used Facebook for longer, and spent more hours on it each week, were more likely to agree that other people were happier and had better lives than them. So were students whose friend lists included lots of people they didn't know in real

life. Online, people post the wedding and the new job. They don't post the row in the car on the way to the wedding.

In 2011, a team led by Alexander Jordan, then at Stanford, published four studies in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* with a title that does the work for you: "Misery Has More Company Than People Think." People underestimated how often others feel bad. They saw their own negative feelings as more private than their good ones. And the people who underestimated other people's bad feelings tended to feel lonelier and to brood more, while those who overestimated other people's good times tended to be less satisfied with their own lives.

We hold our full story up against everyone else's edited one. You aren't the only one. Yours is just the only inside you can see.

So what do you do with this? Stopping comparing isn't on the menu. People compare; it comes with having eyes. What you can do is make the comparison fair. Each time a post makes you feel behind, put back the bit it left out. And when you can, spend the time with people in person, where the cracks show and the dishes pile up in the sink like yours.

Four people, one Tuesday

Priya sat in her car outside the school gate with the engine off. The other parents were already standing in their usual clumps, and one of the dads was doing an impression of somebody. She found a raisin in her hair from breakfast, picked it out, looked at it, and didn't get out until the bell rang, so she could walk straight past them to the door without having to chat.

Tomas was at his brother's flat for dinner. His brother had just been promoted, and their mother kept saying so, to the table and then to the neighbour who popped in to borrow a pan and stayed for twenty minutes. Tomas said "that's brilliant, really" three times and once, by accident, "that's really brilliant". On the night bus home a man behind him was eating chips, and Tomas didn't open the group chat when it buzzed.

Aiko worked the early shift at a pharmacy. At 6 a.m., counting the float into the till, she found a message from an old university friend. A photo of a new house, keys held up to the camera. She typed "so happy for you!!" and deleted it, then typed it again with one exclamation mark and sent it. A man was already tapping on the glass because his watch said six and the sign said six.

Kwame stood in the office kitchen while the kettle boiled. He'd just come out of a meeting where he'd nodded at everything and understood about half. A colleague came in, rinsed a mug, and said, "Did you follow any of that?" He opened his mouth. The water came to the boil. He said, "Mostly," and she said, "Lucky you," and went back to her desk. He dropped the tea bag, missed the bin, and had to pick it up off the lino.

Each of them went home that night thinking everyone else had it together.

Look at what nearly happened in that kitchen. Somebody asked the true question. If Kwame had said "Not really," two people would have found out they weren't the only one, right there by the sink, over a dripping tea bag. It's that small, most of the time.

Now turn it round to you. Who in your life looks as if they've got it all worked out? And who would say "me too" if you gave them half

a chance? Put a face to both.

Do something with that now, while it's fresh. Feelings like this stay large while they live only in your head. On a page, they stop growing, and a pattern you can see starts to look less like a flaw and more like a habit.

If now isn't the time, mark this page and come back.

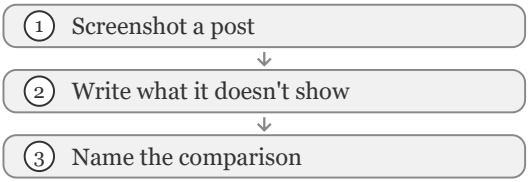
Two minutes: one post, and what it leaves out

Do this now, 2 minutes. Set a timer for two minutes.

1. Open the app you scroll most. Find a post from the person you thought of, or the first one that gives you that drop in your stomach. A holiday, a promotion, an engagement, a new flat. Take a screenshot.
2. Open a note on your phone, or take a piece of paper, and write one line under today's date: *"What this doesn't show:"* Then finish it. A loan, a fight on the way there, the forty photos deleted before this one. You don't have to know. Guess kindly.
3. Say it to yourself, quietly: "I'm comparing my inside to their outside."

Keep the screenshot for a week. Then delete it, and see if you can still remember why it bothered you.

Nobody's asking you to cheer yourself up by imagining their life is secretly awful. Just make the comparison fair.



At a glance

Carry this

- Tonight, tell one person one true thing about your day that the role usually covers.
- The line to remember: you're comparing your inside to their outside.
- Write one thing that helped you, or one thing you got through, on the **Proof list** at the back.
- The full page for this, the roles you play and what helped last time, is in the Practice section at the back, on page 104.

Somewhere today, someone looked at you and saw the calm version of you.

Next up

There's a question this chapter left open. If nothing is actually wrong, why does your mind keep running the worst version anyway, the awkward thing you said, the message nobody has answered since Thursday?

CHAPTER 2

Your Brain Is Built to Worry

> *"There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality."*
>
> *Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius, Letter 13, "On Groundless Fears" (translated by Richard Mott Gummere, 1917)*

A worry arrives, and within minutes you've pictured everything that could go wrong. You tell yourself to stop thinking about it. It gets louder, and then a second worry turns up behind the first: why do I always do this? You won't stop worrying. Nobody does, but it can stop feeling like a fight you have to win every night.

It's twenty to eleven and you've just plugged the phone in to charge when it buzzes against the bedside table. A message from your manager: "Can you come and see me first thing tomorrow?" Nothing else, not even a "nothing urgent."

You put the phone down and that's the end of sleep for a while.

Within ten minutes you've been through the lot. The report you sent on Monday had a mistake in it. Someone complained. There are going to be cuts and you're first. You work out how many months of rent you've got saved, lying there in the dark doing

sums. You decide what you'll tell your family. You rehearse what you'll say in the meeting, then rehearse it again, better, with a slightly braver version of yourself.

At 8.05 the next morning your manager asks if you can cover a colleague's shift next week.

You say yes and go back to your desk feeling foolish and very tired.

An alarm that goes off for toast

Your mind isn't trying to ruin your night. It's trying to keep you safe.

The brain's first job was never making you happy. It was keeping you alive, and for most of human history that meant noticing danger fast, a rustle in the grass or a stranger at the edge of the camp. The people who stopped and thought "that could be bad" lived a bit more often than the people who thought "it's probably fine."

A mind that notices what could go wrong is not broken. Noticing danger is one of the things brains are built to do, and it does it more readily than it notices what's going well.

The trouble is that the danger has changed and the brain hasn't. There are very few lions on the 7.40 to work. Instead there's a short message from a manager, or a test result that hasn't come back. The same old system treats these as threats in the grass. It sounds the alarm, floods you with the urge to plan, and won't let you rest until the danger has passed. Except it often can't pass,

because it hasn't happened yet and exists only as a possibility, so the alarm keeps going.

This is why you can't simply tell yourself to stop worrying. You're asking an ancient survival system to stand down because you said so. It doesn't take orders like that.

It also explains why worry feels useful while you're doing it. Every round of "what if" feels like preparation, as if thinking about the bad thing hard enough will protect you from it. Sometimes it does. Worry gets people to check the lock and book the doctor. But a lot of late-night worry isn't planning at all. It's the same three thoughts going round like socks in a dryer, getting no closer to an answer.

And sometimes the worrying is a way of not doing the thing. An hour spent picturing the awkward call is an hour you didn't make it. It feels like effort, so it feels like you're handling it. Sometimes the plain step, the call or the appointment, is exactly the one the worry is keeping you away from.

Think of a smoke alarm. A good one goes off for burnt toast, because an alarm that waits until it's sure there's a fire is no use to anybody. It's built to go off too often rather than too late, and yours is the same. That doesn't mean you run out into the street every time it beeps. You check the kitchen, see it's toast, and open a window.

Bad is stronger than good

Bad things land harder than good ones. In 2001, Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer and Kathleen Vohs went through a wide range of research for a long review in the *Review*

of General Psychology, called “Bad Is Stronger Than Good.” Everyday events, close relationships, how people learn. In area after area, bad things had a bigger effect on people than good things. Bad events moved people’s moods more than good ones, and bad first impressions formed faster and were harder to change. The authors found hardly any exceptions. The reason they suggested will sound familiar by now: over the long history of our species, paying close attention to bad things helped people survive.

The same year, Paul Rozin and Edward Royzman, at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* about what they called “negativity bias.” When good and bad are mixed together, the result tends to feel worse than the parts add up to. One bad element can spoil a whole thing more easily than one good element can rescue it. Think of an evening that went well, apart from one awkward comment. Which part do you remember on the bus home?

So a mind that leans towards the negative isn’t some habit you picked up; it’s a common tendency of human minds.

Seneca spotted something close to this nearly two thousand years ago. Some troubles, he wrote, torment us before they ought to, long before they arrive, and sometimes they never arrive at all.

You can’t switch it off. What you can do is smaller: when a worry arrives, say it in one sentence, then say what you actually know, fear on one side and facts on the other.

Ten days of writing it down

For ten days, 29 university students carried a paper journal. Each of them met the criteria for generalised anxiety disorder, so worry lived with them rather than dropping by. Four times a day their phones prompted them to write, and they could add more whenever they liked.

Each night they went back over the day's entries, and again twenty days after the last one, to note whether the bad thing had come true.

About 91 per cent of the worries never came true. Roughly nine out of every ten. The study was by Lucas LaFreniere and Michelle Newman at Penn State, published in the journal *Behavior Therapy* in 2020. What these students had was a page, where each worry sat still long enough to be checked.

The part worth borrowing is the checking. Write the worry down, give it a date a week away, and when the date comes, look at what really happened.

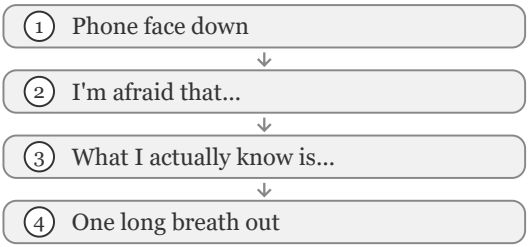
Two minutes: say the fear, then say what you know

Do this now, 2 minutes. Start with something your mind keeps returning to this week: money, or a message that's been on "read" since the weekend. Kept in your head, a worry feels bigger than it is. Put into one plain sentence, it shrinks, and you can see which

bit is fear about the future and which bit is fact about today. Set a timer for two minutes.

1. If the worry came from a notification, a message, an email or a work ping, turn the phone face down first.
2. Say the worry to yourself in one plain sentence, starting with “I’m afraid that…”
3. Now say one sentence that starts with “What I actually know is…” Only facts. No guesses.
4. Take one slow breath out, longer than the breath in, and say, “My alarm is doing its job.”

The worry can stay. It’s just no longer sharing a sentence with the facts.



At a glance

Carry this

- Tonight, copy the worry in one line into the **Worry log** at the back, with a check date a week away.
- The line to remember: fear on one side, facts on the other.
- When the check date comes, write what actually happened.
- The full sorting page for this, one worry, one step or one thing to let sit, is in the Practice section at the back, on page 107.

Your alarm went off today, and you're still here reading.

Next up

So the worry has been said out loud, split into fear and facts. Then a different question comes up. What do you actually want to do about your life, not just tonight but next month?

Most people think they need someone to tell them. Often you already know. Chapter 3 gives you a simple way to hear it. A short letter from the calmer, clearer part of you. Be ready for it to say something you've been avoiding.

End of the sample

That is the end of the free sample.

The full book has twelve chapters, a Practice section and a Read This When index.

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