



Before you begin...

This chapter is shared with you as an invitation, not a conclusion.
If something inside you feels seen, relieved, or gently understood as you read, that is not an accident.

You are not broken.
You may simply be wired differently in a world that taught you there was only one “right” way to be.

Please read slowly. Let the words meet you where you are.
There is nothing you need to fix while you are here.

This excerpt is provided for personal reading only and may not be copied, distributed, or reproduced without permission.

© Sabine Mann, PhD | Matters of Perspective®

PART I — The Problem Was Never You

Chapter 1: The Myth of “Normal”

How Normal Got Promoted Way Past Its Skill Level

Let’s talk about “normal.”

Not because it deserves the attention —
but because it’s been sitting in a position of authority it never actually earned.

“Normal” sounds comforting. Familiar. Reassuring.
Like a soft beige couch you’re supposed to fit into if you just angle yourself correctly, tuck your legs in, and — for the love of all things decent — stop fidgeting.

I spent a good portion of my life trying to sit on that couch properly.
Feet flat.
Hands folded.
Smile appropriate.
Thoughts edited.

Spoiler: it never fit.

And if you're reading this, I'm guessing you've spent at least some time wondering why you couldn't seem to sit correctly either — while everyone else appeared to lounge effortlessly, drink their metaphorical beverages without spilling, and somehow not feel like they were constantly one wrong movement away from social eviction.

For a lot of people, “normal” becomes the unspoken finish line:

If I can just be normal enough, things will finally work.

Normal enough to be liked.

Normal enough to be understood.

Normal enough to stop being “a lot.”

Except here's the part no one bothers to explain:

Normal isn't a standard.

It's a statistic.

That's it.

That's the whole résumé.

Normal just describes what shows up most often in a given group.

It doesn't mean better.

It doesn't mean healthy.

It doesn't mean wise, kind, regulated, evolved, or emotionally literate.

It means average.

And somehow, collectively, we looked at average and said:

Cool. You're in charge now.

Which explains... honestly?

Most of the mess.

How Normal Got Promoted (Without an Interview)

At some point, “normal” stopped being descriptive and started being prescriptive.

What was common became expected.

What was expected became rewarded.

And anything outside that range became... suspicious.

Too loud.
Too quiet.
Too emotional.
Too blunt.
Too slow.
Too intense.
Too sensitive.
Too much.
Not enough.

I learned these words early. Not because anyone sat me down and explained them, but because I felt them.

In the pause after I spoke.
In the glance that lingered half a beat too long.
In the gentle redirection that pretended to be helpful.
Maybe don't say it like that.
You're not wrong, but...
Can you tone it down just a little?

So I learned to say it differently.
Or not at all.
If your life has ever felt like a never-ending performance review where the feedback is vague but the disappointment is clear — congratulations.

You've met normal.

And here's the kicker most people miss:

This rarely comes from cruelty.
It comes from comparison.

Teachers compare.
Employers compare.
Families compare.

Entire systems are built on comparison.

And once comparison becomes structural, difference quietly turns into deficiency.



Not because someone declared, “Let’s shame people.”
But because redesigning systems is hard — and blaming individuals is efficient.

Normal isn’t evil.
Normal is lazy.

Where “Normal” First Shows Up

For most people, “normal” doesn’t arrive as a concept.
It arrives as a correction.

It shows up in classrooms long before anyone has language for what’s happening.

Sit still.
Raise your hand.
Wait your turn.
Pay attention — but not like that.

Some kids absorb these rules effortlessly.
Others learn them through repetition, redirection, and the dawning realization that being themselves seems to create friction.

If this was you, you might remember compliments that always came with conditions:

So bright, but easily distracted.
So creative, but inconsistent.
So capable... if only you’d apply yourself.

The lesson wasn’t that learning looked different.
The lesson was that difference required management.

And so, very early on, many people learned to watch themselves from the outside.
To anticipate expectations.
To adjust before being adjusted.

Not because they were defiant —
but because they wanted to belong.



This is where “normal” gets its first promotion.
Not through authority,
but through repetition.

The Professional Version of “Normal”

Adulthood doesn’t retire normal.
It just gives it a blazer and calls it professionalism.

Professionalism has rules that sound reasonable — until you live inside them:

Be clear — but not blunt.
Be confident — but not intense.
Be passionate — but not emotional.
Be efficient — but don’t rush.
Be collaborative — but don’t slow things down.

For people who naturally process deeply, quickly, emotionally, or intuitively, this becomes another full-time performance.

You soften emails before sending them.
You reread messages for tone instead of content.
You prepare excessively so you won’t be misunderstood.
If you’ve ever left a meeting exhausted — not from the work, but from the monitoring — you know this version of normal well.

From the outside, it looks like competence.
From the inside, it feels like holding your breath.

And once again, the assumption isn’t that the environment is demanding.
It’s that you should adapt better.

Normal Is a Moving Target
(Which Is Fun. Said No One Ever.)

Here’s another delightful feature of normal:

It cannot make up its mind.



What's normal in one family is "rude" in another.
What's normal in one culture is "cold" in the next.
What's normal in one workplace is a fireable offense somewhere else.

I learned this the hard way by being praised in one room and corrected in the next — often for the exact same behavior.

Enthusiasm here.
"Too much" there.

Directness here.
"Insensitive" there.
So I started scanning rooms before speaking.
Adjusting before reacting.
Editing before existing.

And somehow, people are expected to just *know* which version of normal applies where — and switch instantly.
That's not a standard.
That's a scavenger hunt with emotional consequences.

A lot of people grow up thinking they're bad at life when, in reality, they're just bad at mind-reading unspoken rules that change without notice.

The Slow Burn of Self-Blame

Most people don't wake up one day and decide they're defective.

It happens gradually.

It happens when "simple" tasks drain you more than they seem to drain others — and you don't know why.

When you need more recovery time and assume you're just bad at pacing.

When you prepare more, anticipate more, think more — and still feel behind.

I remember thinking:
Why does this take so much out of me when everyone else seems fine?



Not out loud, of course.
I learned early not to say that part.

It happens when bosses praise your work but question your tone, your pace, your “fit.”

When partners love your depth right up until it becomes inconvenient.

When you’re celebrated for what you give — but subtly corrected for how you are.

Eventually, the question shifts.

Not:
Why is this system so rigid?

But:
What’s wrong with me?

That question is expensive.
It costs energy.
It costs confidence.
It costs self-trust.

And it often costs years of unnecessary self-monitoring.

All based on a faulty assumption.

Difficulty Is Not a Diagnosis

Here’s one of the biggest lies normal tells:

If something is hard for you, it must be because you’re bad at it.

But difficulty is contextual.

A marathon runner forced into constant sprints will struggle.
A night owl living in a 5 a.m. world will suffer.
A deep processor dropped into a speed-obsessed, surface-reward culture will burn out.

Not because they’re incapable —
but because the conditions don’t fit.



For a long time, I thought effort was the problem.

If I could just try harder, be more disciplined, be more prepared, eventually I'd catch up.

What I didn't realize was that I was already running with extra weight.

If you built a world entirely for right-handed people and never mentioned it, left-handed people would spend their lives thinking they were clumsy.

That's not a flaw.

That's design bias.

And "normal" is absolutely full of it.

The Cost of Constant Adaptation

Each correction feels small.

Reasonable.

Manageable.

But they stack.

You expend energy deciding how to say things.

You expend energy deciding whether to say them at all.

You expend energy recovering from environments that demand constant self-regulation.

Eventually, life doesn't feel hard because of what you're doing.

It feels hard because of what you're carrying.

And when no one names that load, it's easy to assume it means something about your character.

It doesn't.



It means you were compensating.

Why “Normal” Feels Moral

(Even When It Isn't)

Normal doesn't just present itself as common — it presents itself as good.

Normal people are seen as responsible.

Reasonable.

Mature.

Dependable.

Anything outside that gets framed as a character issue.

So when you struggle, the discomfort isn't just practical.

It's moral.

You don't just feel tired.

You feel wrong.

And that's a heavy thing to carry when no one ever told you the measuring stick was arbitrary.

The Crack in the Story

Here's the relief hiding underneath all of this:

If the standard was flawed,
then the struggle was never a verdict on your worth.

That doesn't erase the exhaustion.
It doesn't undo the grief.
And it doesn't magically make the world accommodating.

But it loosens shame.

Because once you realize you weren't failing at being human — you were failing at fitting into a narrow model of humanity — the story changes.

You stop asking:
What's wrong with me?



And start asking:

What was I adapting to?

That question doesn't accuse you.

It doesn't demand answers.

It doesn't require action.

It just opens a door.

And that door leads us exactly where we're going next.

The Unspoken Question Beneath the Question

There's a question most people never say out loud — not because they don't have it, but because it feels dangerous to voice.

It sounds like this:

If normal isn't real... then what have I been doing my whole life?

That question can feel destabilizing.

Because when you've spent years adapting, adjusting, calibrating, and compensating, realizing the standard itself was flawed can feel less like relief and more like vertigo.

If that reaction is happening in you right now — good.

That means something important just loosened.

People often assume clarity should feel clean and empowering immediately.

But when a long-held belief collapses, the first sensation is often disorientation.

Not because something is wrong — but because you've been standing on a story that quietly rearranged itself underneath you.

Why This Isn't Just a "Mindset Shift"

This is where I need to be very clear — especially for the folks who have spent years being told to *reframe*, *adjust your attitude*, or *just think differently*.



This isn't about mindset.

Mindset is what gets blamed when systems don't want to change.

What we're talking about here lives deeper — in the nervous system, in pattern recognition, in learned vigilance.

If you've spent years scanning environments for what's allowed, what's tolerated, and what's risky, your system didn't do that because you lacked confidence.

It did that because it was paying attention.

Normal didn't just shape your beliefs.

It shaped your anticipation.

And anticipation is not cognitive.

It's embodied.

That's why realizing "it wasn't personal" doesn't instantly undo the tension in your body.

Understanding is the beginning, not the eraser.

The Myth of Effort as Proof

One of the cruelest side effects of normal culture is how it equates effort with virtue — but only when the effort looks familiar.

If your effort shows up as quiet preparation, internal processing, emotional labor, or recovery time, it doesn't get counted.

So you learn to work harder invisibly.

You over-prepare so you won't be caught off guard.

You rehearse conversations before they happen.

You think through outcomes others don't even consider.

And when you're still tired, the conclusion becomes:

I must not be doing this right.



But here's the thing normal never accounts for:

Effort doesn't always reduce friction.
Sometimes it reveals it.

Trying harder inside a misaligned system doesn't make you more functional.

It just makes you more exhausted.

That exhaustion isn't weakness.

It's feedback.

When "Everyone Else" Is a Myth Too

Another unasked question that needs answering:
But everyone else seems to manage... so why can't I?

Here's the quiet truth:

You're comparing your internal experience to other people's external performance.

That comparison is rigged.

You don't see how many people are numbing themselves to get through the day.
You don't see how many are disconnected from their bodies.
You don't see how many have learned to ignore their own signals because that was rewarded.

What looks like ease is often just familiarity with suppression.

Normal doesn't select for wellbeing.
It selects for tolerance.

And tolerance is not the same thing as capacity.

The Grief That Comes After the Relief

Once shame loosens, something else tends to surface.

Grief.



Grief for the energy you spent trying to be easier.
Grief for the versions of you that were trimmed, muted, or delayed.
Grief for how early you learned that being fully yourself created consequences.

This grief doesn't mean you're wallowing.
It means you're integrating.

And here's something people don't say enough:

You're allowed to grieve something that was never explicitly taken from you — but was quietly made unavailable.

Support.
Accommodation.
Understanding.
Room.

You're allowed to grieve not being met.

Why Awareness Can Feel Like a Threat at First

Another thing overthinkers often wonder — and rarely say:

If I stop adapting... will everything fall apart?

That fear makes sense.

Adaptation worked.

Not perfectly — but enough.

It kept you employed.
It kept you connected.
It kept you functioning.

So questioning it can feel like pulling out a load-bearing beam.

But awareness is not an eviction notice.



This book is not asking you to stop adapting overnight, burn down your life, or announce your truth on a megaphone.

Awareness doesn't demand action.

It offers choice.

And choice is different from obligation.

The Difference Between Safety and Familiarity

Normal often disguises itself as safety.

But safety and familiarity are not the same thing.

Familiarity says:

I know what to expect, even if it hurts.

Safety says:

My system can relax here.

Many people confuse the two because unpredictability feels threatening — even when the predictable thing is draining.

If you've ever stayed in environments that exhausted you simply because you knew how to navigate them, you already understand this distinction intuitively.

Your body wasn't wrong.

It was choosing the known cost over the unknown risk.

Again — not a flaw.

A strategy.

Why This Was Never About Toughening Up

There's a persistent cultural narrative that says the solution is resilience.



Be tougher.
Grow thicker skin.
Stop taking things so personally.

But resilience without context becomes self-betrayal.

Resilience is meant to be responsive, not constant.

When someone has to be resilient all the time, what they're actually doing is compensating for a lack of support.

That's not strength.

That's endurance.

And endurance has limits.

The Quiet Intelligence of Your Discomfort

Here's a reframe that tends to land softly — especially for people who've been doubting themselves for years:

Your discomfort was not a malfunction.

It was data.

It was your system saying:

This costs more than it should.

This requires more override than is sustainable.

This environment isn't neutral for me.

Normal teaches people to ignore those signals — especially if they can still perform.

But performance is not proof of fit.

It's proof of effort.

The Moment Before the Pivot



If you're feeling something settle — or stir — right now, you're in a very specific moment.

Not the moment of change.

The moment before it.

The moment where the old explanation no longer works —but the new one hasn't fully formed yet.

This is where many people rush to answers.

Diagnoses.

Labels.

Fixes.

Frameworks.

We're not doing that here.

Not yet.

Because before you build a new understanding, you need space to let the old one collapse without turning inward.

That's what this chapter is for.

Recognition without urgency.

Clarity without correction.

Relief without replacement.

One Last Thing Normal Never Told You

Normal loves to imply that if something doesn't work for you, you're the outlier.

But statistically?

Outliers are far more common than we pretend.

What's rare is not difference.

What's rare is systems flexible enough to acknowledge it.



So if you've spent your life feeling like the odd one out — the difficult one, the intense one, the sensitive one, the one who needed more — consider this possibility:

You weren't an exception.

You were just inconvenient to a narrow model.

And This Is Where We Pause

Not because the story is finished.

But because something important has shifted.

You don't need to do anything with this yet.
You don't need to make sense of everything.
You don't need to decide what it means.

Let it land.

Because once you stop trying to force yourself into "normal,"
the next question isn't:

How do I fix myself?

It's:

What am I actually working with here?

And that question — finally — is an honest one.

Copyright Notice

This chapter is an excerpt from *Different Isn't Broken* by Sabine Mann, PhD, and is shared for personal reading purposes only.

No part of this material may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, stored, or used in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise — without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or educational discussion with proper credit.

Thank you for honoring the heart, time, and lived experience behind these words.

© Sabine Mann, PhD | Matters of Perspective® | All Rights Reserved