

Chapter 1

AM I NORMAL?

Right, let's tackle this bit first because it's probably the thing most teens worry about.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes normal as 'conforming to a standard; usual, typical or expected'.

So, **are YOU normal?**

The short answer is **YES, YOU ARE.**

The longer answer is: 'We might not be what is expected but this just means that in some ways we are different.' And that's a positive, not a negative thing. I'll explain...

We'll look at our appearance first, as an example.

Normal just means 'average'. For instance, normal (average) height for adult males is around 176cm in the UK, and for women it's 161cm.

Neither is an *ideal*. They are just average 'normal' heights.

And normal (average) weight for Asian adult males is 57 kilos. But it's 80 kilos in North America.

Again, you can easily see that neither is an ideal, perfect weight. They are just an average of all male weights in specific countries.

Over the years, doctors and scientists have measured every part of us and come up with a rough average.

This is really handy if, for instance, you need an operation. The amount of anaesthetic used will depend on your weight. Too little anaesthetic for your weight won't knock you out; too much will knock you out for longer than is necessary.

Does that make more sense? I can't say this loudly enough; I'll need to shout:

☆ **NORMAL MEANS AVERAGE!**

What's hard is when we feel we don't *look* average. Because then we feel we stand out as different and we feel self-conscious.

What about if you're extra tall, extra short, fatter than average, thinner than average, wear specs, have spots, wear different clothes or have a different skin colour from most people around you? What if you just feel you don't look the way you want to look?

You may not be average. *But you are definitely still normal!*

And just in case no one's ever explained this to you, it's also really important to remember that as teens you have what's called 'asymmetric growth'. This means when you have that teenage growth spurt – anywhere between, on average, 10 and 19 years – your feet and hands grow first. Then your arms and legs. And finally, your body. **NO WONDER** you can feel awkward and clumsy! And hormones are just a whole other complication!

But what if you were born with any condition that made your features different from others (like Down syndrome or cleft lip) or you've got scars from surgery for cancer, or for burns, or from an accident?

You may not be 'average' either. *But YOU are still absolutely normal!*

It's simply that some of your features might fall outside those measurements for average.

What is extra difficult in this case is that if you look different in any way, others are going to notice you. For instance, most people are able to walk. If you're in a wheelchair, you will attract extra attention because it's different from that 'normal' (average) method of walking.

And it's exactly the same if you have a different skin tone or wear different clothing from the average person in your area. People will notice you more.

They make decisions about you based on bits of (often totally inaccurate) information they've heard somewhere...