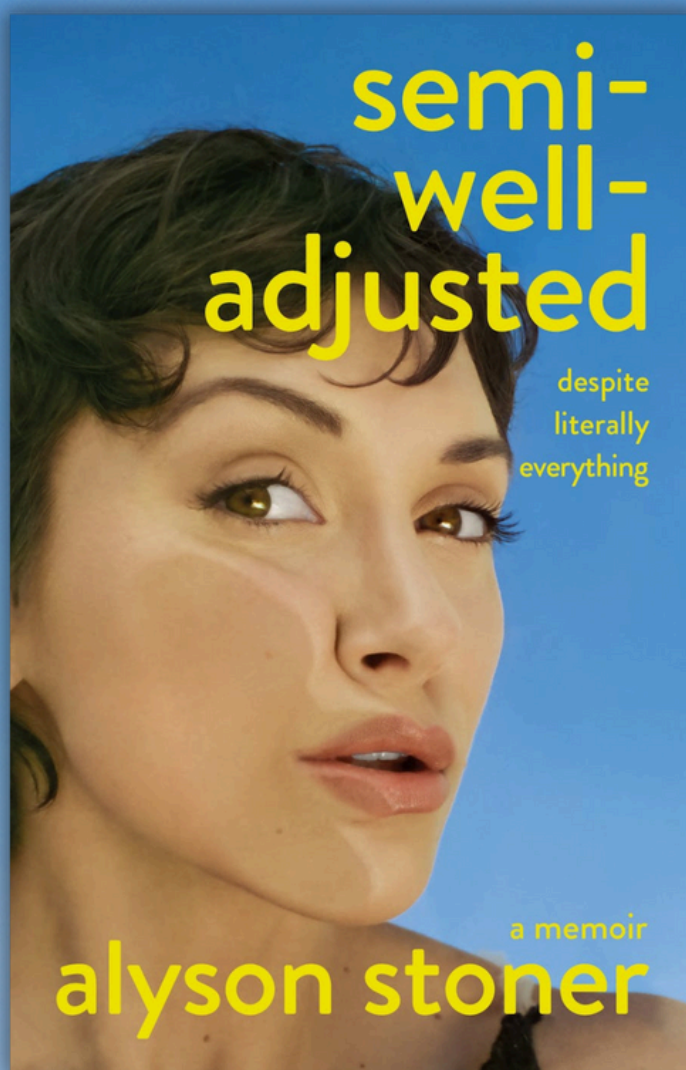


semi-well-adjusted despite literally everything

by Alyson Stoner

Book Club Discussion Guide



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CONTENT NOTE & SELF-CARE MENU

Important: This memoir covers several potentially triggering topics, including descriptions of child abuse, addiction, eating disorders, domestic violence, mental illness, rape, gun violence, religious extremism, surgery, body modification, homophobia, fatphobia, grief, and microaggressions, as well as mentions of suicidal ideation, suicide, death, and general trauma. Please check in with yourself when reading. If anything feels unmanageable, pause and focus on grounding your mind and body into a place of safety. Please skip over any sections that feel harmful or unsuitable for your current life and needs. There is a list of resources available in the back of the book to support.

Before reading, I highly encourage you to create a personalized “self-care menu,” which includes a few supportive practices or people you can reach out to as you engage with the material. Try to identify at least two items you’d like on your menu.

Your Self-Care Menu might include:

- Taking a fifteen minute break between chapters or sections
- Having a trusted friend to process with
- Putting down the book to listen to calming music
- Moving your body in a way that’s soothing and satisfying
- Making a list of things you’d like to explore further with your therapist

Remember: You have permission to pause, step away, or skip content that doesn't support your wellbeing (or your intended reason for engaging with this material). Your overall life balance is more important than finishing this book.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION GUIDE

PROLOGUE

Personal Reflection:

1. What are the five “buckets” (pillars) of your own life? How do you prioritize them when they feel threatened?
2. Reflect on a time when you struggled to ask for help. What made it difficult to use your voice?
3. How do you relate to the metaphor of “silent suffering”? What stories did your family or early community teach you about expressing needs or emotions?

Communal/Societal:

4. What messages did you receive about being “good” vs. being honest about your thoughts, feelings, and needs during childhood?

CHAPTER 1

Personal Reflection:

1. What stories about success, achievement, or “being special” did you inherit or observe in your peer circle?
2. Reflect on your earliest memories of shifting your behavior or performing for others' approval. How has external validation shaped your sense of self, if at all?
3. Where in your life do you relate to the pressure Alyson felt to never “let anyone down”?

Communal/Societal:

4. Examine the culture of high-performing competitive spaces, child beauty pageants, and talent competitions. What values do they promote? What elements are helpful for a child’s development and life path? Potentially harmful?
5. Discuss how families navigate a child's talents. What was your experience with adults helping you identify your skills and interests? When does support become exploitation?

CHAPTER 2

Personal Reflection:

1. How did your early family (or support system) dynamics shape your understanding of love, stability, and home?
2. Reflect on the family or community roles you adopted (peacemaker, entertainer, etc.). How do these patterns show up in your adult relationships? Which roles would you like to shift or explore?
3. What did your family (or support system) teach you about coping mechanisms and emotional regulation?

CHAPTER 3

Personal Reflection:

1. What did fame and celebrity culture represent to you as a child? How has your relationship to it evolved? In terms of

social and cultural norms, in what ways does society create exceptions for Hollywood and celebrity culture? Why?

2. Think about a time when you entered a new situation, relationship, job, or community that initially presented itself in an overwhelmingly positive light—where you were shown only the benefits, perks, and exciting possibilities. What questions do you wish you had asked, or what information do you wish had been provided upfront? What is the difference between “healthy optimism” and bypassing critical information (when it’s available)?

Communal/Societal:

3. Examine how the entertainment industry markets itself to families and children. What promises does it make?

4. Discuss the role of agents, managers, and other industry professionals in children's lives. What are their motivations and responsibilities? (Keep in mind: many are well-intentioned.)

Systemic Change:

5. Where could the industry have better educated Alyson’s family about realistic expectations and potential risks?

CHAPTER 4

Personal Reflection:

1. Alyson describes being given a “flipper” (fake teeth), is told to avoid sun exposure to stay pale, and is coached on how to present themselves for different “types.” When in your childhood were you asked to change your appearance, personality, or behavior to fit others' expectations? How did this affect your sense of self?

2. The chapter shows how Alyson learned to become a “chameleon,” leaving their own feelings at the door to become whatever character was needed. In what situations—past or present—do you find yourself adapting so much to please others that you lose touch with your authentic self?

3. Alyson experiences the euphoria of booking three major TV pilots followed by the devastation when none get picked up. Recall a time when you came close to achieving something important but fell short. How did you cope with that disappointment? How did this shape your perspective moving forward?

4. In reflecting on your childhood, which area of your life (e.g. education, social, spiritual, family, etc.) and aspect of your personhood (e.g. skills, personality, discipline, etc.) received the most attention? Least?

5. When did you first take on “adult” responsibilities? What developmental experiences did you miss or have to postpone?

6. If you relate to perfectionism and/or people-pleasing, where did these patterns originate? Do they tend to be self-prescribed, others-prescribed (e.g. imposed on you by surrounding people), or societally-prescribed (e.g. reflective of societal pressures)?

CHAPTER 5

Personal Reflection:

1. When you first saw “Work It” (or an exciting project from an emerging artist), what was your personal perception and experience of that moment? How is this similar to or juxtaposed with Alyson’s experience of “overnight success”?

2. How has social media and internet culture shaped your relationship to privacy and public image? What boundaries do you maintain around your public vs. private life?

3. Think about the language we commonly use with children who show exceptional ability in an area: “You’re going to be a star!” “You’re meant for this!” “This is your calling!” “You’re so special!” “Don’t waste your gift!” How might phrases like these affect their relationship to:

- Their sense of choice and agency?
- Their fear of disappointing others?
- Their identity beyond that particular skill?
- Their ability to explore other interests?

4. When we tell a child “you’re meant for this,” whose dreams and desires are we really expressing? What alternative language could we use to celebrate children’s talents while preserving their freedom to choose their own path?

Communal/Societal:

5. Think about your own interactions with celebrities or public figures. Imagine meeting them in person, seeing their posts online, and consuming media (art, news, etc.) of them. What level of access do you feel entitled to from them (e.g. approaching for a photo, getting personal information or life updates, receiving responses to comments)? How should these expectations differ when the celebrity is a child versus an adult, if at all?

6. What responsibility do we have to consider the human cost of their accessibility to us? How does that correlate to our own experience of being online and managing posts, comments, and direct messages?

7. Discuss how viral fame affects young people today compared to Alyson’s experience.

CHAPTERS 6-7

Personal Reflection:

1. What would you have done if you were a child faced with the choice of taking a series regular job on Disney Channel versus going back to weekly auditions versus potentially booking more mature material? If you were the parent/guardian?

2. Alyson reveals numerous safety hazards on sets and describes inappropriate work environments including registered sex offenders being hired to work with minors. How does learning about these conditions change your understanding of what “working in Hollywood” actually means for a child?

3. Consider your own childhood understanding of “normalcy.” How did you learn about appropriate boundaries, stranger safety, and healthy relationships? What would it have been like to navigate childhood without these basic social frameworks?

4. Alyson describes shifting to “pseudo-vulnerability”—appearing emotionally connected while avoiding real attachment to people, in order to protect themselves from inevitable loss. What role do consistent and trustworthy bonds play in a young person’s development? How have your own early experiences with attachment figures shaped your sense of trust and intimacy in adulthood?

5. Picture your ten-year-old self reading detailed critiques of your appearance, personality, and worth from thousands of

strangers. How might this constant feedback loop affect: your self-image and confidence? Willingness to express yourself or take risks? Your mental health and sense of safety in the world?

Communal/Societal:

6. Now consider: When we comment on or consume content critiquing public figures (especially young ones), how might our “harmless opinions” contribute to this overwhelming environment of judgment?

7. Within your family or early support system, how did people handle conflict, substance abuse, and mental health challenges? What coping mechanisms did you develop to survive difficult home environments? Other environments?

CHAPTER 8

Personal Reflection:

1. Alyson describes the importance of having weekly vocal lessons to process emotions and “fall apart” safely. Where do you currently have safe spaces to 'fall apart' and process life experiences as a human-in-progress? What happens when you bury or compartmentalize difficult feelings rather than having outlets for them?

2. Nick observed that Alyson lacked awareness of what was happening inside their body—inner cues like tiredness or emotions were 'overridden or manipulated.' How often do you check in with your body's signals throughout the day, and when do you find yourself overriding or ignoring what it's telling you?

Communal/Societal:

3. Alyson describes being 'peculiarly underdeveloped' in basic life skills. How does this relate to your perception of child stars struggling with “normal” behaviors or life skills? Who is responsible—the child, the parents, the industry, or society? Be sure to factor in that children are sometimes shaped even *more* by influences beyond parents and guardians.

4. Within Alyson’s family home, they were dealing with domestic violence, police intervention, and complex guilt while simultaneously worrying that news of this crisis might 'leak to the industry and ruin their career.' If you were following Alyson's career during this period, what did you think their life was like? How was it to read about what was really happening?

Systemic Change:

5. Puberty in the public eye meant being judged professionally and personally on Alyson’s changing body and appearance. Consider the photos and videos you've seen of babies, children, and teens online during awkward or vulnerable years. Consider your own social media habits of posting children: How might sharing a child's physical and emotional development during experimental years affect their self-esteem and identity formation? What right do children have to privacy during the vulnerable process of discovering their identity, and how do we balance sharing proud moments with protecting their future selves?

CHAPTER 9

Personal Reflection:

1. How has spirituality or faith functioned in your life—as comfort, control, community, purpose, or something else? At what point did it enter your life, and what were the surrounding experiences that shaped your entry?

2. Reflect on times when you've used spiritual, faith-based, contemplative, or religious belief systems to make sense of

difficult circumstances. How did this help or hinder your processing?

3. How do your current beliefs interact with what you're reading of Alyson's journey into Christian evangelicalism? What do you expect to unfold?

Communal/Societal:

4. How does finding a sense of purpose or destiny influence the way you show up in spaces? How do you differentiate adhering to your beliefs versus projecting your beliefs onto other people or situations?

CHAPTERS 10-11

Personal Reflection:

1. What moments reveal the invisible labor and mental/emotional work that go far beyond what audiences see, and how does this hidden effort contrast with public perceptions of the celebrity lifestyle? What would happen if we dismantled the facade?

2. Alyson describes an influx of requests from brands, cause-based organizations, and media outlets. Explore the different vantage points of people in these situations: Alyson's view (e.g. feeling the pressure to be a good role model and to prove their market value), companies using Alyson as a prop to further their mission, audiences demanding autographs as a gesture of loyalty to fans. What arises for you?

3. How might navigating these professional and social dynamics feel for a young person seeking love and belonging? How does this level of professional and social responsibility affect a child's ability to form relationships, understand their own needs, or develop a sense of play and wonder?

4. As the pressures mount, Alyson "splits off" into their persona. How do compartmentalization and "masking" serve as a means of protecting their safety and mission?

5. As a teen, Alyson regularly navigates complex power imbalances with adult executives. How do you handle situations where your ideas or contributions are taken without credit? Reflect on times when you've had to choose between advocating for your needs and maintaining relationships or opportunities.

Communal/Societal:

1. This chapter describes the steep costs of building career momentum, noting that artists often lose money on their pursuit to "making it." Discuss the economics of fame—who actually profits from a young person's success?

2. We've seen countless cases of the "darker side effects" of fame—stalkers, kidnapping plots, scandals. Often, we view them purely for entertainment. How do these chapters change your perspective on consuming content about people in these circumstances?

CHAPTER 12

Personal Reflection:

1. Reflect on the messages you received about bodies, control, and worthiness. How do these show up in your current relationship with your mind and body?

2. How do you recognize when coping mechanisms become ineffective or harmful?

Communal/Societal:

3. Examine how diet culture and fitness messaging can mask or enable harmful behaviors. Discuss how different communities recognize, miss, or enable these behaviors.

4. How do social media and celebrity culture currently shape your own body image?

Systemic Change:

5. Alyson blames herself for struggling. When might self-blame actually serve the systems that created the pressure in the first place?

6. What accountability should exist for industries that profit from diet, fitness, or beauty culture?

CHAPTERS 13-14

Personal Reflection:

1. What surprised you most about the information in these chapters?

2. What thoughts and feelings arose when Alyson tasted their dream finally coming true on tour?

3. Examine the different points of view driving the conversation between Cheryl (therapist) and Alyson.

4. What does Alyson's discomfort in industry spaces—while simultaneously being told these are the “right” places for them to be—reveal about how we learn to distrust our own internal compass?

5. Reflect on times when you've pushed yourself beyond healthy limits in pursuit of a goal. What drove those choices?

6. What thoughts and feelings arose when Alyson chose to listen to that quiet inner voice and go to rehab?

Systemic Change:

7. How does being expected to normalize, defend, or cover for others' harmful behavior teach us to override our instincts about justice and living into our values? What are the long-term costs of this disconnection on social, cultural, political, environmental issues?

CHAPTER 15

Personal Reflection:

1. How do you define recovery—is it returning to a previous state or creating something new? Something else?

2. There is a paradox between Alyson's destabilizing withdrawal symptoms and Alyson experiencing the most stabilizing daily routine in rehab. What does this reveal about a human's foundational need for safety, consistency, and structure in order for healing to happen?

3. Alyson operated in chronic stress and hypervigilance for years before learning the importance of rest and nervous system regulation. What does true rest feel like for you—not just physical stillness, but mental and emotional calm? What

activities or environments help your nervous system settle and feel safe?

Communal/Societal:

4. Discuss the complex relationship dynamic between Alyson and LuAnne.
5. How do you balance personal healing with external obligations?
6. Examine the stigma around mental health treatment and how it affects help-seeking behavior. Discuss how family systems and communities either support or undermine individual healing.
7. Given that Alyson's recovery required excruciating daily effort and extensive support systems, how might we shift from viewing recovery as a test of willpower or moral strength to understanding it as a slow, biological process of rewiring that deserves patience and gentleness? What would it look like to honor the courage to heal in small, daily acts rather than expecting dramatic transformation or linear progress?

CHAPTER 16

Personal Reflection:

1. What was a key moment in your life that signaled you were beginning to take ownership of your life path? What is it like to ask yourself (and listen to) what you truly want?
2. Alyson offers many reflections on body modification (pages 214-215). Which reflections do you relate to? Discuss your own reflections on body modification, noting where your beliefs originated.
3. How do you react to Alyson's "I told you so!" moment when changing their appearance led to more work opportunities? Does their acknowledgment of the complex tensions of their decision resonate with choices you've made in your own life? What does it bring up for you about navigating systems we know are flawed while still needing to survive and thrive within them?

Communal/Societal:

4. How do you navigate relationships where loved ones can't or won't support your healing journey?

Systemic Change:

5. How can we better prepare ourselves and others for the challenges of supporting someone in recovery? If healing is a communal act, what space in your life can you allocate (if any) to being a supportive community member?

CHAPTER 17

Personal Reflection:

1. How have your beliefs about spirituality, sexuality, and identity evolved over time?
2. Reflect on times when you've had to choose between authenticity and belonging to a community.
3. What does "self-denial" mean to you, and how do you distinguish between healthy sacrifice and harmful self-suppression?

Communal/Societal:

4. How do faith communities address or overlook systemic issues affecting their members and others? What's the difference between healthy spirituality and spiritual bypassing?

Systemic Change:

5. How can faith communities better support members dealing with trauma, mental health, or addiction?

6. Examine how religious communities navigate LGBTQ+ members and questions about identity.

7. How do we create space for people to deconstruct and evolve their beliefs? What support should exist for people leaving or questioning institutional doctrine and religious communities?

8. What accountability should exist for religious leaders who promote harmful practices like conversion therapy?

CHAPTER 18

Personal Reflection:

1. This chapter shares several major revelations that challenge Alyson's previous understanding of their life. Discuss the revelations from Alyson's father, Charlie, and the significance of their time spent together.

2. Alyson struggles with maintaining loyalty to LuAnne while uncovering difficult truths about their relationship and financial situation. How do you balance love for family members with the need to protect yourself and determine your own individual path? When is loyalty helpful versus harmful?

3. The chapter ends with Alyson reconnecting to an old dream—going to college. What forgotten dream or aspect of yourself would you like to reclaim?

Communal/Societal:

4. Discuss the role of financial literacy in your life. Reflect on the narratives around money, work, and finances that you've inherited.

CHAPTER 19

Personal Reflection:

1. Reflect on times when you've had to rebuild or start over in some area of life.

2. Alyson finally acknowledges and embraces grief. How does this challenge the message that we must "get over" or "move past" pain before we can build meaningful lives? What might become possible if we embrace the gift of grief while moving forward?

3. What do you notice about the quality of Alyson's strength and competence at this point in their story compared to earlier chapters? How does this earned resilience feel different from the "toughness" our culture celebrates? What does it suggest about the genuine empowerment that comes from having worked through pain rather than around it?

4. How is the tone of the book shifting from earlier chapters?

Communal/Societal:

5. What is the role that education has played in your life? Examine how educational systems support or fail students once they're in the real world.
6. Discuss Alyson and Scout's relationships as "a testament to the transformative power of love and acceptance."

CHAPTERS 20-21

Personal Reflection:

1. Chapter 20 shows how Alyson's boundaries were repeatedly crossed—from being told what to wear and how to look, to more serious violations. They had to learn as an adult how to recognize and assert their boundaries, including saying no to work demands and situations that felt unsafe. How do you know when your boundaries are being crossed? What physical sensations accompany feeling safe versus unsafe in different situations or relationships? What does a "yes" feel like in your body versus a "no"?
2. In Chapter 21, what arose for you while reading Alyson's intentional process of reclaiming the experience of performing in public spaces?
3. In Chapter 21, Alyson's career comes full-circle while dancing with Missy Elliott at the VMA's and then going on Ellen DeGeneres's talk show. What strikes you the most about the difference between their first and second experience? How has Alyson shifted as a person and professional since the first round?

Communal/Societal:

4. How has your view shifted of Hollywood and stardom since the beginning of the book?
5. How can you help reshape cultural values around fame, achievement, and worth?
6. Realistically, how do we create space for rest, privacy, and ordinary life?

EPILOGUE

Personal Reflection:

1. What would it look like for you to embrace "ordinary" life as valuable and meaningful?
2. What does moving forward look like when trauma has shaped your life trajectory?
3. How can you use your experiences—both positive and difficult—to contribute to the world?

Communal/Societal:

4. How can we better protect the children in our lives and abroad?

Systemic Change:

5. Discuss our collective responsibility as consumers of content featuring minors. What role do audiences play in supporting ethical entertainment?
6. List concrete ways that we can better support children and families as they enter the industry and/or participate in

content online. Explore solutions at every level of the problem: personal, communal, industrial, and legislative.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Society:

- What does it mean to be “semi-well-adjusted” in a dysfunctional society?

The Toddler-to-Trainwreck Pipeline:

- Examine the larger cultural myths that inform society’s definitions of success, achievement, and fame (e.g. in the U.S.A., “American exceptionalism,” “the myth of meritocracy,” “the Frontier myth,” “Protestant work ethic,” “Horatio Alger” narrative of rags to riches, “Manifest Destiny,” and “The Great Man Theory”). What other myths would you add?
- How do these cultural myths shape and/or harm children (both the children who “make it” and the children who “do not”)?

Childhood and Beyond:

- How has this memoir changed your understanding of your own childhood experiences? Of child stardom and the entertainment industry?
- What aspects of Alyson's journey most resonate with your own experiences of growing up, finding identity, or healing from difficult experiences?
- What patterns from your family of origin do you want to continue or change?
- Reflect on times when you felt reduced to a single characteristic or achievement. How did that impact your sense of self? How does that correspond to the way we view people for singular success markers (e.g. child stars, one-hit wonders, etc.)?
- Alyson writes that they never once told their dad that they “wanted to act or be a star” and didn't even know what Hollywood was at age seven. How does this revelation change your understanding of their story? What does this suggest about children's agency in major life decisions?

Advocacy & Action:

- Where do you see opportunities to advocate for children's rights and welfare in your community?
- What protections should exist for minors' digital footprints and online presence?
- How can we advocate for more ethical media coverage of young people?

Healing & Growth:

- What stories of your life are you ready to re-write or release?
- How do you define success and wellbeing for yourself now?
- Alyson transforms their difficult experiences into advocacy work and mental health resources. How can personal struggles become sources of strength and service? What's the difference between exploiting your pain and healing through it? What are the risks of projecting our own healing journeys onto others?

Fame and Responsibility:

- Discuss the intersection of fame, platform, and public responsibility.

The Value of “Ordinary” Life:

- By the end, Alyson finds deep fulfillment in anonymity and simple pleasures like washing dishes and paying bills. What

makes life meaningful in 2025? What elements of a meaningful life are at risk with what's unfolding in society and the world? How can we integrate or shift toward these elements despite literally everything?

ACTION STEPS

Advocacy and Protection:

- Research child labor laws in your area.
- Learn about digital privacy rights for minors.
- Support organizations working to protect children.
- Examine your own consumption of content featuring children.

Personal Empowerment:

- Practice distinguishing between your authentic voice and internalized messages from others.
- Develop skills for recognizing and leaving exploitative situations.
- Consider how your experiences—both struggles and strengths—might help others.

Cultural Change:

- Question the exploitation of people for entertainment.
 - Support media that portrays healthy relationships and realistic life paths.
 - Educate others about the real costs of fame and public visibility.
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Remember: Healing is not a destination but an ongoing journey. The goal isn't to be perfect or “fixed” but to be authentic, connected, and able to use our experiences—both difficult and beautiful—to contribute to a more just and compassionate world.