

Owning Our Struggles

CONVERSATION GUIDE



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INTRODUCTION

“Self-care is the bridge to community-care, and community-care is the bridge to community healing.” (ix) Had you considered how your own self-care transcends the work you do on yourself to something larger?

“For as long as I can remember, I have felt split in half. Half Minaa, half stranger. . . . Always tucking and folding pain like laundry and storing it away.” (1) What does the author mean and have you felt a similar sense of tension in your life? How did you cope?

“The self-help industry is dominated primarily by white authors, which leads to an erasure of not just Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) voices but also BIPOC readers and their experiences, healing practices, and needs. . . . We can’t improve mental health without an understanding of the intersections of a person’s identities as well as the structures and attitudes upheld in our society that keep people oppressed.” (3) What is the author suggesting is the consequence of this? Why is the bigger picture of one’s intersections so important for success?

“Self-healing may be powerful, but we are not healing to exist within a vacuum; we are healing to integrate within our community and build healthy, supportive networks.” (5) How does community-care sustain us? Had you considered just how key community is to well-being?

THE STRUGGLE FOR WHOLENESS

“What we go through does not define us, but what we go through has the ability to mold and shape us.” (9) How does the accumulation of experiences and interactions with the outside world shape our beliefs and world view? What were your early experiences like?

Did sibling rivalry impact you formatively, or do you recall any moments of dissociation or out-of-body experiences to cope with tense situations? Could you relate to the author’s portrait of the “safe space” she created in her mind to tolerate sharing an environment with her siblings? How did you adapt, or what did you sacrifice in the process? (13)

“Both our home environment and community environment contribute to our origin story.” (16) When you assess these two factors of your early life, what emerges for you? How would your Adverse Childhood Experiences score situate you? How do you feel these experiences did or will impact you decades later?

“Since I had not healed my inner child, I continued to act like my teenage self as a grown woman.” (18) What are the consequences we face by living through the lens of a wounded child? What kind of healing work does the author advise to help us get unstuck?

What is an adult tantrum? What do child-like, passive coping mechanisms look like? How do we build and assess our “window of tolerance”? (20)

What practices (like box breathing, co-regulation, movement, etc.) help you calm your nervous system? Have you explored these techniques in the past or what new option will you try? (22)

“Ultimately, boundaries are an act of self-care and self-advocacy.” (24) Do you struggle or find it easy to set such boundaries? When your needs are unmet, what does it feel like? What are some boundaries you want to expand (time, emotional, physical, and more)?

THE STRUGGLE FOR HEALING

“Healing is a social justice issue because trauma impacts not only the individual but the family unit, our communities, and the social and economic structure of our country.” (45) What kinds of trauma (from acute, chronic, to complex) can shape us in this way? What systems can block access?

“Denying our truth, because we have been exposed to someone else’s truth, doesn’t make our truth less factual.” (50) Do you engage in comparative suffering from time to time? What does it feel like for you?

“Trying to always remain happy is not only destructive but unrealistic. Emotions are not pieces of clothing that we can sort through and put on and take off when we feel like it.” (53) What does toxic positivity look like? Why should we feel all our feelings?

What are some healthy practices you can use the next time you are in emotional distress? How do you plan to build your distress tolerance? (59)

What does emotional immaturity look like? How does tuning into our bodies and using mindfulness help? (62)

“Healing does not have an expiration date or an age requirement.” (66) Why is it never too late to begin our healing journey from trauma, or at least plant the seeds?

THE STRUGGLE FOR SAFE SPACES

“I grew up proud of my heritage, my culture, and my race, and that day in Home Depot changed everything about how I saw myself and moved through the world.” (73) Discuss this interaction the author experienced as a girl. What new weight did the author carry from the exchange and what innocence was lost? Have you had such an “adultification bias” experience?

“The belief that whiteness is superior is deeply engrained in the minds of many white people . . . and it shows up through both overt and covert acts of violence, harm, abuse, and power hoarding on both a micro and macro level.” (76) How do you see and witness this manifested in your micro and macro environments?

Unpack what the author means by this assessment: “What’s most tiring is the struggle for safe spaces. Anywhere in the world can be a threat to Black people, including simple day-to-day spaces like the grocery store, work, school, the park, a restaurant, and even a doctor’s office.” (77) Why do safe spaces matter? What makes a space safe?

What is “internalized oppression” and “performing for the white gaze” (82)? And how can that inward hate morph into outward expression?

How is trauma stored in the body, and how does intergenerational trauma manifest? What aspects of this trauma can become tradition and unfortunately taught? (85)

“As BIPOC, we must first examine the ways we’ve been programmed to see ourselves and push against narratives that are dehumanizing, and this starts in the home.” (89)
Where do these narratives come from? How can we push back against history and the media, or from our family dynamics and stories told?

“These messages I heard were intended to be empowering, but instead, they were burdensome, leading me to feel afraid or like a failure for needing help, wanting support, and not wanting to be depended on all the time and seen as a person and not a savior.” (93) What are some myths you might carry about what it means to be strong?

What are the four types of intimacy, and how does counterdependency undermine our growth? What can healthy dependence look like? (95)

“The cultural stigma surrounding mental illness exists as a product of racism, medical mistrust, and continued oppression institutionally and systemically.” (101) What disparities in care have BIPOC communities faced? Why is culturally competent care so critical?

“Gatherings are rooted in both safety and celebration. It means that I can exist in this communal space without having to worry about someone being a threat to my well-being.” (105) How can gatherings help us strengthen community bonds? What aspects of the celebration (food, dance, music, storytelling, honoring nature) help us unlock healing and make a safe space?

THE STRUGGLE FOR UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

“Growing up in a dysfunctional family has a long-lasting impact on the developing brain. Childhood trauma can impact an individual twenty to thirty years later, no matter how far removed they are from their experiences of abuse and helplessness. Family dysfunction can manifest in different ways and is not always directly linked to physical abuse.” (112) How have you seen this dysfunction manifest and in what ways? How does the cycle repeat?

“During stages of healing, it is normal for people to live in two conflicting states where they are seeking change but desiring homeostasis. It’s like playing an internal game of tug-of-war.” (115) How can staying in one’s comfort zone come into play versus an urgency for new habits and disruption? Is change always risky, and if so, in what ways?

Discuss the theory of attachment and the four well-regarded styles (secure, ambivalent, avoidant, disorganized). (118) How would these styles impact a person’s behavior through life? How are we programmed for attachment and what happens when our caretakers deprive us of this emotional bond?

“Parenting never stops; however, as the child matures through different stages of life, the parent-child dynamic will shift.” (121) Explore this. In what ways does the parental role evolve and mature? What needs of a child remain the same, no matter one’s age?

“While parenting, the things you thought you were healed from will come back to go toe to toe with you, and healing is a dance that you will now have to navigate with a toddler at your hip trying to get your attention.” (124) In what ways does parenting force us to examine our old traumas or wounds? How are women especially impacted by this self-sacrificing and “the grueling realization that we cannot have it all”?

“As a parent, you need to acknowledge that two things can be true at once—even in the midst of trying to do better, you may make choices that hurt your children.” (125) Can you think of examples here that help illustrate how our parents’ struggle for wellbeing may have inadvertently caused harm to us? Is it helpful to put ourselves in their shoes? How can the cycle of harm repeat in us as parents?

How can we set boundaries with ourselves during conflict? What could that look like for you? What actions can we take that help us preserve our feeling of wholeness and power and stop the power of our triggers? Where can we exert control and promote acceptance? (128)

“Accepting reality does not mean tolerating abuse or dysfunction. Radical acceptance means learning to observe life through a solutions-focused lens.” (130) How would this active, framed mindset help you look at a problem in a new way? How does it take us out of “victim mode” or the expectation people will change?

How can “emotionally immature parenting” manifest and what toxic parenting tactics may result? (135)

“People are not wired to be constantly exposed to emotional violence.” (139) Does age equal maturity? How can we help ourselves assess our cost versus benefits, especially if we have made attempts at repairing a relationship?

Why is an “emotional well-being plan” (145) an essential tool for any process that involves cutting familial ties? Why is outlining a support system critical for our journey here?

THE STRUGGLE FOR INTIMACY

“You can also have high self-esteem and still make poor choices regarding a partner or a relationship. It is perfectly normal and healthy to desire romantic partnership; after all, we are innately wired for connection and thrive when we are in healthy relationships, which play a role in co-regulation.” (149) Why is understanding our duality key? How do relationships create value for us and build community-care?

How has dating culture (ghosting, deceit, breakups, rejection, love bombing, catfishing) hijacked our brains, body image, and sense of trust? What is “ambiguous loss”? (152)

“Healthy relationship dynamics are developed, not magically formed.” (154) How does this pertain to the different bonds we make with others? What tools do we need?

“Relationships can show us more about ourselves than we ever thought we knew. The good ones, and even the ones that are unhealthy, can be a window into how we view ourselves and the condition of our self-esteem.” (154) What can relationships teach us about ourselves? Does seeing ourselves as “fully healed” prevent us from learning or walking through life as interdependent? Why is it sensible to want interdependence?

What are the risks of over-romanticizing partners, or creating an idealized version of a partner when dating? Why should we “believe people when they show you who they are”? (157)

Why is it important to review our partner “checklists” to better define what makes a good partner? What guidelines might we revise to make sure we are attracting healthy and meaningful relationships? Why are our “types” good to unpack? (158)

How can poor communication undermine romantic relationships? Why is being assertive and emotionally regulated essential? (163)

What are red/yellow/green flag rules? Why must all relationships still carry boundaries? (167)

Can relationships ever be “fifty-fifty”? (172) Why or why not, and how can this myth harm? How can we build equity, fairness, and flexibility into our relationships to help them thrive?

What is the difference between “experiencing aloneness and feeling lonely”? (176) What can this solo self-attunement do for us as people, and how does it help us mend our shattered selves?

Describe the five types of friendships we build. How can unpacking each type help us better understand ourselves and sustain the community-care we wish to build? How does our language surrounding friendship limit us? (182)

How would you define a healthy friendship? Were you surprised by the author’s markers? Which steps do you find the most challenging or awkward—or empowering? Why?

THE STRUGGLE FOR FULFILLMENT

“Burnout is America’s way of evaluating tenacity, drive, passion, and worthiness.” (198)

What does the author mean by this? What are the repercussions of burnout on us personally and as a community? How are the labels “lazy” and “unskilled” disproportionately applied to Black people and people of color?

Describe the difference between social capital and financial capital. When we are connected with each other—or invest, act as a role model, lean on our networks, share experiences—how are we benefitting? (200)

Why is accountability important, even if it comes with a little suffering and deep reflection on our part? (202)

“We need to be okay with taking up space and showing up as our full selves because it is our full selves that need care, compassion, and nurture, not just the bits and pieces of us that appear well put together.” (208) Why must we prioritize this work, even as we acknowledge the toxic structures and injustices around us?

“We must be willing to push our own boundaries, because sometimes the limits that we put in place to protect ourselves are self-sabotaging.” (210) How can our boundaries hold us back, and what benefits might there be in making space for the unknown and our joy?

What is **“urgency culture”** and what are the consequences of being **“on, ready, and available at all times through the day”**? (213) Why are pauses and rest so essential to our wellbeing? Is being **“nice”** and saying yes preventing you from meeting your own needs? In what ways?

“Balance is not a requirement for rest, but mindfulness is.” (215) Discuss the finer points here—what myths do we hold in our minds about what conditions are perfect for finding rest? In what ways is rest not **“a waste”**?

What are the seven types of rest that Saundra Dalton Smith, MD, has outlined? (217) Were you surprised by any of the forms here? Why? What new strategies will you try to incorporate into your daily routine?

“When we people-please, we are disconnected from ourselves in the moment and trying to become more in tune with fixing the feelings of others, instead of identifying what we feel and what we need for our own emotional safety and refuge.” (224) Do you find yourself falling into this trap? How might you approach helping others without veering into self-sabotage?

“We also must stop guilt-tripping ourselves for not having the emotional and energetic capacity to always show up.” (228) How can our ever-connected devices, even if essential tools for our work and relationships, contribute to sensory overload? How can being unavailable help us to sustain our mental and emotional wellbeing?

THE STRUGGLE FOR BEING HUMAN

“All this self-improvement work was just turning into self-shaming work. These habits can be extremely useful to some, but when they are not and when they feel like another joyless task to check off the to-do list, then at some point you must be willing to slow down and assess the ways you might be pursuing perfection over wholeness.” (235)
Do you experience these perfectionist tendencies? How will you defend yourself as you grow?

“The more you do this work, the more you may notice the dance between grief and growth. We do not evolve without having to go through transition and loss. Healing is a deeply complex experience.” (236) What has been uncomfortable—and what has brought you relief—while using this book? What aspects will you need reminders on?

“Give yourself permission to be and do what feels right for you. Owning your struggles is the bridge to owning your healing.” (253) Has the title of this book taken on a new meaning for you after finishing it? In what ways?

