

Next to Normal is a contemporary family drama, about a woman's struggle with mental illness, and the effects of her illness on her family. At the opening of the show, Diana seems to have an ideal life; she is educated (studied architecture), well-off, and happily married with two teenage children. But it soon becomes clear that all is not as it seems. Diana has bipolar disorder, plagued with anxieties, mood swings and delusions that trace back to a family tragedy 16 years earlier and are growing worse with time. During the course of the play, Diana goes through a series of doctors and treatments, in response to and sometimes triggering the ups and downs of her illness. Under the care of her primary doctor, Dr. Madden, Diana takes medication, talks through her issues and problems, and undergoes the more controversial option of electroconvulsive therapy. Meanwhile, her husband Dan confronts his own confusion and depression; daughter Natalie deals with isolation and a budding romance with a fellow music student, Henry; and son Gabe serves as Diana's confidante and link to a happier past. Though the family strives to establish some sort of normality, and each character seeks his or her own peace and happiness, the ties that bind slowly and inexorably unravel around them.

Next to Normal is considered a rock musical, and much of the story is told through song. The melodies are often interwoven in tight harmonies, and the action moves back and forth among simultaneous scenes, as well as between literal and psychological realities. Though serious in focus, the play is full of surprises and humor as well.

CHARACTER INFORMATION

DIANA

Diana is the main character of Next to Normal: a housewife in her late 30s or early 40s. In the character list in the script, the authors describe her as 'sexy' and 'sharp'. From the outside, it would seem like she 'has it all', but Diana suffers from bipolar disorder, which keeps her from living her life fully. She begins to become delusional and live in a world that goes back and forth between reality and fantasy. Before Diana was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, she enjoyed climbing mountains. In the song, "I Miss the Mountains", she explains, "I miss the highs and lows, all the climbing, all the falling, and all the while the wild wind blows." Diana wants to move forward with her life, but she is unable to do so because her past haunts her. The trauma caused by past losses has produced distant relationships between her and both her husband and her daughter. Diana and Natalie do not have a real bond or connection because Natalie feels that she is invisible in her mother's eyes. Diana and Dan do not have a strong marriage because they do not support each other when they encounter in an emotional conflict. As time passes, she feels more isolated, and her bipolar disorder only becomes worse. Diana strives to at least become "next to normal", but in all actuality the reality that has developed over the years is not normal at all. It should also be noted that Diana is a very creative individual, who went to college to study architecture, but had to quit when she became pregnant and got married.

DAN

Dan is the husband of Diana and the father of Natalie and Gabe. It is suggested that he and Diana met and married while they were in college, both studying to be architects. He is a man that wants his family to be normal and he is driven by a need to take care of his wife. As a husband, he is protective, worried, and stressed; as a result, he can be selfish and even passive-aggressive. The bottom line is that he struggles with an ongoing dilemma, the choice between his own personal interest and happiness, and what he feels he needs to do to care for his wife. His search for the best decisions for his family often just leads to additional problems. Dan tries to keep his household together the best he can, but in reality it doesn't turn out the way he would want, and he realizes that he has little control over his destiny. Still, he chooses to stay with Diana and give her whatever support he can.

NATALIE

Natalie is Diana and Dan's 17-year-old daughter, and Gabe's sister. She is a teenage girl basically just trying to find herself. Dealing with her mother's mental illness, she is on an emotional rollercoaster which she doesn't know how to get off. As a result, she pushes away the people that care for her most because she doesn't know how to accept their love and concern. She is attracted to Henry, and to the attention he gives her, but also frightened and intimidated. Her relationship with her father is ambiguous, and, as evidenced in the song "Superboy and the Invisible Girl," she is jealous of her brother's central position in the family's emotional life, and in her mother's psyche. At times, Natalie just wants to get away from all of it, but doesn't know how. She is eager to leave and start her life and to stop feeling like a shadow at her own house. Like her mother, she is extremely creative and gifted—she is a pianist.

GABE

Gabe is the son of Diana and Dan, and brother of Natalie. Toward the beginning of the play, Gabe comes off as daring and rebellious. He is somewhat rude and flippant when it comes to the other characters, such as Natalie, Dan, and Doctor Madden. The only character for whom he ever shows any affection is his mother, Diana. Because of this, the two are very close. Gabe is an enigmatic character, and as the play progresses, his role in the family is more fully revealed. Gabe is scared of losing her, and scared that if she's not around he will no longer be relevant to his family. This fear causes him to cling to her and to prevent her from fully living her life. Gabe is also extremely jealous, and gets upset whenever someone challenges his hold on Diana. His songs often use irony to fully convey the nature of his character. They are usually upbeat, in sharp contrast to the dark subject matter. Gabe is in some ways on the periphery of the action of the play, and, paradoxically, also central to the dramatic conflict and resolution.

HENRY

Henry is a 17-year-old boy, a musician who is clearly interested in, and perhaps in love with, Natalie. He meets Natalie in the Music Room at school, hearing her practicing on the piano, and finds that music is something they have in common. He is a stoner, but not showy or obnoxious about it; he is very much a free spirit. When Natalie says "Oh. You're one of those pretentious stoner types," he replies, "That's totally unfair. I'm not pretentious. And definitely not classical. It's so rigid and structured. There's no room for improvisation. You have to play the notes on the page." Henry admits his character weaknesses when he sings, "I might be lazy, loner, a bit of a stoner—it's true." But he takes pride in being "the master of the lost art of making a pipe out of an apple." Although he seems to have his priorities a bit confused, he is very much a romantic person. Throughout the play he expresses his feelings, telling Natalie, "Perfect for you, I could be perfect for you . . . I'll make myself perfect . . . perfect for you." His role in the story is the love interest for Natalie, and he is also an important outlet for her feelings about her family and her mother's illness.

DR. MADDEN

Dr. Madden is Diana's primary physician through the action of the play. He attempts to reach her through a variety of treatment methods, and in the course of their relationship he unearths crucial family secrets. He is fairly easygoing and 'hip', and in Diana's mind he assumes the persona of a rock star, providing excitement and fulfilling fantasies. In reality, he is a proficient doctor, clearly concerned for the welfare of his patient and her family.