

Unusual Normality

Ruler Approach

1. Recognizing Emotions in Oneself and Others

- Ishmael describes arriving in New York City with very few possessions and feeling a mix of confusion and humor. How does he recognize his emotions in this situation, and how does his reaction to losing his baggage reflect his emotional state at that time?
- When Ishmael first meets his new mother, she is welcoming and supportive, which contrasts with his past. What emotions does Ishmael feel when interacting with her, and how can you tell that he might be unsure of what a “normal” life looks like?
- Ishmael reflects on his high school experience and how he feels different from his peers. How does he recognize the emotions of others (e.g., when students express curiosity about his background), and how do his own emotions contrast with theirs?

2. Understanding the Causes and Consequences of Emotions

- Ishmael’s background—growing up in a war zone, losing his family, and being a child soldier—shapes his reactions to his new life in America. How do these past experiences contribute to the emotions he feels in New York, especially around the concept of “normality”?
- He describes the school interview process, where his inability to provide a report card leads to further rejection. How does this moment highlight the tension between his past and the expectations of American society? What emotions does this reveal about his experience of trying to fit in?
- Reflecting on his time playing paintball with friends, Ishmael sees his ability to outsmart his peers as something born of survival, not “pretend war.” How do his emotions about the game reveal his deep understanding of real violence versus the playfulness of his peers?

3. Labeling Emotions with a Nuanced Vocabulary

- Ishmael says, “I didn’t trust in happiness or any kind of normality at all.” How would you label these emotions he is describing, and how do they reflect his psychological state after years of war and trauma?
- He uses humor to cope with difficult situations, like when he laughs about the lost baggage. What does this say about how he labels or masks his emotions? Can you think of a specific example in the text where Ishmael’s humor helps him deal with something painful?

- At several points, Ishmael describes feeling "weird" or "unusual" because of his experiences. How would you define the emotions behind these labels? What does he mean when he prefers "unusual" to "weird"? How does this nuanced labeling of his emotions affect his interactions with others?

4. Expressing Emotions in Accordance with Cultural Norms and Social Context

- When Ishmael is at his new school, he describes his silence about his past. Why does he choose not to speak about his experiences as a child soldier? How does this reflect his understanding of cultural norms and the social context in his new life?
- Ishmael's interactions with his friends highlight his struggle with cultural differences, especially his formal British African English. How does his attempt to fit in with American teenagers by changing his speech patterns reflect his emotional struggle to be accepted?
- During the paintball game, Ishmael chooses not to participate in face-painting, which his friends associate with war. How does this action express his emotions about war and how he distinguishes real war from pretend violence?

5. Regulating Emotions with Helpful Strategies

- Ishmael uses humor and detachment as ways to regulate his emotions throughout the narrative, especially when dealing with stressful situations like the school interview and losing his baggage. How do these strategies help him manage his feelings of uncertainty and alienation in a new country?
- He reflects on the difference between "pretend war" and "real war" after playing paintball. What does this reveal about how Ishmael has learned to regulate his emotions in response to his traumatic experiences? How does his understanding of "real war" influence his behavior during the game?
- When Ishmael observes his friends' behaviors in New York, he notices that they glorify violence, which he knows from experience is not something to be romanticized. How does he regulate his emotions when dealing with this cultural difference? How does he show restraint or calm in this situation?