

Empowered:

A Center for Sexuality, LLC.

ABCs of Queer Youth Survival

An ACT-Aligned Approach

Nicholas Maio-Aether

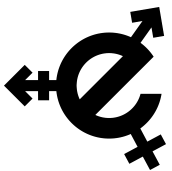
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A Note from the Author

If you are reading this book, then you're a human being, and as such, you are worthy of living a life you would value.

Anyone who has told you otherwise is not coping well with their own internal struggles, because people who are coping don't feel the need to react and call other people out for making them feel uncomfortable.

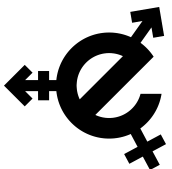
Each of us will always make someone else feel uncomfortable and it is not your job to safeguard the feelings of others. It *is* your job to figure out who you are and to learn to live authentically and in ways that are also wise, so you may end up with a rich, fulfilling life.



A = Acceptance

The world around us will always have elements of anger or hurt, and the world within us may respond to this with inner pain. Learning to accept the pain -- not the bad actions of others, but the inner sensation of being hurt -- can help us to move forward through it.

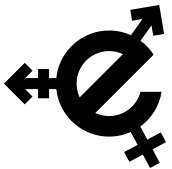
This is NOT resignation -- that is giving up because of the pain. This is deciding that, no matter how external forces may try to get you down, and no matter how much the inner voices are echoing those negative sentiments, you are still a whole human being, worthy of a life in which you get to live your values. This is making small changes for yourself, even when you have doubt or wonder if this will end up being worth it.



B = Being Flexible

This is a skill -- being able to see things outside the box. Shutting out information we don't like, refusing to engage in conversation with people who are attempting to be allies and kind of sucking at it without helping them see what they could be doing better, blocking everyone we disagree with...may seem better for mental health in the short-run, as it reduces conflict and inner pain.

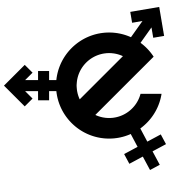
However, this also creates rigidity, the same rigidity that has harmed queer folx, just on the opposite side. We must learn that ideas can be added to, that science -- by definition -- is never factually set, and that our beliefs are only as valid as those of others. And we need to be okay with the notion that *no one* ever gets *everyone* on their side.



C = Community

It's really hard to be a lone wolf, an isolated queer person in what seems like a sea of heteros. However, you're not alone. First off, many queer persons (especially as teens) don't come out and make their identities known. This means there are probably other queer folx around you -- in Gen Z, it is about 20%, or 1 in 5.

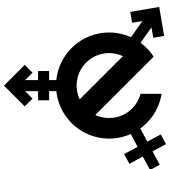
Still, that's not enough to meet community needs since there isn't an automatic connection between isolated queer teens. You'll need to find out where your local LGBTQIA+/Pride Community Center is, and they can get you local resources and access to teen or young adult support groups and events. They can also provide parents and educators with necessary resources to help you and/or your family out.



D = Dropping Anchor

When things get really tough, it becomes hard not to get overwhelmed and become avoidant or reactive. Unfortunately, avoiding achieves nothing, and reacting often achieves the opposite of the desired outcome. The world is tough, yes, but you're stronger than how it makes you feel. So, before acting upon an urge or intense sensation, try the following exercise and see if maybe there's a better way to go about responding -- it legit helps:

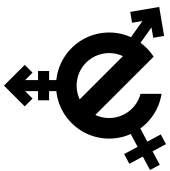
- What are 5 things I can see right now?
- What are 4 things I can feel right now with my body or hands?
- What are 3 things I can hear right now?
- What are 2 things I can smell right now -- *or is my nose plugged, and what's that like?*
- What does the inside of my mouth taste like right now?



E = Err on the Side of Caution

It can be exciting to find other queer folx, and much of that is done online nowadays, which means essentially getting to know strangers through apps. And that's fair -- I mean, what else are you supposed to do? However, you can be safe about it. Some quick tips:

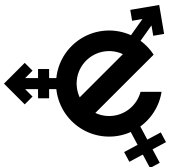
- Anyone can pretend to be anyone online, and many profiles are fake
- Everything online is permanent -- even if deleted it can be restored
- Anyone asking for your nudes is asking for illegal porn of a minor (if you are under 18)
- When you're over 18, nudes can still be used against you
- If meeting up in person for the 1st time, always bring a friend and meet in a public place -- and leave with the friend you brought, not the new person



F = Family of Choice

Some families, maybe yours, kick members out for being queer, or treat them poorly. Well, we have a remedy for this -- we form our own families, called Families of Choice. These are our closest friends and mentors/mentees -- and we become family, spending time & holidays together, bringing the love that biological families sometimes lack.

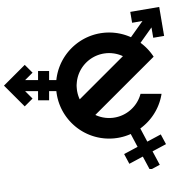
Families tied to the Ballroom or Drag scenes, are called *Houses*. The author of this book is the Father of the St Louis House of Effort and has 5 “kids” and 3 “grandkids”, all of whom are young genderqueer or trans artists. *Hold out, hang on. A family who will love you is out there, waiting for you to find them.*



G = Growth

It's no secret life is hard for queer youth in a straight society. That difficulty, that strife -- it can wear you down. *Or*, it can inspire you to become your best self, because you'll need to adhere to your values to survive. The trick is surviving, and that takes resilience -- a strength that comes from a core belief that you *can* survive this, and that what is on the other side makes surviving this worth it.

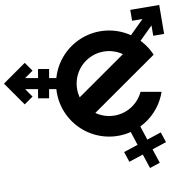
Part of what will make surviving all this crap worth it is the growth you will undergo -- the you that will come out on the other side. You'll still be you, no doubt, but wiser, stronger, living a life you value, and maybe even able to help younger generations survive.



H = Happiness

It can be really hard to find reasons to feel happy, and many people think that we “should” be happy, or that we should try and feel happier than we do -- which is a lot of pressure, actually! But what if happiness became something we couldn't achieve or make ourselves feel?

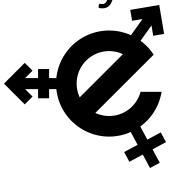
What if we saw happiness instead as being proud of ourselves for making the most of the moment, even when we were handed a crap sandwich? This is something anyone can achieve, not through the actions of others who may suck, but through one's own actions -- by simply working to be your best self, no matter what you are feeling. This isn't being in denial; this is more like *acceptance*.



I = Invisibility as a Skill

Online, the worst in people comes out. This is a lot for our poor brains, and it often feels like we have to participate in conversations being had by strangers across the world or we will be left out, voiceless. This is especially true if these people are saying something ignorant of queer persons, because it cuts deep on a personal level. Many trolls, though, actually *enjoy* fighting!

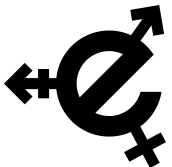
It is vital to remember: choose your battles wisely. You can remain invisible in comment sections or threads when the conversation is heated, pointed, or leaning toward misinformation -- even though it feels like you've gotta say something. Ultimately, it is your choice. *A feeling can't make you do anything.* Why feed the trolls?



J = Jargon

With any group, you have to know the lingo in order to know what you're talking about, agreeing/consenting to, etc. Lingo that is uncommon or hard to understand for outsiders is called *jargon*, and some of the queer lingo definitely qualifies.

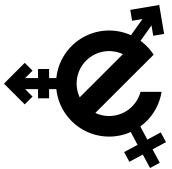
We have jargon for attractions, kinks, fashion mistakes, even specific drugs -- *note, this is to inform, not to promote drug use*. Jargon also evolves, so it pays to stay informed. Check in with your local and online queer resources and community, and don't feel bad for being new or not knowing things -- we all start somewhere! Elders may not know new jargon, but that does not mean they lack wisdom -- don't discount your elder queers; they've lived life.



K = Know Your Rights

Learn what your federal and state rights are -- it's such boring information to sift through, but it is SO worth it to be able to advocate for yourself and others. Knowing this also means staying informed about any legislation that may expand or restrict your rights. A lot of laws are drafted each year about queer youth, mainly because straight adults don't understand queer identities and experiences.

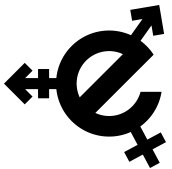
Not all laws drafted are anti-queer, either. Knowing what is on the table for a vote is your key to expanding and protecting your rights as you grow into a queer adult and elder. It is your key to making a better world for future queer youth, too.



L = Let Go

We often find ourselves caught up, stuck in our heads. But the reality is that thoughts and feelings can't wrap us up in them, they can't ruin our day, and they can't overwhelm us. The issue is -- they seem like they can. We have to recognize that we are bigger than our internal experiences, and that anything that happens, once over, is in the past.

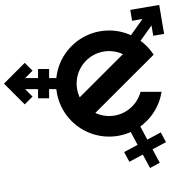
Let go of the pain of the past, even the very recent past. Don't let the hater on the street ruin your day -- once they are no longer present, they don't have the power to. You can let go of trying to avoid the feeling, you can move on and be okay -- even while you feel upset. It will move on eventually on its own; allow it to.



M = Mindfulness & Meaning

Mindfulness is being aware of what's going on around and in you at the present moment. It isn't sitting around, lost in your head, trying to figure out where things went wrong. It isn't freezing up and trying to avoid a disastrous outcome that isn't actually very likely in the next few moments.

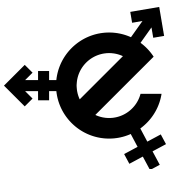
Mindfulness is about finding meaning and value in the present, about remaining here, rooted firmly in the ground. It is from this present place that you can more easily make wise choices, and from there, achieve moments of "happiness," as defined earlier, by taking actions toward our values and goals, even in the face of systemic challenges.



N = Needs VS Wants

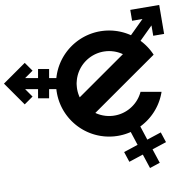
Many queer youth have difficulty with their finances/money when initially getting going on their own, an impact of systemic oppression. Despite this, there are ways to still get by, and one of these is to separate your needs from your wants. You may **want** that new silicone mermaid tail on Amazon, but at \$600, you could meet many of your **needs**, like saving up for small emergencies.

If you get a bonus or a birthday gift of money, try and save at least half for your needs. With any paycheck, pay off debts and/or buy your needs first, then save at least 10%, then address your wants. If there's not much there to address your wants, use downtime to make extra \$\$ rather than to dwell.



O = Observing the Self

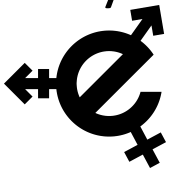
You are not your thoughts, no matter how ugly or painful they get. There are 3 aspects of the self: the thinker; feeler; observer. The thinker/feeler parts of us are constantly going, and feed off one another. The thinker tries to help us solve problems but often doesn't have one in the immediate present, so it dwells on the past or flies forward into panic about the future. This is often unhelpful. So...tap into the observer, this part that knows who you are and is usually calmer: "I am having depressed thoughts again. I'm not them, they are just thoughts -- even though they feel bad. So, while I have these thoughts and feels, what can I do to be present and better or make the most of this situation?"



P = Protect Yourself

There are people with good and bad intentions in all communities, queer ones, too. Always remember: at the end of the day, you are the one who will be accountable for yourself. You are the only one who has your exact perspective, values and understanding of them, and your exact vision of the future.

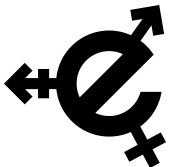
Learn to share and be open and flexible, while also not giving people access to ways they can easily screw you over or steal from you. There are ways we can help one another that don't put us at personal risk; one of the best ways to help others while protecting yourself is to connect them to resources you know of, rather than trying to be their resource for them.



Q = Queerness

Queerness is, by definition, uniqueness or weirdness. The word *queer* is still considered offensive by some elders, who grew up having it hurled at them as a slur, but many younger queer folx use the term with pride. You can be queer without being any particular “type” of queer -- there’s no right fashion, haircut, or specific look.

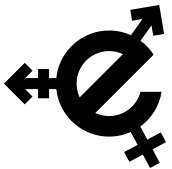
There’s no right or wrong way to do anything in the queer community, so long as no one is being harmed. Don’t give into pressure by anyone, queer or straight, to express yourself inauthentically. Granted, at school or work we all have to mask a bit, but for the most part, let your freak flag fly, so long as it is safe; there is nothing inauthentic about survival -- it’s our root function.



R = Responding Wisely

Ever react poorly to something? Of course you have -- we all have. A lot of straight folks have the support of their families and local communities, so there is less to react to and coping is easier. It is common to see queer youth fall into bad decisions early on and learn life lessons the hardest of ways.

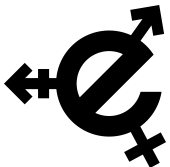
This comes down to reacting versus responding wisely. Reactions are the first impulsive urge we have to respond to something -- and these are usually not helpful! So, we have to slow down, accept that we feel intensely and want to react -- which is normal -- and we have to remember who we are and who we want to be in that moment. And then, we just do what our best self would do.



S = Sleep

I know, the old queer writing this book sounds even older when saying sleep is a key to queer survival -- but hear me out. Sleep is when your body and your brain reset. Want a better life with less stress? Sleep 8 hours at night. Having trouble sleeping? That's common, especially in people who have had stressors, anxieties, or traumas -- which means it's pretty common in the queer community!

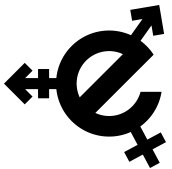
Try this approach: "I'm just not going to deal with this right now, so whatever shows up, I am just gonna let it do its thing," and then continually letting go of any thoughts that show up, slowly fading into the void that exists around the thoughts.



T = Traditions

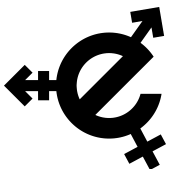
It can feel really rough being a younger queer and being left out of certain traditions, whether it's the holiday festivities of home or bringing a date to the school prom. This is where we create our own traditions! Traditions of our own range from Friendsgiving to Queer Prom to "Church" -- that's what my queer friends and I called our Friday night tradition of Chinese food, a movie at the theater, and ending with a slushie on the gas station parking lot's curb.

In our House (see Families of Choice, earlier), we have Sunday night dinners, and it's a full house with lots of food, laughter, and love. You and yours will develop traditions of your own; don't fret for those missed out upon in the meanwhile.



U = Unpack

We all need a time & place where we can “unpack” -- process and feel everything, then let it go. Ideally, we won't need to unpack much, or often. But we need that freedom to do so, because unpacking isn't comfortable or ideal for most, so it has to feel accessible and safe. This could be allowing yourself to cry in your room and really sit with the feeling until it doesn't sting so sharply anymore; this could be screaming your feels into a microphone during an angry af karaoke song. This could also be journaling, cooking, or otherwise creatively using the energy of your feels, like writing or crafting art. Unpacking, whether it is simply letting it out or finding a creative outlet, is needed for some feels before letting go.

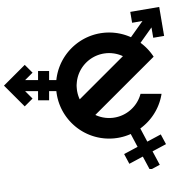


V = Voice Concerns Wisely

If you find yourself with a concern related to bullying, harassment, etc., you will want to be wise about speaking up and getting help.

Learn who in your school or workplace, and online communities, are allies. Try and figure out who has power/influence and can get things done. For instance, if the boys in the locker room are harassing you, the cisgender straight PE instructor with an anti-queer bumper sticker on his office door is probably also not a great choice.

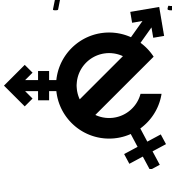
Your parents, if allied, can be helpful, but be wary -- parent complaints often actually increase bullying at school. *Anytime you go to an adult about bullying, tell them to make sure they don't mention to the bully that they found out from you.*



W = Wisdom

Wisdom slightly differs from knowledge, in that wisdom is a special type of knowledge: lived experience that teaches one how to apply knowledge effectively. This helps us know when to hold our tongues VS speak up; how to choose our battles; how to be who we want.

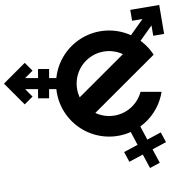
Queer youth grew up with open access to the Internet -- worldwide knowledge also means open-access to BS, scams, conspiracy theories, and to seeing people act like emboldened asses. Don't expect the world to reflect what you see online. Listen to other people's lived experiences, and seek out your elders. They may not know as much about tech or games or trends, but they know how to survive and *the proof is in the fact that they are still here.*



X = Xerophyte

Xerophytic plants are ones that need very little watering, that are hardy and strong even in harsh conditions. These are cacti and succulents, known for having unique elements to them, from spines to fruits to hairs. All xerophytes contain thick, tough skin but underneath, they hold a swelling depth of water, just as many queer youth contain swelling depths of emotions and creative inspiration.

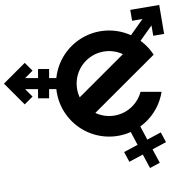
Even in drought, the xerophyte relies upon itself and it survives, having stored what it most values -- its water. It is always a good idea to ensure your inner wells have been filled, that you can rely on yourself, and don't run from your inner experiences -- *you don't even need to, because they can't damage the strong structure that is you.*



Y = YAAAAAAS

There has been a lot of advice in this book, but being queer is not just about surviving -- it's about *thriving*. Find the things in life that inspire you, make you feel a buzz of energy, that center you in the moment. Make those things the things you align your life with -- your values and goals, your hopes and dreams -- the *you* that you want to be and the life you want to live.

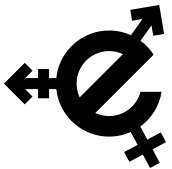
Find the best in every moment where you realize you are present and aware -- *find* the YAAAAAAS! Make it happen, because it's there but it isn't always obvious. Sometimes, it's really little value-aligned actions that get us to where we can finally have that bigger YAAAAAAS moment, so keep aligning yourself.



Z = Zipping on By

Live your best life and be your best self, no matter what you get handed. Living your best life is about being authentic and proud of the choices you make. When life hands you a turd sandwich, you find a way to value it or you simply don't let it get to you, and you move on in a direction that moves you closer to who you want to be and how you want to live.

Zipping on by means moving through quickly, rather than dwelling. Stay in the present moment, which is ongoing. Every mean thing someone said, every mistake you've made, every pain you've felt -- is all in the past the moment it happened. So move on when you realize you can. It's as simple as doing what you value.



Resources for Queer Youth

CDC website contains a bunch of resources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm>

Trevor Space - a social media site for queer youth 13-24:

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/visit-trevorspace/>

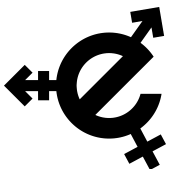
Q Chat Space - a social media chat site for queer teens:

www.qchatspace.org

LGBT National Help Center - weekly chat groups for queer teens:

www.glbthotline.org/youthchatrooms 800-246-7743

The SQSH - a queer-run helpline (Fri-Mon, 1-7 CDT): (314) 380-7774



About the Author

Nicholas Maio-Aether owns **Empowered: A Center for Sexuality** in St Louis, where their team works to assist humans with and without disabilities to achieve sexual access, sexual freedom, gender affirmation, and self-control of compulsive behaviors. They completed practicum experiences in Marriage & Family Therapy, Sex Therapy, and Behavior Analysis, and are a Certified Sexuality Counselor.

Nicholas provides Sexual Behavior Analysis (SBA), and has assisted polycoles, kinksters, gay couples, trans and nonbinary humans, among others, on their journeys. Nicholas developed and codirects the world's first certification model for Behavior Analysts to become affirming sexological practitioners -- the Certified Behavioral Sexologist (CBS) & (CBS-C). It is their mission to bring affirming care and solid science together for the best interests of the humans served.

Nicholas also weekly provides some form of free service to queer clients, whether it is a support group, a pro bono case, or community trainings.

