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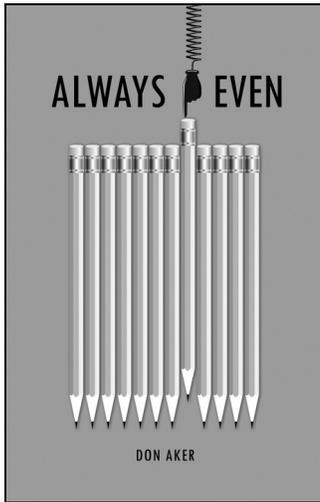
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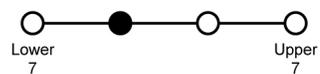
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**Level**



**Text Type**

- Realistic Fiction

**Genre**

- Fiction

**Line Masters**

- LM 8: A Character's Perspective
- LM 9: What Was I Thinking?

**Invitation to Learning**

# *Always Even*

by Don Aker

Purpose	Content Focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn the importance of reaching out for help when experiencing difficulties</li> <li>• To recognize the value of empathy and kindness to those who are dealing with mental health issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flashbacks (p. 48)</li> <li>• Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (p. 48)</li> <li>• Dealing with Challenging Situations (p. 49)</li> <li>• The Stigma of Mental Illness (p. 51)</li> </ul>

## What You Need to Know

### Flashbacks

A flashback is a literary device in which the author interrupts the chronological sequence of events to present past events that provide background information for events currently taking place. In this invitation, students have the opportunity to explore the author's use of flashbacks in *Always Even*.

**See:** Activity #1: In a Flash, p. 48

### Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Here are some basic facts about OCD from Mental Health Canada:

- The individual who suffers from OCD becomes trapped in a pattern of repetitive thoughts and behaviours that are senseless and distressing but extremely difficult to overcome.
- OCD sufferers often attempt to hide their disorder rather than seek help.

Experts have also noted that symptoms can worsen during times of stress. For further information about OCD, see the website for the Canadian Mental Health Association. If you know or suspect that a student in your class has OCD, you might have a school counsellor speak to the student before this text is introduced so that the student can use planned strategies to maintain confidence during the activities in this invitation.

**See:** Activity #2: What the Author Says, p. 48

## Dealing with Challenging Situations

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In *Always Even*, students learn how challenging life can be for someone with a mental illness. Teri struggles to deal with her feelings of guilt, confusion, frustration, and fear. The text also illustrates for students how beneficial it can be to reach out for help when they are confronted with challenging situations, and the importance of seeking a diagnosis and treatment from a qualified professional for serious mental health issues.

In *Always Even*, Teri fears that she has lost Shaniqua's friendship. Later, Teri learns that her fear was groundless and was based on an incorrect assumption. In this invitation, students have the opportunity to practise critically examining assumptions they make to avoid causing themselves unnecessary stress.

Students learn about the importance of cultivating calmness in order to make good decisions about how to handle the stress of challenging situations. They will also come to appreciate how beneficial it can be to reach out to others for support when they find themselves in a challenging situation.

**See:** Activity #3: I'm Losing It! p. 49; Activity #4: What Was I Thinking? p. 49; Activity #5: Tell Someone, p. 50

## The Stigma of Mental Illness

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Negative stereotypes of people with mental illness are pervasive in our society and are often fed by media depictions of mental illness. The negative effects of these stereotypes on people with mental illness can include the following:

- Greater suffering, including being bullied
- Being seen as a stereotype rather than an individual
- Unwillingness to seek professional help
- The potential for experiencing discrimination

Talking openly and honestly about mental illness is one way to help end the stigma. In this invitation, students learn about this stigma, are encouraged to feel empathy for people with a mental illness, and consider what they can do to counteract the stigma.

**See:** Activity #6: Fight the Stigma! p. 51

## Curriculum Connections

The activities in this Invitation to Learning have connections to Language, the Arts, Health and Physical Education, and Character Education.

## TEACHER TIP

These notes provide a “menu” of ideas and strategies. Timelines and the choice of options to pursue under each step are left to your discretion, as you know your students best.

# Teaching Notes

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## A. Before You Begin

**Centering:** *How do I prepare for this learning experience?*

Invite students to sit comfortably and think of a favourite place where they enjoy (or have enjoyed) spending time—somewhere that makes them feel happy, peaceful, or other positive emotional states. For example, students might choose a room in their home, a place in the community, a natural setting, or a place they have visited on vacation. Then say:

- *Close your eyes, take deep belly breaths in and out, and picture this favourite place.*
- *Visualize the details of this place and experience how you feel when you spend time there.*
- *Think about yourself in this place for two minutes. Use your imagination to explore and enjoy it.*

After two minutes have passed, quietly ask students to open their eyes. Remind them that when we need to take a break from a stressful situation, we can escape for a few moments without going anywhere just by taking the time to stop, breathe, and imagine being in a place that makes us happy.

## B. Introducing the Text

**Contemplating:** *What is this text about, and why is it important to me?*

Begin by asking:

- *Do you have certain routines or rituals you follow every day—for example, first thing in the morning, after school, or before bed? Share some examples.*
- *Why do you think people have routines that they follow every day?*
- *How do your routines or rituals make you feel?*
- *If you are not able to engage in your daily routines, how do you react?*

Explain that some people don't mind if their routines are disrupted, and there are even people who don't follow specific routines or rituals. Point out that others, however, find comfort in following familiar routines and rituals and have great difficulty when it's not possible to follow them. Tell students that *Always Even* is about a girl who struggles when her need to follow routines and rituals begins to have a negative impact on her life.

Invite students to examine the front and back covers and title of *Always Even*. Ask:

- *What do you think the title might refer to? Why do you think so?*



- *The author of this text, Don Aker, has written many books. Have you read any of his books? If so, what are you expecting, thinking about, or hoping for in this text? Record your thoughts so you can go back later and see if your expectations were fulfilled.*

## C. Reading the Text

**Connecting:** *What do I already know, and what do I need to know?*

Read aloud Chapter 1 to the section break on p. 3. Ask: *Why do you think Ivy says, “Maybe we should call her Two Times Teri”?*

Read aloud Chapters 2 and 3, stopping along the way to create a group chart listing the troubling things that Teri has been experiencing over the past few months. Then ask: *After hearing about the past few months in Teri’s life, do you think she has cause for concern? Why or why not?*

Suggest that students each pick a character (Teri, Shaniqua, or Teri’s father) to focus on through the rest of the story, noting how the character feels, what he/she does, and how he/she responds to situations. (Consider assigning characters to students so that an equal number of students focus on each character.) Provide students with **Line Master 8: A Character’s Perspective**, which they can use to record relevant information from the text. Explain that after finishing the story, students will use information they recorded on the line master to retell the story from the perspective of the character they chose.

After reading Chapter 5, recall with students their discussion of routines and rituals in the Introducing the Text activity. Emphasize to students that if they have a strong preference for following certain routines and rituals, this does not mean that they have OCD. Point out that many people follow routines and rituals and these do not create problems in their lives. Explain that for people with OCD, their routines and rituals have a negative impact on their lives. You might recall with students the negative impacts that Teri’s routines and rituals have on her life.

Continue reading aloud the remainder of the text.

Invite students to break into small groups to briefly retell the story from the perspective of the character they chose. (Consider assigning students to groups of three in which each student retells the story from a different perspective.) You might provide an example to clarify for students, such as the following: *How would Teri’s father tell the story? For example, he might start by describing what he was noticing about Teri’s behaviour before he had the special chat with her.*

Alternatively, students could retell the story by writing one or more journal entries from the perspective of the character they focused on. Encourage students to communicate the emotions the character is feeling.

### TEACHER TIP

Record the text as it is read aloud so students who are ELL or who need support can listen to the story again in school or at home in order to be part of the discussion that follows. This is called *assisted reading*.



## D. After Reading: Reflecting About the Text

**Confirming:** *How do I practise what I have learned?*

### Activity Related to ... Flashbacks

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#### Activity #1: In a Flash

#### Discussion Starter #2

Connect to **Discussion Starter #2:** *Chapters 2 and 3 present events that happened before the events in Chapter 1. Why might the author have decided not to present these events in chronological order? Do you agree with his decision? Why or why not?*

Establish that Chapters 2 and 3 are flashbacks—these chapters present events that took place before the events in Chapter 1. You might ask students to share examples of flashbacks they have encountered in novels (including graphic novels), stories, movies, and comics.

Arrange students in small groups to share ideas they have in response to the first question in Discussion Starter 2. Then provide time for students to discuss their ideas with the whole group. If necessary, guide students to see that one of the purposes of an opening chapter is to engage readers in the story so they will be interested in reading on. Discuss how this might be one reason why the author began the book with the events in Chapter 1, which leave readers with questions that make them want to continue reading. Then have students form an opinion on the author's decision to use flashbacks, and share and support their opinion.

Close by encouraging students to consider whether it would be a good idea to use a flashback when they are writing stories of their own.

### Activity Related to ... Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

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#### Activity #2: What the Author Says

Point out that the author, Don Aker, has included in the story quite a bit of information about the mental illness called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Arrange students into small groups and ask them to scan the text for information about OCD and to record their findings. Depending on the size of the groups, you might have each group member scan and record information from one or two chapters and then share their findings with the rest of their group.

Provide time for students to share with the larger group the information they found about OCD and any questions they might have. Then ask:

- *What do you think it would be like to have OCD?*
- *Why is it important to show empathy and support for someone who has a mental illness like OCD?*

## TEACHER TIP

Remind students that **they are not health professionals and they cannot be responsible for others' well-being.** Instead, their focus should be on supporting those others in finding help.

## Focus On

Self-Regulation

## Discussion Starter #1

Remind students that OCD is a mental health problem that can be treated by a professional health-care team. Explain that the first step in dealing with a problem like this is to seek a qualified professional and receive a diagnosis.

## Activities Related to ... Dealing with Challenging Situations

### Activity #3: I'm Losing It!

Begin by asking:

- *What do you think people mean when they say they are “losing it”?*
- *What do you think the word “it” refers to? (self-control)*
- *What words would you use to describe how it feels when you are “losing it”?*

Explain that we all go through experiences where we feel that we are losing self-control. When this happens, we can recognize that our emotions are taking over. Point out that a good way to deal with this situation is to stop and think about what is happening, why it is happening, and what we can do about it.

Share an experience when you lost your self-control (perhaps from when you were the same age as the students) or create a fictional anecdote. Guide students to consider how the situation might have been different if you or the character had taken a moment to stop, breathe, and think about what was happening and why as well as what might be the best way to respond to the situation. Provide time for students to silently consider an experience when they lost self-control and ask them to imagine how the experience might have been different if they had remained calm and considered the best way to respond. (Avoid asking students to share the experience they recalled.)

Point out that when we are “losing it,” we are experiencing stress. Connect to **Discussion Starter #1: Teri’s OCD causes her body to react as if it is stressed. How does your body react to stress? What are some situations that cause these reactions? How do you cope with stress?** Students could think-pair-share to discuss the questions with a partner. Ask volunteers to share their responses with the larger group.

Conclude by emphasizing to students that it is important to recognize when they are feeling stressed and to use coping strategies to help manage the stress.

### Activity #4: What Was I Thinking?

Recall with students the events in Chapter 1 of *Always Even*. Ask:

- *What words would you use to describe how Teri feels after she overhears the conversation between Shaniqua and Ivy?*
- *What assumption does Teri make about Shaniqua?*
- *What evidence does Teri have to believe her assumption is accurate?*
- *Was Teri’s assumption correct? How do you know?*



Explain that sometimes we make assumptions that are based on feelings, such as fear, rather than facts and logic. Point out that in many cases these assumptions might not be correct, and we can cause ourselves unnecessary pain, difficulty, or stress by making incorrect assumptions.

Have students complete **Line Master 9: What Was I Thinking?** to practise taking a critical look at the kinds of assumptions people sometimes make. To model the activity, you could complete the first example situation as a group.

When students have completed the line master, have volunteers share their responses with the class. Then ask:

- *Teri makes an assumption about Shaniqua after she overhears Shaniqua talking to Ivy. Imagine you are Teri and you are carefully examining the assumption you made about Shaniqua. What thoughts might you have?*
- *Do you think that carefully examining your assumptions and considering other possibilities might help you in the future? Why or why not?*

### Discussion Starter #3

Connect to **Discussion Starter #3**: *Teri's father says, "It's hard for people to interpret why others do what they do, and they don't want to offend anyone, especially somebody close to them." If you had been Teri's friend, do you think you would have spoken to her about the behaviours that Shaniqua noticed? Why or why not?*

Invite volunteers to share their ideas with the class. Then pivot the discussion back to the topic of assumptions. Explain that when people have difficulty interpreting why others do what they do, they often make assumptions, which might turn out to be incorrect.

### Discussion Starter #4

Point out that Teri makes the assumption that her OCD is her own fault. Connect to **Discussion Starter #4**: *Teri learns that her OCD is not her fault. What effect do you think this knowledge has on her? Why?*

Invite students to respond to the Discussion Starter. Emphasize that by telling her father and learning more about OCD, Teri is able to overcome the negative feelings she had about herself when she thought her OCD was her fault.

Close by reminding students how important it is to critically examine the assumptions they make, especially when an assumption causes unpleasant emotions such as fear or anger.

### Discussion Starter #5

#### Activity #5: Tell Someone

Connect to **Discussion Starter #5**: *Why does it take Teri so long to tell others about her problem? In what ways does she benefit from talking about it? If you had a problem similar to Teri's, how easy or difficult would you find it to tell someone? Why?* Invite students to share their responses.

## TEACHER TIP

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In many cultures, talking to an older person, such as a family relation (or an Elder in Aboriginal cultures) is valued as a way of seeking out wisdom that the person has gained through life experience. Encourage students to seek out trusted adults when they are in need of wisdom to help them deal with a situation or problem.

Point out that even if students have a problem or concern that seems small compared to Teri's, talking about it can still help. Share with students the saying "A burden shared is a burden halved." Define "burden" for students and talk about how a problem, worry, or concern can be a burden to someone. Then ask:

- *What does this saying mean?*
- *How might the saying relate to the events in Always Even?*
- *When you're having problems, do you tend to talk to others about them? Why or why not?*
- *After reading and discussing Always Even, do you think you will be more likely to share with someone a problem you are having? Why or why not?*

Confirm with students that there are times when we all need help and support from others, and it is important to reach out for help when we are having a difficult time. Explain that while friends can be a wonderful source of support, it is best to talk with a trusted adult for more serious problems.

## Activity Related to ... The Stigma of Mental Illness

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### Activity #6: Fight the Stigma!

Recall with students that one reason Teri doesn't tell others about her problem right away is because she thinks it makes her a "freak." Ask:

- *Ivy makes fun of Teri by suggesting the nickname "Two Times Teri." Do you think this nickname contributed to Teri's feeling that she is a "freak"? Why or why not?*
- *If Ivy understood that Teri had OCD, do you think she would still make fun of Teri? Why or why not?*
- *Have you ever heard people make fun of someone with a mental illness? Have you heard people use unkind words like "freak" to describe someone with a mental illness? (Avoid asking students for examples of unkind words.)*
- *Why do you think some people lack empathy for those with a mental illness and treat them with disrespect when they would not react the same way to a person with a physical illness?*

Explain to students the meaning of the phrase "the stigma of mental illness." Talk about the potential effects of this stigma (see What You Need to Know, The Stigma of Mental Illness, p. 45 in this resource).

Brainstorm with students things they can do to counteract the stigma of mental illness, such as

- Refusing to use unkind words for people with a mental illness, and speaking up when they hear others using these words
- Treating people with a mental illness with the same kindness and respect they would give anyone else



- Avoiding stereotyping people with mental illness, and recognizing them as individuals who are coping with a challenging situation
- Talking openly and respectfully about mental illness to demonstrate that it is not a shameful topic

For more ideas on ways to fight the stigma of mental illness, you might have students visit Bell's Let's Talk website.

Close by reminding students of the importance of demonstrating empathy and kindness to anyone who is facing difficult challenges, including mental illness.

## **E. A Step Further: Additional Learning Activities**

**Creating:** *What are some other ways I can use what I have learned?*

The goal of this section is to extend students' learning across the curriculum and beyond the classroom.

### The Arts, Literacy, Empathy

Recall with students how much Teri benefited from the empathy and support provided by her father and Shaniqua. Have students conduct a campaign to promote sensitivity and empathy among students, especially for those going through a difficult time.

Invite students to think of a simple but effective message they could communicate to help achieve their purpose. Possibilities include the following:

- Think before you speak. Don't let your words hurt others' feelings.
- Be an empathetic listener when friends need to talk.
- Make someone's day by doing a small act of kindness.

As a class, brainstorm various forms students could use to communicate their messages, such as a poster, cartoon, song, poem, or rap. Provide time for students to work individually or in pairs to develop their message in the form they chose.

Students could post print text forms around the school or on a class or school website. You could arrange for students to perform songs or raps for other classrooms.

### Volunteerism, Values, Empathy, Language

Recall with students how Shaniqua felt empathy for Teri, so she took action by going to speak to Teri's father about her concerns. Explain that sometimes we get so busy with our own lives that we forget about the struggles that others are going through. Encourage students to reach out to the community to do something that will make someone else's life better. Provide students with examples such as the following and invite them to suggest their own ideas:

- Design and send a card to someone they know who is ill or who has had a recent misfortune, such as a fire, loss of a pet, or death in the family.
- Explore volunteer opportunities open to people their age and volunteer in a way that will make a positive difference in the community.
- Arrange to visit a seniors' residence or nursing home to talk with residents.
- Organize a school food drive to collect non-perishable goods to donate to a local food bank.

Remind students that when they do something kind for someone else, it has the added benefit of making them feel better about themselves.

### **Throughout the Learning Experience— Celebrating “I can!”**

Celebration occurs at various points throughout the learning experience. See p. 7 of this resource for a discussion of celebrating learning.

An activity celebrating learning might ask students to complete the sentence “I can...” This will help to promote confidence, self-efficacy, and self-concept. Here are ways you can incorporate celebration into this Invitation to Learning:

- Invite students to celebrate times when they stopped themselves from “losing it” by using a coping strategy.
- Encourage students to give themselves a pat on the back any time they reach out for help and support with a difficult situation.
- Suggest that students thank their friends for being there when needed and congratulate themselves on times when they have been an empathetic and supportive friend.
- Celebrate what they have done to help other people in their community.

### **The Parent/Caregiver Connection**

Parents and caregivers play an important role as part of the shared support system for children. Have students prepare a letter to their parents/caregivers explaining what they have learned from *Always Even* about the importance of reaching out for help when they need it. Encourage them to share this at home and engage in dialogue about times when they have reached out to family members for support and how doing so helped them.