



**is for Zen**

## Z is for Zen

- Extremely high rates of depression, anxiety and self-harm in teenagers have been linked to heavy social media use, with a 40-year high in suicide amongst teen girls. Even if this isn't the root cause, it's been referred to as possibly being 'an accelerant — the gasoline that turns a flicker of adolescent angst into a blaze.'<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the online world can be an excellent way of distracting ourselves from our feelings, it doesn't get rid of them. They bubble away subconsciously, still impacting how we feel about ourselves. Our repeated failed attempts to get control over our feelings, experiences, self-worth, popularity, appearance, and lives through social media can leave us feeling worse off, beating ourselves up for things that are simply not our fault.

For example, when making a short video for an app like TikTok, I can literally spend *hours* trying to match up words and songs and perfect execution, where all I'm concentrating on is the video. However, once I've posted the video and logged off, I feel a tidal wave of anxiety at how the post will do, anger and guilt at myself for wasting such a huge chunk of my time on something that I know is ultimately quite pointless, and worried about all the other things I have to do.

I might log back on to reassure myself by checking how the video is doing, and get sucked into a numbing scrolling vortex, as in 'T is for Time', losing even more of my day. This time when I log out, I might be beating myself up for not being as good as the other videos I've subconsciously compared

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<sup>1</sup> Markham Heid, '[We Need to Talk About Kids and Smartphones](#)' | Time, 10 October 2017. Accessed 17 March 2022.

myself to. This can often end up with me logging back in to delete my original post!

Ultimately, our interaction with social media can sometimes be a way of self-harming ourselves without even realising. As technology develops, we might be able to invert ourselves more deeply into this online world, but we will always stay human beings – the body and mind come together as a package deal!

This means we're still going to have feelings, emotions, and human needs like sleeping, eating, or showering. As much as we might like to, we can't leave our bodies behind in cases of goo. The real world exists for a reason, and if we miss out on this, we miss out on the entire human experience of being alive. The virtual world cannot give us the fundamental requirements we need to be truly content, such as having genuinely meaningful in-person connections with other people.

We aren't born with social media accounts or a virtual watch around our wrists for a reason: we don't need them to exist. We are not products – we are people.

### **Illnesses**

Unfortunately, it's easy to become so disconnected from our human needs, that we can easily experience challenges with our general wellbeing, that can quickly result in serious illnesses requiring medical support.

Some of these might include the below mental health issues, which can be seriously debilitating conditions. I STRONGLY advise speaking to a doctor as soon as possible if you are suffering with any of these:

- **Depression**

Feelings of hopelessness and sadness that last several days can amount to depression. Many people who use social media compulsively can experience this due to having low self-worth, low self-esteem, and low

enjoyment of life, especially if they don't have a strong identity outside of the virtual world.

I've experienced depression throughout my life, which for me, feels like joy and happiness have been sucked out of my days. Feeling happy can feel very hard, and I struggle to motivate myself to do the things I know will help me to feel better, such as exercising. When we're on our phones, numbing ourselves to emotion and certain stimulating experiences, such as those in 'X is for X-rated', we stop feeling our full spectrum of emotions.

It can also fool us into believing this numbing sensation is 'relaxing', when it's actually exposing us to even more content and behaviours that make us unhappy. Whenever I've taken a break from social media, I've literally noticed my senses such as smell and noticing beauty around me to return – these simple pleasures return very quickly.

If you're experiencing this, I would advise you to start looking for one tiny way you can experience joy each day. For me it was eating an almond croissant, for others it's been going out for a walk, or speaking to someone they love. It doesn't have to be bubble baths worthy of a #selfcare hashtag, but the simple action of doing an activity in the real world that will allow you to enjoy your life. Spot those seconds of happiness, and follow them like an investigator. Each one is shining a pathway out of the black hole you might currently feel stuck in.

You will feel better, you will enjoy your life, and you will experience happiness. You can't possibly imagine how good your life is going to become, so please hold out for that time, and until then, be as kind to yourself as you possibly can.

- **Anxiety**

Feelings of constant worry and stress can amount to anxiety, of which there are several forms. For example, there may be anxiety about having to do certain things, be around certain people, or having panic attacks. It's uncontrollable thinking, worrying, and panicking – anxiety can feel as

though your brain has gone into SOS mode, with a range of other symptoms such as tensing up certain muscles, or sweating, for example.

I've suffered from anxiety so much that it simply feels normal to me, to the extent that I actively avoid going out in the dark (which makes it difficult in the UK winter, as the sun sets at 4pm!). Social media can fuel anxiety, because it offers us an unlimited range of possible scenarios to worry about and attach our thoughts to. At the same time, it gives us a false sense of control, such as analysing the finer details of people's lives to try and figure out whether they might be upset with us, for example. I often find myself feeling a sense of relief when I see people post online, as I know they're still alive!

If we're literally equating life and death situations to this online world, it's obvious that we're all going to worry. Social media is not real life. As in 'C is for Content', what we see on there is biased and distorted. We can't process complex information through 180 character tweets, or infographics on Instagram – life is just not that simple. When we use social media as a self-soothing 'safety behaviour', it can become addictive, fuelling even more anxiety if we're unable to relax ourselves by checking our profiles, for example, keeping us trapped.

An anxiety-free life is possible, as in 'R is for Resilience'. By engaging with real life, we solve problems and overcome our fears. Our experiences make up who we are, but if we're refusing to have any because it feels safer to live through our phones, we're missing out on our lives.

I've found mindfulness to be extremely helpful for anxiety, including noticing when I'm worrying and asking myself what the worst possible case scenario could be. Most of the things we worry about, we can't change. Once we accept this, they disappear – it's only when we repeatedly try and fail to control these worries that they get worse.

- **Eating disorders**

As in 'D is for Disordered Eating', eating disorders are unsurprisingly, very common in relation to excessive social media use, with rates

skyrocketing since Instagram became popular on a mass scale in 2012.<sup>2</sup> These might include anorexia, bulimia, over-exercising, bingeing and restricting, and more.

Social media can present ‘healthy’ information or ‘inspiration’ in a way that fuels negative comparisons to other people, especially in relation to their bodies, which amplifies our society’s pre-existing obsession with weight. Nutritional information can easily be taken out of context to become restrictive diets, but with a veneer of justifiable reasons, such as being vegan. Veganism is great for our health and planet, but only if we cook proper food and ensure we’re still getting enough nutrients. My attempt at veganism failed because I just tried to survive on bread, pasta, fruit and vegetables!

Disordered eating is so dangerous because dieting is so widely normalised in our society. Before we know it, we can easily have a full-blown eating disorder which consumes our entire lives. Having suffered with anorexia and bulimia myself, I would strongly advise addressing the root cause of these problems as soon as you notice them. Speaking from experience, sticking your head in a toilet bowl multiple times a day and spending every waking moment you have obsessing over all the food you can’t eat is a horrible way to live. There is so much more to life than having a certain kind of body.

- **Body dysmorphic disorder**

Although the perfect body simply doesn’t exist, as in ‘B is for Beauty’, we can convince ourselves that there is something wrong with ours. This is when a person worries a lot about their appearance, especially a particular area of their body, spends a lot of time comparing their looks

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<sup>2</sup> Marie Galmiche, Pierre Dechelotte, Gregory Lambert and Marie Pierre Tavolacci, ‘Prevalence of eating disorders over the 2000–2018 period: a systematic literature review’, *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Oxford Academic*, 26 April 2019. Accessed 20 February 2022.  
[www.academic.oup.com/ajcn/article/109/5/1402/5480601](http://www.academic.oup.com/ajcn/article/109/5/1402/5480601)

with other peoples', and generally obsessively try to control or 'fix' their appearance.

Along with most of the models that I've worked with, I've suffered with this throughout my career, having been heavily pressured to meet impossible measurements that literally meant nothing. Despite knowing I am objectively very thin, it's taken a huge amount of work to stop thinking of myself as 'curvy', because of this.

It's desperately sad to hate a part of your body so much that you obsess over it, and especially when it's not even apparent to other people. Social media can work as the equivalent of mean model agents, by holding completely meaningless and impossible standards over us, literally offering us airbrushed versions of ourselves every time we look at our phones.

It can be easy to become obsessed with these standards and fixate on a particular 'issue', which makes BDD even more dangerous because it's not always apparent, and could arise in 'normalised' ways. For example, Bigorexia, or 'muscle dysmorphia', can lead to a harmful and obsessive focus on muscle development, which 1 in 10 men are estimated to experience!<sup>3</sup> Simply viewing exercising content may not be harmful in itself, but when we become obsessed with this and looking like what we see, it can easily become dangerous.

As in 'S is for Surgery', this can end up with us become addicted to potentially life-threatening medical procedures that don't make us feel any more confident – they just give us more things to 'fix'.

Therapy can be very helpful to overcome this, along with avoiding things that trigger your symptoms, such as using filters! We've all been given little jelly bags to walk around this world with that nobody truly

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Hoyles, 'Bigorexia - 1 in 10 Men Suffering?', *Hoyles Fitness*, 22 September 2015. Accessed 20 February 2022. [www.hoylesfitness.com/fitness-news/bigorexia-1-in-10-men-suffering/](http://www.hoylesfitness.com/fitness-news/bigorexia-1-in-10-men-suffering/)

understands, so why waste our time obsessing over the dimensions of these jelly bags, instead of using them to their full potential?

- **Addictions and substance abuse**

We can be addicted to anything, including thoughts, drugs, behaviours, smoking, alcohol, social media, work and so on! Addiction is sometimes explained in the 'Four Cs':

1. Compulsion (having an irresistible or overwhelming urge / desire to do something) – *e.g feeling an overwhelming urge to check our social media feed in the morning*
2. Cravings (sensations that mimic physical needs like hunger or thirst, which generally leads to feeling anxious when the cravings to do something aren't satisfied) – *e.g if we don't check our social media in the morning, feeling increasingly physically uncomfortable and repeated thinking about it.*
3. Consequences (when someone continues to do something despite an awareness of the negative consequences it will bring) – *e.g when we know checking our social media will distract us from getting ready, making us late for our plans, and generally lead us to feeling annoyed with ourselves for being unable to wait.*
4. Control (when someone is unable to exercise any restraint when it comes to their habits – they can't stop by themselves). *e.g checking our social media accounts, no matter how hard we try not to.*

Repeated harmful behaviours, such as taking drugs, can easily spiral out of control and destroy people's lives by becoming full blown addictions. Social media normalizes this, such as the addiction of using filters, or using 'thinspiration' pictures. It can also glamorize harmful substances such as alcohol and drugs, which are highly addictive and definitely NOT glamorous or 'cool'.



If you're feeling like a behaviour is outside of your control, please don't hesitate to ask for help. No addiction is untreatable, and the first step can often be recognising that there's a problem, especially when things like drinking alcohol and dieting are so normalised by our society. There is no shame in asking for help and every reason to do so – having your life controlled by an addiction is such a terrible waste. I lost many years of my life to alcohol, and probably even more to my screens, but if I can change, so can you.

- **Self-harm**

This is when a person intentionally injures themselves, including behaviours such as cutting or burning themselves, picking at their skin, pulling their hair, and hitting themselves. Having experienced this, I know how shameful, confusing, and addictive it can feel. It can arise from a range of situations, such as attempting to control pain or emotions, or seeking help, or self-punishment.

Social media has amplified and glamorised the problem of self-harm significantly. This is particularly girls and women – the rate for those aged 16-24 in the UK who had self-harmed increased from 6.5% in 2000 to 19.7% in 2014.<sup>4</sup> With everything from anti-recovery 'communities' on social media encouraging this behaviour, to group sessions, and an unlimited number of posts about it, it's unsurprising that so many of us are vulnerable to this harmful content.

If you're experiencing this, please remember that it is **not your fault**. You are not a bad person. You simply need to get the help that you very rightly deserve. You are certainly not alone, as you probably know from the internet – but this doesn't mean that this is okay. You deserve to live in your beautiful body and enjoy it. There are ways of processing the pain you're experiencing in a healthy way.

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<sup>4</sup> Denis Campbell, 'One in five young women have self-harmed, study reveals', *the Guardian*, 4 June 2019. Accessed 20 February 2022.  
[www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/04/one-in-five-young-women-have-self-harmed-study-reveals](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/04/one-in-five-young-women-have-self-harmed-study-reveals)

- **Feeling suicidal**

Suicide is the act of intentionally causing one's own death, and it's the fourth leading cause of death in 15-19 year olds.<sup>5</sup> Feeling suicidal is obviously not good, because not only can it lead to actually acting upon this, we can torment ourselves with harmful thoughts – and your life matters so much more than I can put into words.

I've experienced this throughout my life, and I understand how dangerous and awful it is to live like this. I was absolutely terrified to tell anyone in case I was put into a mental health hospital, but also terrified of actually acting on it in case it didn't work. This was really just shame, and fear of asking for help. I realised that I didn't want to 'die' – I just couldn't bear the emotional pain that I was experiencing, and didn't know how to process or cope with.

When we feel like we can't talk about this out of fear or guilt, especially given that we might not want to scare anyone or admit that this is really how we're feeling, it builds up, because we can't process or understand it properly. If we're suffering in silence, we might be likely to go on the internet in search of someone who is in a similar position – I remember feeling like I was the only person on Earth who felt like this.

As seen in this book, the internet can take our feelings and distort them, exposing us to more of the causes that have resulted in us first feeling this way. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to process our emotions in a healthy way on social media – Instagram and TikTok is not therapy. Although it might help to see other people are experiencing similar emotions, when you're in this state you may be highly vulnerable to exploitation, and **you need support in real life, not the internet.**

**Please, please, please speak to someone if you're feeling suicidal.** Please do not hesitate to call a helpline like Samaritans (116 123), or the others listed in the resources part of this book. Please just tell someone

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<sup>5</sup> 'Suicide', *World Health Organization*, 17 June 2021. Accessed 20 February 2022. [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide)

how you're feeling, and if you don't get the help you need, try someone else. Do not give up on the help you deserve.

It took me over 15 years to speak to someone about feeling suicidal. When I did, I received the help I needed, and was diagnosed with ADHD. I haven't felt this way since, but I will always remember how painful and all consuming it was, and how I didn't believe it would ever end. I couldn't see a way out, and I very nearly died, until I finally understood that I just didn't want to live how I was living, and sought the help to make these changes that I needed.

Two years later, I was on *Lorraine* speaking about the book I'd published that week which was on the cover of *the Times*, with a full time job, stable home, and happy relationships. This was a future I couldn't have imagined, but it was there. Hold out for your future – you can't possibly imagine all of the wonderful things that are waiting to be experienced by you.

### **Take control of your wellbeing**

Just as social media can show us dangerously negative content, this can also be dangerously positive. No person is 'happy' 100% of the time – if we were never sad, then we'd be unable to identify what happiness is. Feeling a range of emotions is the essence of being human – you have your own unique soul.

So this isn't me telling you how to 'be happy', but simply sharing some evidence of how you can improve your overall wellbeing and get the most out of your life.

#### **1. Connect with other people**

As in 'F is for Friendships', having good relationships are very important to help build a sense of belonging and self-worth, provide opportunities to share positive experiences, and to have emotional support and allow you to support others.

As difficult as it might feel when you're in a negative spiral, please try your best to prioritize seeing friends or family in real life, and to be truly present with them. You can also connect with people through ways such as volunteering, which is also an excellent way of putting your difficulties into perspective!

## **2. Be physically active**

Exercise helps us to raise our self-esteem, set goals and achieve them, and causes chemical changes in our brains which can help to positively change our mood. Obviously, it's also good for our physical health and keeping fit and healthy overall.

It can be extremely difficult to motivate yourself to exercise, especially if you're stuck in a scrolling vortex, but you will simply never regret it, even if it's just going for a walk. The key thing is to try and find activities that you enjoy, from rollerblading to yoga, dancing to swimming – anything! Doing exercise first thing in the day (and even sleeping in your gym clothes, if you're like me) can really help ensure this becomes part of your routine.

As above, exercise can become addictive in itself, so try to find a balance with the activities you do, and ensure these are primarily for **enjoyment** rather than looking or feeling a certain way. We can't control the outcome of exercise, but we can control how we choose to experience it.

## **3. Learn new skills**

This can help us to strengthen our self-confidence & raise self-esteem, find a sense of purpose, and to connect with other people. In the world of Youtube the choices can be overwhelming, but just pick one thing at a time, and make it small!

For example, you could try cooking a new recipe, or signing up for a course at a college to learn a new language. My book writing started out as blogging! If you can, try to avoid doing this through apps, because it can be so easy to start and stop new hobbies, and beat ourselves up as a

result! Start with choosing just one action to try out today, with no expectation on yourself to be 'good'.

#### **4. Give to others**

As in 'K is for Kindness', when we're kind to others this can create positive feelings and a sense of reward, give us feelings of purpose and self-worth, and helps us to connect with other people.

Kindness can be anything from complimenting a stranger to listening to a friend in need, sending a gratitude letter or volunteering at the local homeless shelter. If you can, try to do this in 'real' life, rather than online, as this will feel more meaningful. The more effort we make, the more genuine pleasure and connection we will feel as a result.

#### **5. Mindfulness**

This is paying attention to the present moment, as in 'U is for Unreal'. It can involve noticing your thoughts, feelings, body, and your current environment. As we can lose touch with both ourselves and the 'real world' in the online world, mindfulness allows us to reconnect with life in a way that feels good.

Simply noticing your thoughts is the most powerful thing you can do. You don't have to meditate for hours sitting still, but simply notice the inner voice narrating your life. Do you like what you hear? Are the thoughts helpful, or are they keeping you stuck in a loop of negative emotions? Would you say them out loud, or to somebody else? Are they true?

Challenging unhelpful thoughts has been the most life changing thing I've done, because it's helped me to see how I'm believing and acting upon thoughts that are simply not true. We have thousands of thoughts every day – so take care over which ones you're listening to.

# Resources

These lists are very much non-exhaustive, so if you think something needs to be added, please send me a message at [www.leannemaskell.com](http://www.leannemaskell.com).

## Helplines to call (UK)

- **NHS:** 111 (call 999 if you feel your life is in danger)
- **Samaritans:** 116-123
- **Campaign Against Living Miserably:** 0800 58 58 58  
Webchat page: <https://www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat/>
- **Papyrus** (for people under 35): 0800 068 41 41  
Text: 07860039967
- **Childline** (for children and young people under 19): 0800 1111
- **SOS Silence of Suicide:** 0300 1020 505  
Email: [support@sosilenceofsuicide.org](mailto:support@sosilenceofsuicide.org)
- **Shout Crisis Text Line:** text 'SHOUT' to 85258
- **YoungMinds Crisis Messenger Text Line:** text 'YM' to 85258

## Charities

- **Mind:** <https://www.mind.org.uk>
- **Mental Health Foundation:** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>
- **Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation:**  
<https://www.bddfoundation.org>
- **BEAT:**

- **Anxiety UK:** <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>
- **Campaign Against Living Miserably** (men's mental health charity): <https://www.thecalmzone.net>
- **Rethink Mental Illness:** [We are Rethink Mental Illness](https://www.rethinkmentalillness.org.uk/)
- **No Panic:** <https://nopic.org.uk/>
- **Young Minds:** <https://www.youngminds.org.uk>
- **The Molly Rose foundation:** <https://mollyrosefoundation.org>

### Books

- **For body image:** 'Women Don't Owe You Pretty', Florence Given
- **For time:** 'Time and How To Spend It', James Wallman
- **For mindfulness:** 'The Power of Now', Eckhart Tolle
- **For understanding dopamine:** 'the Molecule of More', Daniel Lieberman MD, Michael Long et al.
- **For questioning your thoughts:** 'Loving What Is', Byron Katie
- **For self-esteem:** 'Self-Compassion: the proven power of being kind to yourself', Kristen Neff
- **For addiction:** 'In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: close encounters with addiction', Gabor Mate
- **For stress and overall health:** 'When the Body Says No: the cost of hidden stress', Gabor Mate
- **For paying attention:** 'ADHD: an A to Z', by me! Or 'The Organized Mind', Daniel Levitin
- **For boundaries:** 'Set Boundaries, Find Peace', Nedra Glover Tawwab
- **For people pleasing:** 'The Disease to Please', Harriet Braiker

- **For processing emotions:** ‘How to do the work’, Dr Nicole LePera
- **For eating disorders:** ‘The Opposite of Butterfly Hunting’, Evanna Lynch
- **For social media challenges:** ‘Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now’, Jaron Lanier
- **For insight into ‘influencer’ culture:** ‘Mixed Feelings’, Naomi Shimada & Sarah Raphael
- **For confidence:** ‘Fuck Being Humble’, Stef Sword-Williams
- **For dating:** ‘How To Fix A Broken Heart’, Guy Winch
- **For overcoming addictions to harmful content:** ‘Your Brain On Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction’, Gary Wilson, Noah Church et al.

#### Other recommendations

- **Body Love Sketch Club:** a ‘body positive & creative empowerment project’ holding joyful art workshops focusing on life drawing, healing and empowerment. Their events are seriously AMAZING and some are held online: [Body Love Sketch Club Events | Eventbrite](#)
- **Music Therapy (Talia Girton):** if you’re not sure about therapy, try this! Talia takes the very simple concept of having fun and playing, and helps you to process your emotions along the way. Sessions with her changed my life and helped me during incredibly difficult times - <https://www.taliagirton.com>
- **Energy healing (Josephine McGrail):** when my brain has just been too emotional to be able to process anything, I’ve found energy healing to cut through the mess and sort my body out in ways that I simply can’t put into words. I can’t recommend Josephine enough.



- **No Lights No Lycra:** for dancing in the dark! Sessions are held online and in person: [www.nolightsnolycra.com](http://www.nolightsnolycra.com)
- **The Joyful Wild (Emily Harding):** Emily teaches yoga in the most empowering way for 'every body', and it's impossible to leave one of her classes unhappy. I find they're especially great for people who 'don't really do yoga'! She teaches in person and online: [www.emilyharding.live/join-the-joyful-wild-emily-harding-yoga-on-demand](http://www.emilyharding.live/join-the-joyful-wild-emily-harding-yoga-on-demand)

#### Further resources

- Center for Humane Technology
- Your Undivided Attention podcast
- The Social Dilemma (documentary)
- The Instagram Effect (BBC)
- That Feeling When podcast