

SUMMARY

SMART GIRLS SCREW UP TOO

BELLA ZANESCO



Summary of “Smart Girls Screw Up Too” by Bella Zanesco

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Discover the no-nonsense guide for creating the life
you want.

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Introduction

Inevitably you will go through moments in life that will devastate you, destroy you, and make you feel as if nothing will ever get better. For author Bella Zanesco it was hearing two simple, life-changing words that we've all heard at some point in our lives. "It's over." These two words shattered her to the core as her perfectly planned future dissolved as if it had never even existed. Falling into a state of depression, Zanesco didn't know how to pick herself back up. She'd tried all the usual "bandaids," including swiping on Tinder, retail therapy, and bottles of pinot grigio but nothing worked. She likens this experience "to a vase smashing on the floor: you can glue it back together, but it's never quite the same -- you can always see the cracks, the chips." As she lay in the fetal position, she asked herself, "What if the new version of me could somehow be the better than the sleek, activity-based and society-defined version I'd always sought to be?" Well, you're going to learn how she achieved this.

No matter how big or small, if you're navigating a life change and want to create a life that you want, then this book is for you. Perhaps you'd like to start a business, have a fulfilling relationship with your partner, or simply approach your day with excitement versus dread. So if your vase is just slightly cracked or even completely shattered, Bella Zanesco is going hand you the Golden Glue to help you put the pieces back together.

Feelings and Emotions

The first step in beginning your journey to happiness and success is building a solid foundation. Building your foundation involves uncovering your autopilot settings and finding the authentic *you*. It means giving you the tools to help you confidently answer the questions, “Who do I want to be?” and “What do I (really) want?” So in order to do that, we first need to get in touch with your feelings and emotions.

If you’re like Zanesco, then you understand what the downside feels like. For Zanesco it meant feeling as if she was going to die from heartbreak because life had officially knocked her down and she wasn’t certain she would ever be able to get up. She changed from the girl with the world at her feet to someone that was a mere shell of who she used to be. It was in this moment of despair that Zanesco began thinking about the time she’d been sitting on the beach reading a book. As she read, she saw a group of women run into the ocean laughing and enjoying themselves. Having clearly come from a yoga class, these women had strong, beautiful bodies with a kind of buoyancy about them that Zanesco couldn’t explain. All she knew was that she envied them. She found herself thinking, “What might my life look like if I felt like those women did more often?”

In this moment of thinking back to these women, Zanesco pulled out her notebook and wrote down three things: her problems, her current feelings, and how she wanted to feel. Her problems included, “I don’t love what I do and I don’t want to get out of bed to do it,” “More savings, stuff, and travel aren’t making me any happier,” and “I am 36 years old. I am very single. And will I ever have a baby?” She felt disconnected, conflicted, afraid, sad, anxious, and lonely. Lastly, she wanted to feel healthy, calm, playful, secure and fulfilled.

To begin your journey, start by identifying your own problems and feelings and then write them down! This simple exercise will help you clarify your feelings, where you’re finding unhappiness, and provide goals for how you

want to feel. When Zanesco looked at her list, she realized “shit was about to get real.” She knew something had to change, maybe even everything but she didn’t know where to start or how to do it. So she began by printing out a version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which would become the blueprint of her life. Meeting your basic needs by taking time for yourself and prioritizing your needs is a great place to begin building your foundation.

For instance, when Zanesco took a walk by the sea, she felt calm. When she meditated, she was able to let tears flow without judgment. When she made the bed each morning, she felt like she’d won the lottery. Taking care of yourself doesn’t mean you are being selfish, it means you are simply meeting your basic needs and taking the steps to build a solid foundation for happiness and success.

Rediscovering Your Inner Smart Girl

How can you find your authentic self? Who are you *truly*? Zanesco was met with this question when talking to her mother about who she was as a child. Trying to discover who her daughter truly was, Zanesco's mother told her a story of the time they'd taken her to the beach when she was just two-years-old. She says, "I'd left you building sandcastles, turned my back for no more than 10 seconds to smooth my towel against the wind, and when I turned back you were gone. Splashing in the waves. Squealing. Full of joy. You terrified me: you had no fear. Just like your father. Both of you always ran towards life, never away from it."

So where had that little girl gone? At that moment, Zanesco realized she needed to be the person her childlike self was. But how? She decided to write down all her favorite memories from her life up until this point. She included moments like, "giving 20 girls from the Kibera slum in Kenya the gift of disposable cameras and showing them the amazing photographs they created and seeing their faces when they saw their smiles on show," and "whizzing my two-year-old niece over the waves as she squealed in delight."

The list revealed a few commonalities, including adventure, freedom, inspiration, connection, seeking the beauty of nature, culture, and exploration. These words allowed Zanesco to identify the touchstones of her life, and she realized she needed to use these touchstones to guide her decisions in order to reconnect with her inner Smart Girl. Once she identified her touchstones, Zanesco plastered them on her walls and in the notes section of her phone for easy reference each time she was faced with a difficult decision.

For instance, one of her touchstones is *thriving curiosity*. Through this touchstone, she aims to always stay curious about all things in life, learn and explore new things daily, and take the time to learn new skills in a field that interests her. So when asked to photograph a wedding in Italy overlooking Mont Blanc, the decision was a no-brainer. In other words, it's

essential that you use your touchstones to guide your decisions in order to begin thriving! So begin by asking yourself one question: What can I not live without?

Improve Your Mental and Physical Health

Now that you've identified your touchstones and how you're going to guide the decisions of your life, it's time to focus on your mental and physical health. Think about how often you get moving, is it every day? A few times a week? Almost never? No matter where you are on your journey, there is always room for improvement. For Zanesco, exercise was walking her dog from the living room to the kitchen, so even if you're starting from scratch, you're not alone.

If you struggle to get up and move, try thinking about your body at the age of 58 or 78 if you don't begin taking care of yourself now. You see, Zanesco has a familial history of back problems, she's watched as her very unfit father has been unable to use his body in ways he'd like to. She realized she didn't want to be that woman who couldn't pick up her grandchild or couldn't dance with a handsome stranger in a bar, so she knew she needed to make a change. Luckily, when you begin to work on your physical health, your mental health will begin to improve as well. Therefore, Zanesco chooses to immerse herself in yoga to get the best of both worlds.

For instance, if you're experiencing anxiety, insomnia, indigestion, bloating, or even a short temper, then that's a sign that your vagus nerve isn't able to send the messages it needs to keep your body balanced. You might be thinking, "What the hell is the vagus nerve?" Well, its primary role is to report back to your brain what is going on in your organs. Essentially, it networks the brain with your stomach, digestive tract, lungs, heart, spleen, intestines, and other nerves associated with speech and facial expressions. More importantly, the vagus nerve helps calm us down. However, the vagus nerve can only do its job if your head is on straight and your posture is in alignment. This is why yoga is the best of both worlds. It aims to put your posture in alignment while decreasing the activity in your sympathetic nervous system. In other words, you're likely to leave your yoga class in a mild state of euphoria and even sleep better at night!

Additionally, as your body calms itself through aligning your posture, you can also begin to calm your mind through your breath. This may become challenging for some because as you continue your practice, you'll realize how terribly you speak to yourself. While nobody speaks in a yoga class, it is the place where your internal narrative shouts louder than anywhere else. This is the time where you'll need to learn to "shut the verbally incontinent b**ch up." And the benefits don't stop there. According to the founder of Forrest Yoga, Ana Forrest, "if you practice yoga regularly, you will gain wisdom from the process of feeling to healing; you will earn self-respect; and your brain, body, and emotions will come into a new balance. Your chemistry resets and then there's room for new perceptions and love."

So remember, you only get one body. You can't trade it in. So get moving, challenge yourself, touch your toes, and prioritize exercise!

Improve Your Gut Health

In the words of Bella Zanesco, “Nobody wants to be the girl doing smelly farts in a crowded elevator as it slowly makes its way up to the forty-fifth floor. Nobody.” Unfortunately, Zanesco has been that girl, and while she may have been embarrassed to admit this a few years ago, today, she has learned that the majority of us experience bloating, pain, and nausea or discomfort after eating.

After her diagnosis with IBS, Zanesco didn’t want to be sentenced to a lifetime of worrying where the nearest toilet was at all times so she could avoid pooping herself in public. This meant that she would need to overhaul her life: diet, lifestyle, stress, you name it, she had to change it. And remember the vagus nerve from the previous chapter? Yeah, that plays a big role in our gut health as well. In fact, “the vagus nerve is like a freeway running from the gut to the brain and back.” This means that what we put into our gut has a critical influence on our mood and overall well-being.

As Zanesco puts it, your gut is your second brain. You see, your gut can produce up to 95 percent of your body’s serotonin. You know, the chemical in your body that makes you calm and happy. This is why many studies have found that people, like Zanesco, who suffer from IBS and other gut-disorders are far more likely to experience anxiety and depression. So if you want to focus on healing your brain, you’ll need to focus on healing your gut as well. In a study done by Irish scientist John Cryan, mice with depressive tendencies showed symptoms of anxiety and stress when they failed to swim for a long period of time. They would often freeze and give up, awaiting what was coming. On the other hand, mice that were fed a strain of bacteria known to be good for the gut experienced less stress, swam longer and had more motivation than those who didn’t receive the bacteria.

Of course, many other studies have proven this same theory in humans, and according to neurologist Dr. David Perlmutter, up to 90 percent of all human illness can be traced back to an unhealthy gut! The good news is

that the cure lies there too. While everyone has different dietary requirements, Zanesco relied on probiotics and foods like free-range eggs, avocados, salmon, lean meats, tomatoes, cold-pressed olive oil, arugula, and blueberries and almonds. Typically, these foods increase good gut bacteria and reduce gut inflammation. A perfect combination for becoming both healthier and happier.

Hormones and Moods

Like many women, Zanesco had been taking control of her body and her future by taking the contraceptive pill. For fifteen years, Zanesco experienced pain-free periods, no acne, and prevented unwanted pregnancy. Even better, she was living in the UK where the birth control pill cost nothing. Even in countries like the United States where healthcare is notoriously expensive, the birth control pill is typically cheaper than your daily cup of coffee. The pill has incredible benefits so it's no surprise that millions of women around the world choose this option to take control of their bodies and their futures.

It wasn't until Zanesco decided to prepare her body for pregnancy that she began to experience what many women experience when going off the pill: intense mood swings and incredible pain as her hormones became imbalanced and crazy. During this time, Zanesco went to her naturopath for advice, she simply couldn't handle the frequent outbursts, tears, and debilitating pain. With a concoction of herbal potions and medicines designed to rebalance her hormones, Zanesco continued her clean diet and daily meditation to get her body back on track. And it worked!

Now, Zanesco recognizes that Smart Girls do their research when it comes to their bodies and hormonal birth control. Smart Girls do their homework and through Zanesco's research, she found the side effects of birth control are serious and detrimental. For instance, a study by the University of Copenhagen revealed that contraceptives like the hormonal IUD, coil, patch or ring were shown to increase depression at a rate much higher than oral contraceptives like the pill. In fact, women using oral contraceptives are 23 percent more likely to be diagnosed with depression, and those using progestin-only pills (also known as mini-pills) are 34 percent more likely.

Even worse, the National Cancer Institute in the United States shows that birth control increases the chances of getting certain types of cancers, including breast, cervical, and liver. So what is a girl supposed to do?

Zanesco turned to the Natural Fertility Awareness Method. This method involves a five-minute time investment a day: taking your temperature and noting down the changes in your body, including your mood, appetite, sleep, stress levels, and vaginal mucus levels. While this may seem like a lot of work, there are ways to make it easier. An app called Natural Cycles allows you to easily store this data electronically and track your menstrual and ovulation cycles.

Additionally, those who want to prioritize their health will find that the extra work, in the beginning, is worth feeling more control of your destiny and understanding your moods. So ditch five minutes of social media time a day to get in touch with the inner workings of your body. When you track your cycle, you can even learn which days are your most productive and prepare accordingly. For instance, Zanesco found that days 15-21 of her cycle was when she started ovulation. This is when the body releases an egg to prepare for fertilization, Zanesco also found that these days are when she is her most creative. She is able to verbalize her thoughts and feelings much easier and the decisions she makes during these days tend to turn out well. Zanesco uses this knowledge to her advantage by scheduling meetings during these days!

Leisure and Play

As we grow older, we tend to stop taking time for ourselves and we forget how to do one simple thing: play. We associate playtime with children, and even worse, we believe we will finally have time to play once we retire from our stressful jobs when our bodies no longer work like they used to. When we neglect playtime, we become unbalanced and set ourselves up for failure as playtime allows us to reconnect with our emotions and even become more productive!

So what's the best "play" activity that can lower our stress levels? While swimming, reading, and golf are certainly proven to be great stress-relieving activities, there is one other that proves to be far superior: dancing. "In a study of music and partner dancing by Rosa Pinniger from the University of New England School of Behavioral, Cognitive and Social Science, 22 tango dancers had not only lower levels of stress hormones after dancing with partners but they also felt sexier and more relaxed. Furthermore, it revealed that participants who spent six weeks practicing dance recorded significantly lower levels of depression than the control group that didn't. And here's the kicker: dance can protect you from dementia and Alzheimer's."

Dance can be an incredibly powerful and life-changing playtime activity, but why? According to Rosa Pinniger, the "extreme focus, or mindfulness, of dance ... interrupts negative thought patterns that contribute to anxiety and depression." In other words, dance forces us to be in the moment, taking us from a place of self-consciousness to self-awareness. For Zanesco, she signed up for a dance class at a studio called 5Rhythms. It was during one of these classes that Zanesco experienced a pivotal moment: the longing for a deeper relationship with her mother.

During class, Zanesco felt a deep sadness and regret of not opening herself up and she longed for a stronger connection with her mother. Immediately following class, she sent her mother an email simply stating that she wants

to see her and now prioritizes her mother and their relationship. As you can see, prioritizing playtime can change not only you but your relationships with others. “But it takes courage because be it dance or kiteboarding or whatever you choose, play has no choreographed steps. You may look stupid. You will not be able to do it wearing armor (that shit is heavy). But it will free you.”

Friendships and Support Networks

You've heard all the sayings, "It takes a village" to raise a child and "Nobody ever became great on their own." Unfortunately, many of us don't understand the importance of these sayings because we surround ourselves with people who are "too busy" for us, and we are taught that we can only rely on ourselves. And according to Zanesco's research, "The majority of us feel like we don't surround ourselves with our kind of people and almost half of us spend most of our time with friends complaining about everything from men to children to jobs. Or, as the case may be, the lack of those things."

So what's your circle like? Do you surround yourself with people who support you? Or do you surround yourself with people simply because life just stuck you together randomly? Maybe you have the killjoy friend who complains that everything is so hard and broken or the dopamine addict who constantly checks her phone during catch-ups. Surrounding yourself with the right people is important, this is what Zanesco refers to as your inner circle, or your tribe. According to British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar from Oxford University, "we have a limited amount of time and emotional capital we can distribute, so we only have five slots for the most intense type of relationship." So, pick wisely!

Luckily, Zanesco has some advice on the types of people you should look for who will add to your life and be great members of your tribe. First is the Catalyst, this person is the one who can change the whole course of your life and inspire a transformation. They can either invite you to become a better version of yourself, or they can leave you shrouded in heartbreak. No matter their form, they are valuable in their own way and can change you forever. Next is the Player. This is the person you can call to have a fun time with, no matter what. You can't help but have fun in the presence of this person, and they help you find your voice and bust you out of your boring routine.

The third person is the Nurturer. She is a second mother, the kind of person who is literally willing to travel across a big city to comfort you and deliver you chicken soup. They are there for you when you need to cry and can actually be the most difficult tribe member to accept into our lives. We try to say “no” to these people because we believe we can do everything ourselves, but the truth is the nurturer is important and will be there for you whenever you need them, no matter what. Next, you have the Inspirer. This is the person who encourages you to start a business and believe in yourself, they fill your head with possibilities and your heart with hope.

The fifth person is the Challenger, the person who encourages you to challenge yourself and engages in only deep conversations. They make your brain feel it may implode, but they challenge you to see the world in a new way and blast open your mind. Finally, you have the Lover. This is the person who loves you no matter how crazy or unreasonable you are being. For most people, this is usually your parents or a long-term bestie. This is your go-to person for when you need a chat with no judgment and will look after you no matter what.

There is also a bonus member of your tribe called the Maker, or your romantic partner. It’s important to think of your romantic partner as a bonus member because many people make the mistake of looking towards their partner as the person who fulfills all the above roles and more. This is a sure-fire way to set your relationship up for failure, your partner cannot be everything and your needs and desires should be spread across several members of your tribe.

Relationships and Family

Before we begin talking about the big L word, it's important to remind yourself that being single doesn't mean something is wrong with you. Love is a commitment and being single simply means that you're not willing to settle for anything less, and that is a *great* thing! So where is the love of your life? As we enter our 20s we become starry-eyed and hopeful that we will soon find "the one," only to reach our mid-30s and realize that we are exhausted, tired, battle-weary, and simply swiped out.

"It's no surprise that seven in ten Smart Girls decide our true love is either not out there, dead or married to someone else by now ... and so we settle." Settling simply means pairing with someone who does not amplify our life and choosing someone just to fit within a societal expected norm. The reality is that finding love or settling aren't our only choices, in fact, there are four steps to attracting a committed relationship that Zanesco has lined up for you to start your journey.

The first step is to date yourself. Retire your dating profiles, give your swiping fingers a break, and make time for yourself. Prioritize yourself and your happiness, this means "You dust off the instrument in the corner of the room, take up that sport you've been thinking about, travel to that place your ex wouldn't go with you, decide what you want for your career when you're the only one the decision affects and get your shit together." Once you've found confidence and learned to love yourself, it's time for step two: date others. It's important to ask yourself questions when dating to make sure you find what you're looking for and not settling. Zanesco asked herself, "Can they share their feelings?" "Do we operate as a team?" "Can we hold an engaging conversation?" "Am I a better person around them?"

The next step in the dating process is to choose and be chosen. Zanesco knew she was ready to take the next step and commit herself to one person after writing in her diary, "I want to surrender my heart to someone deserving, who I have great adventures with, who supports me to fly on and

off the water, and I support to be fully expressed.” In other words, it’s not about finding someone who *completes* you but *compliments* you. It’s about finding the person who amplifies you and vice versa. And the best part? You get to choose. “Please remember it’s about you choosing, not just being chosen. And if you’re thinking you want to change their mind, all power to you. But Smart Girls know it rarely works.” If they want you, they will choose you too.

Final Summary

If you find yourself in the downside of life, in a dark and depressive state, getting to the other side is possible. While it may seem as if you are stuck and that finding happiness is impossible, Bella Zanesco has laid out the foundational steps she took in turning her life around and adopting a positive outlook. Finding happiness means rediscovering your inner Smart Girl by prioritizing your needs and your health. Adopting a hobby like yoga is the best of both worlds as it allows you to move your body while focusing on your mental health and alignment. Additionally, listening to your body, eating healthy, and healing your gut will help you feel better both physically and mentally. Other practices for finding your inner Smart Girl include surrounding yourself with a tribe that lifts you up and finding activities, like dance, to awaken your inner child and let go of the daily stress and anxieties. Lastly, reminding yourself that you don't need to settle is important when making a big relationship commitment. Remember to love yourself first, surround yourself with your tribe, and begin your journey to becoming a positive, happy Smart Girl.



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