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Wake-Up Call

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Zach Gottlieb is on a mission to make vulnerability cool, and he's using the best tool at any teen's disposal: social media.

Any kid raised by one of the most renowned psychotherapists in the country is bound to be a bit more emotionally intelligent than most. Maybe that's why 14-year-old Zach Gottlieb, son of bestselling author of [Maybe You Should Talk to Someone](#) Lori Gottlieb, brims with empathy. It's a rare quality to find in anyone, let alone in a teenage boy. All things considered, Zach is a pretty normal kid. He plays sports at school. He loves *The Office*. He thinks he might want to get a job in business one day, but he also hasn't given much thought to where he wants to go to college.

Zach also shares one extremely formative experience with all of his peers: his life was turned upside-down by [Covid-19](#). When many teens were feeling lost, confused, and [anxious](#), Zach noticed that a lot of his friends, particularly his male friends, didn't really know how to talk about how they were feeling. So he did what so many kids do these days: he turned to social media.

But he didn't just scroll. Zach started an Instagram account, [@talkwithzach](#), where he posts videos about the issues that plague so many young boys today. He's addressed everything from how to deal with [grief](#) to fears about [peer pressure](#) to how to ask someone you like if they want to be in a relationship. "I'm not a therapist," Zach says, "just a teenager who thinks we should talk more."

But the video that really caught people's attention was Zach's take on toxic masculinity. "We get messages about masculinity and femininity that are super sexist and they really stop us from expressing our full humanity," he says. We spoke with Zach about why he thinks this message is so important for young men.

You were raised by a single mother, who also happens to be a very [famous psychotherapist](#). How do you think that impacted you?

I feel like she impacted me in the sense that she made it clear that talking about my feelings was a good thing — like it was a strength to talk about these things. I think that, sadly, a lot of guys still think it's a sign of weakness and I really just don't have that same mindset and I never have.

Is mental health a topic that kids at school talk about openly?

Not for boys. I think the girls can talk about it more easily, but boys have a much harder time with it. Whatever you're feeling, you're expected to hold it inside. But I feel like, during Covid, it's started to change a little bit. Everyone on the news was talking about how teens were having all these problems with mental health, but it was all coming from adults. That's why I wanted to create a community where my generation could talk about the things that we need to talk about just with each other and feel safe about talking about them. I'm trying to set an example for other teenage guys that it's OK to talk about how you're feeling. I was a little nervous when I first started putting out videos, because there is still such a stigma about it, and I didn't know how my friends would respond. But they have all been really supportive. Most of them have said something to me like, "wow, this is really cool." And they've all followed my account and they watch the videos.

Have you found that people have started opening up to you about their own mental health struggles?

Not necessarily people directly in my life, but I do get a lot of messages. People will message me and say that my posts or videos have really helped them. It's really cool because I'm hearing from kids from all around the world, which is something that I never thought would happen. Someone wrote me a message in French the other day. I'm taking Spanish at school, but I could kind of see what they were saying, that they liked my videos. I also think that since Covid, people have started opening up more.

One of your [most-watched videos](#) is about toxic masculinity. What does that term mean to you?

Toxic masculinity is basically the societal norms that we expect of all guys — that all boys and men should be stoic and not talk about their feelings, and aren't allowed to be sad about anything. We can be angry, but we can't show any emotion beyond that. It's ingrained in our culture from a very young age; we're told that showing emotions is feminine, which basically says that being feminine means that you're weak, which is super sexist. It ends up being really problematic when you're going through something and you have to hide it or push it down. It's this idea that being strong means not showing when you're upset. I actually think that being vulnerable is a strength.

Are there any characters on TV that you think are good representations of how a man could and should be vulnerable?

I just finished watching *The Office*. The main character, Michael, is really unlikable, but the times you really love him are the moments when he's vulnerable. He'll open up about what he's feeling and it's usually the most powerful part of an episode. You never expect a show like that to address some of those themes.

Who is a role model of yours?

[Justin Baldoni](#), he has this podcast called [Man Enough](#). He talks a lot about how he's noticed toxic masculinity in his life. He [wrote a book](#) about it. He's just a really good example of a man trying to change the culture, who is talking about mental health and the toxic masculinity that he's experienced and trying to work against.

Are there any mental health struggles that you've personally dealt with?

I was raised by a single mom, so I was really close with my grandfather, and he passed away last year. It was a really significant loss for me, and the first time I'd lost someone I was really close with. But at a certain point, I felt pressured to just get over it — that it was OK to be angry, but that I wasn't allowed to cry or be upset after a little while. That was something that I struggled with. But, even though I felt like I wasn't supposed to, I decided to talk about how I was feeling and that really helped. The thing about grief is that you can't just get over it. It never really goes away. Instead, as time goes on, it just becomes less sharp. Some days it'll hurt more, like on his birthday. Everyone deals with grief differently. On the day of his funeral, I was a mess. I can't even imagine if any of my friends had seen me like that, I would have felt so weird about it...I guess there are still

these societal norms that are hard to get past. It makes me realize there's still so much work to be done, but I think talking about how we're feeling is a good place to start.