

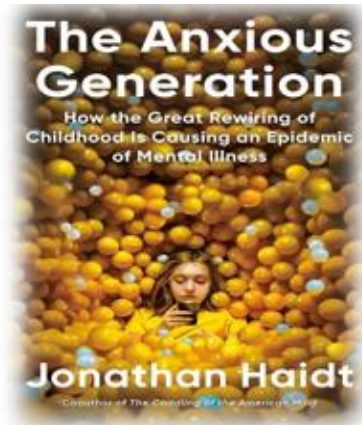
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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“This, That, & the Other IX” The Anxious Generation: The Medium Is the Message



Recently, I read one of the most important books I've read in years: Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*.

Let me repeat: it is one of the most important books I've read in years.

Why is it so important? I'll answer that question in a moment, but first, who is Jonathan Haidt?

Haidt (pronounced "Height") is a social psychologist at New York University. Just as I have done in my *The American Tapestry Project* from the perspective of literature and history, from his perspective as a social psychologist Haidt set out to understand the fraying of American society. In books such as *The Righteous Mind* and *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt has sought the causes of America's current socio-political turbulence. In *Coddling*, Haidt and Greg Lukianoff showed that cancel culture's emergence on campus and society grew out of "three terrible ideas that have become increasingly woven into American childhood and education: What doesn't kill you makes you weaker; always trust your feelings; and life is a battle between good people and evil people." [1]

While these attitudes resulted from multiple causes, Haidt became interested in what enabled their rapid societal dispersion unraveling the American story. Beginning with a 2019 article "The Dark Psychology of Social Networks," [2] a May 2022 article in *The Atlantic*, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid: It's not just a phase" [3] and doing research for a forthcoming book *Life After Babel: Adapting to a world we no longer share*, [4] he located that cause in the pressures exerted by new media America's founders could not have imagined: the internet and social media apps.

As Keith Plummer said in a review of *The Anxious Generation*, "Haidt argues that the 'virtual world' is characterized by forms of human interaction that are only decades old: (1) disembodiment, where communication is restricted to language, (2) online, asynchronous interaction via text-based comments and posts, (3) multiple simultaneous and unrelated one-to-many communications, and (4) easily entered and exited communities that do little to encourage relational investment." [5]

In other *Book Notes*, I said that understanding social media was the "crisis of the moment." Previously, I noted that media are not neutral – they impose their own slant on how humans perceive and understand their world. Marshall McLuhan first stated that decades ago followed by Neil Postman and more recently Nicholas Carr in his *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* and the forthcoming *Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart*. As Haidt researched the impact of social media on American politics for his *Life After Babel*, as often happens to skilled researchers, he ended up somewhere different than he originally intended. He made a discovery so important he put aside the Babel project to write *The Anxious Generation*.

What did Haidt discover so important that he put aside years of work?

Dot #1. It is the youth mental health crisis that developed since the appearance of the smartphone in the early 20-teens. As Naomi Schaefer Riley said in “The National Review,” “bringing decades of research in psychology to the task, (Haidt builds) on the work of Jean Twenge, who convincingly showed in her book *iGen* that the steep decline in youth mental health coincided exactly with the rise of the smartphone.” [6]

Is there a youth mental health crisis? As Judith Warner says in the Washington Post, “there’s no doubt that young people today are in the throes of a mental health crisis that’s unprecedented in scope and severity. The latest statistics are terrible: According to the 2022 [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#), for example, almost 1 in 5 of 12- to 17-year-olds had a major depressive episode in the past year, while nearly half of 18- to 25-year-olds had either a substance use disorder or a mental illness.” [7]

Haidt presents copious data supporting his claim. In each of the following graphs, note the sharp upward slope of the lines in the 20-teens that correlate precisely with the widespread adoption of smartphones. [8]

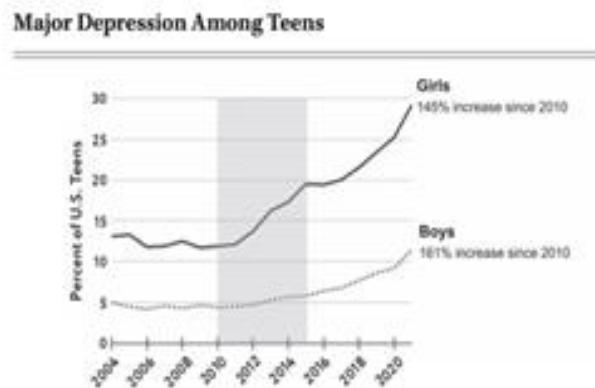


Figure 1.1. Percent of U.S. teens (ages 12-17) who had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, by self-report based on a symptom checklist. This was figure 7.1 in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, now updated with data beyond 2016. (Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.)

Mental Illness Among College Students

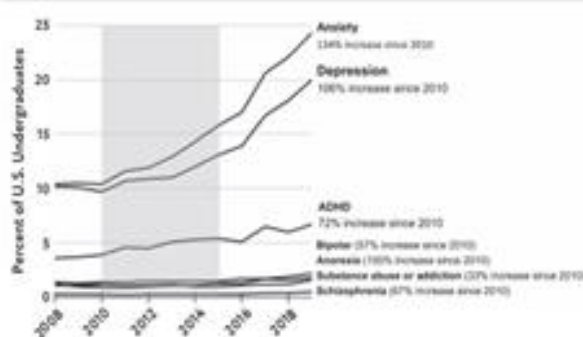


Figure 1.2. Percent of U.S. undergraduates with each of several mental illnesses. Rates of diagnosis of various mental illnesses increased in the 2010s among college students, especially for anxiety and depression. (Source: American College Health Association.)⁹

Anxiety Prevalence by Age

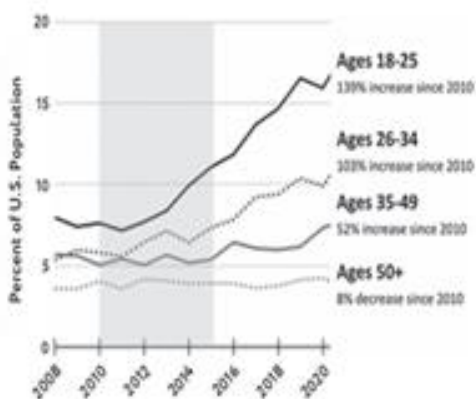


Figure 1.3. Percent of U.S. adults reporting high levels of anxiety by age group. (Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.)¹⁰

Emergency Room Visits for Self-Harm

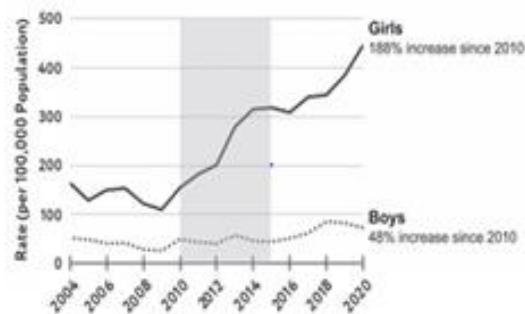


Figure 1.4. The rate per 100,000 in the U.S. population at which adolescents (ages 10–14) are treated in hospital emergency rooms for nonfatal self-injury. (Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.)²⁰

Suicide Rates for Younger Adolescents

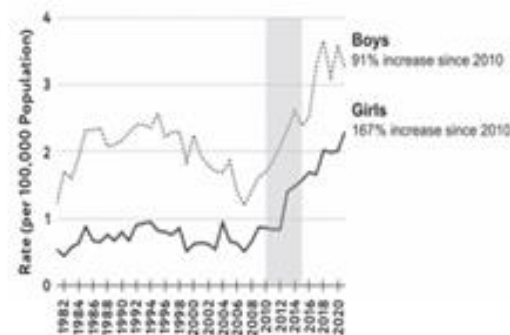


Figure 1.5. Suicide rates for U.S. adolescents, ages 10–14. (Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.)²¹

Dot #3: How did this happen? Haidt understands the importance of context. Although he finds the determinative cause to be increased smartphone usage, he acknowledges that other factors impact these altered behaviors. Two clusters in particular merit attention: the 21st century’s socio-cultural milieu and a series of unprecedented technological revolutions impacting how one experiences the world.

Gen Z (those born roughly between 1997 and 2012) did not grow up in a socio-cultural vacuum. Their childhood was impacted by four or five major culture shocks. Beginning with 9/11, the War on Terror, the financial bust of 2008, the

point, it is fair to say there is probably a causal relationship. It is really a simple Pre-test, Test, Post-test issue. Pre-test (prior to say 2010 or 2012 in the graphs above) the rate of youth mental health disorders of all kinds was “X”; the Test is the emergence of smartphones and social media; and the Post-test is the dramatic increase in youth mental health issues to “X++” by, to pick a date, 2018. Recognizing all the other variables noted above as “social context,” what is the one variable that changed?

It is the ability to monitor one’s social life on the internet in real time, continuously, all day, every day on the phone in one’s pocket, purse, or backpack. Two things: first, to call it a “phone” is a misnomer. That makes it sound innocuous and somehow safe. It is not a phone. It is a powerful mini-computer that “is 120 million times more powerful than the computer that sent men to the moon.” [9] Yes, you can make calls on it, but people increasingly rarely do. Instead, they choose to text, email, and/or use some social media app to connect. Whether we call it a phone or mini-computer is not important. The important thing causing the crisis in mental health among a significant segment of young people are social media apps. In particular “X” (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, et al.

Compounding the impact of a Phone-based childhood Haidt identifies the late-20th century’s defensive minded, over-protective style of parenting. He calls it “Safetyism.” Rather than raising self-confident and self-reliant young people prepared to cope with a complex world, many American parents went into defensive mode and over-protected their children. Fearful of liability claims and lawsuits, school officials also quickly fell into defensive mode. Whether from Gen X’ers recoiling from the “latch-key kid” syndrome of their own childhood, or the wave of alarm about alleged predators on every corner and in every day-care center, or the child-care professionals counseling ever more elaborate car seats (which I think wise) or not to ride a bicycle without a helmet, some American parents raised a generation of children uncertain, afraid, and perpetually on-guard for offenses and threats real and imagined.

All of this created a paradoxical reality that Haidt analyzes at some length in which parents zealously protected their children from a real world not nearly so threatening as they imagined while at the same time giving them open freedom to engage with a virtual world far more dangerous to a child’s sense of self than anything they were likely to encounter on the playground.

Dot #4: What is so bad about a Phone-based childhood? What’s so dangerous about social media apps? Haidt points out that originally Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok were (and for some still are) positive. In our dispersed culture, for example, they permit far-flung family members to remain connected. Haidt identifies the rise of a more performative and potentially harmful use of social media to Facebook and Twitter’s inclusion of a “Share”

function and “Like” icon. “Share” enabled people to share other people’s posts to widening circles of “Friends” of friends creating the concept of virality. The “Like” button encouraged the posting of self-images and other approval seeking content.

But, as anyone who has ever read the comments posted to social media apps knows, the feedback, rather than positive, is often vicious and derogatory. As Haidt goes to great pains to document, for young people at the time they are forming their sense of self-identity and self-worth to be ridiculed and mocked can be devastating. Although social media has negative consequences for boys, it is particularly damaging to young girls. Boys, as Haidt points out, externalize their anger, but girls internalize it. Note in the graphs above the 145% increase in major depression events and the 185% increase in emergency room visits for self-harm since 2010 for teenage girls.

Haidt says there are four fundamental “Harms” caused by excessive use of social media. Underlying the four, borrowing a concept from economics, are social media’s opportunity costs. They are the lost opportunities to engage in more positive activities caused by the obsessive use of social media. The first harm Haidt identifies is *social deprivation*; he says, “When American adolescents moved onto smartphones, time with friends in face-to-face settings plummeted immediately, from 122 minutes per day in 2012 down to 67 minutes per day in 2019.” [10] Why is an almost 50% reduction in time with friends important? Among many reasons, it is far easier to say negative things to a virtual “friend” who you may have never actually met than to a real, flesh and blood person sitting next to you.

The second harm is *sleep deprivation*. Data reveals that around the globe, when smartphone usage increased among young people both the quality and quantity of their sleep declined. Why is this important? Noting that sleep deprivation is a well-studied and documented phenomenon, Haidt points out its negative effects. They include “depression, anxiety, irritability, cognitive deficits, poor learning, lower grades, more accidents, and more deaths from accidents.” [11]

The third harm is *attention fragmentation*. Attention, the ability to focus and to stay on task are essential keys to success, whether it is shooting foul shots in basketball or mastering the second derivative of a function in calculus or trying to create a positive relationship with the person sitting across the lunchroom table from you. As Haidt says, “smartphones are kryptonite for attention. Many adolescents get hundreds of notifications per day, meaning that they rarely have five or 10 minutes to think without interruption.” [12]

Addiction is the fourth harm. Haidt says, “behaviorists discovered that learning ... is ‘the wearing smooth of a path in the brain.’” [13] He alleges that “the developers of the most successful social media apps used advanced behaviorist techniques to ‘hook’ children into becoming heavy users of their products.” [14]

My observation, not Haidt's, is that this is akin to cigarette manufacturers manipulating nicotine content to maximize smoking addiction all the while knowing its harmful effects. If you've wondered about the "tech bros" cozying up to the new presidential administration, it is because they want to short-circuit the coming regulation. They might be succeeding; note the recent reversal of the TikTok case.

Dot #5. What to do about all of this? Two of the strengths of Haidt's book are its numerous suggestions for corrective action that parents, schools, and all levels of government can take. He backs those suggestions with a wealth of information and abundant resources at the website "The Anxious Generation" [available here](#).

Among the many suggestions Haidt offers, four are most important. He argues that children should not be given smartphones before high school, that they should not be allowed to self-register for social media accounts before age 16, that schools should become phone-free zones, and that children be allowed far more unsupervised play and childhood independence. [15]

Regarding no smartphones before high school, that might be a quixotic suggestion given their pervasiveness in our culture. But it is worthy of serious consideration. Restricting access to social media until age 16, however, might be attainable. Currently, the age is 13 – a political compromise brokered between politicians, free speech advocates either indifferent or oblivious to the harm being done to children, and Silicon Valley lobbyists. In other countries, there are movements to make the age 18. Haidt lands on 16 as a reasonable compromise, but makes it clear he supports age 18.

Phone-free schools, however, is a movement that appears to be gaining momentum. Anyone who has ever taught can attest to the distracting impact of students attempting to monitor their phones and still participate in class. It is not possible. Schools are now beginning to take action. In Erie County, Pennsylvania, the Millcreek School Board wisely opted to ban smartphone use at McDowell High School during the school day. The result, as reported by Valerie Myers in the Erie Times-News has been promising. Ninety-eight percent of McDowell teachers who responded to a recent survey said the ban has had a positive impact on learning. As Myers reported, "One teacher's comment in the survey was typical: 'My students are so much more engaged. I can do so much more in my classes. Engagement is up. Participation is so much better.'" [16] Students agreed. One said, "I think the biggest benefits are that during tutorial, I am more focused on my schoolwork." Another said, "I have been able to talk to people more in person during lunch." [17]

Dot-the-Last. The negative impact of smartphone usage on many young people is one of those things that "once you see it, you can't

unsee it.” Is deleterious smartphone usage the major issue of our time? No; and, Yes. No, because any minimally observant citizen can list multiple issues roiling our culture and threatening our shared future. Yes, because it is not the smartphone that is so threatening, but the social media apps it makes possible. Haidt has documented, to my mind, in irrefutable detail the baleful impact of social media on many young people. But that is only one facet of the problem. Recall, he was working on a project about social media’s fraying American culture and fracturing American political discourse. Social media did not create the cracks in American society, but its powerful communicative energy in the hands of those on both the right and the left who want not to unite but to divide us in order to conquer us threatens to explode those cracks into chasms. Maybe it already has.

That is another story for another day, but for now if you are a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, mentor of young people, or just a concerned citizen who wants the best for America’s young, then read Jonathan Haidt’s ***The Anxious Generation***. It is one of the most important books of our time. After you do, go to [About Us - The Anxious Generation](#) to discover a wealth of resources.



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End Notes

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