



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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Growing Up On Mars

Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024)

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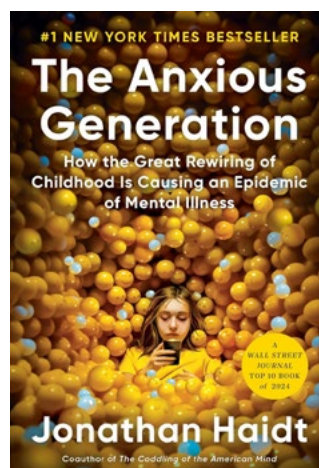
Imagine that a commercial space company chose your 10-year-old child for a program to pioneer the first human settlement on Mars. They intend to stake their claim on the planet, and your daughter's genome (which you don't recall permitting them to test) indicated she is a good candidate. She signed up for the program without your knowledge (they did not require your permission), all her friends are going, and she begs you to let her go. When you question the program planners, you find they have not considered the risks to children, for example, the dangers of unfiltered solar radiation (think, cancer) or bodily maturation under a different gravitational force (think, bone malformation and organ deformity). Would you consent?

Children going to Mars is, of course, a ridiculous idea, and any responsible parent would emphatically respond: "*Absolutely NOT!*" Yet our children *were* effectively entered into a pioneering for-profit, social-

technological program where the risks were similarly unknown and where they now breathe an atmosphere that has proven disastrous for their mental health.

So argues New York University professor Jonathan Haidt (pronounced "height") in *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Haidt maintains that the mental health crisis besetting Gen Z (and later) is happening because Gen Z experienced childhood with diminished opportunities for

free play (due to overprotective parenting practices in the 1990s) and then puberty in a social environment reshaped by widespread unconstrained personal access to social media and smartphones (due to the rapid adoption of these technologies from 2010-2015); these combined changes radically "rewired childhood" social interactions and personal development for the worse.



It has been known for some time that young people are experiencing a burgeoning mental health crisis.¹ In Part 1, Haidt documents trends in depression and anxiety, trends that followed a hockey-stick trajectory (somewhat flat then sharply up) where the bend in the trend happened from 2010 to 2015,² were worse for girls than boys, progressively worse for younger cohorts, and worst of all for Gen Z (those born after 1995).

Haidt's numerous hockey-stick graphs (all available at theanxiousgeneration.com and derived from representative national surveys and hospital incident reports) show, for example, that increases in anxiety prevalence were sharpest among US 18-25-year-olds (161% increase since 2010) and progressively less pronounced among 26-34-year-olds (111% increase), 35-49-year-olds (49%), and those 50 or above (5%). All trends were evident well before COVID-19, and similar patterns were seen in the UK, Canada, other Anglosphere countries and the five Nordic nations.³

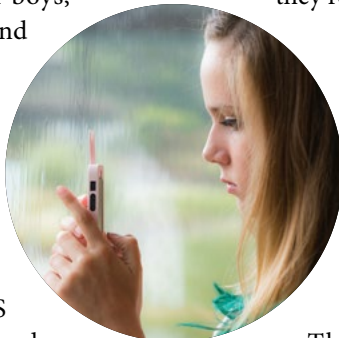
These unhappy trends were worse for girls than boys. For example, major depression frequency rose to 30% of US teenage girls by 2021 (a 145% increase since 2010) and 12% of boys (a 161% increase since 2010). Anxiety prevalence among US young adults (18-25-year-olds) rose to nearly one in four females (a 170% increase since 2010) and over one in six males (a 155% increase since 2010). Evidence from

1 See, for example, David Gunnell, Judi Kidger, and Hamish Elvidge. "Adolescent mental health in crisis." *British Medical Journal*, 361:k2608 (2018) doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.k2608>; Also see: Brigitte Popa, "An overview of Generation Z's mental health." *New Trends in Psychology* 6, no. 2 (2024): 22-29.

2 See, for example, Bethany A. Rallis, Laura Hungerford, and Chris Flynn. "A wave of depression: Implications for college student mental health." *Journal of College Student Mental Health* 38 (3): 541-51. (2024). doi:10.1080/87568225.2023.2202352.

3 See, for example: Klaus Ranta, Terhi Aalto-Setälä, Tiina Heikkinen, and Olli Kiviruusu. "Social anxiety in Finnish adolescents from 2013 to 2021: Change from pre-COVID-19 to COVID-19 era, and mid-pandemic correlates." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology: The International Journal for Research in Social and Genetic Epidemiology and Mental Health Services* 59 (1): 121-36. (2024). doi:10.1007/s00127-023-02466-4.

records of fatal and non-fatal self-harm episodes mimicked these patterns. For example, self-harm rates in 13-16-year-old UK girls rose by 78% since 2010; among boys, they rose by 134%. Mental health hospitalizations of Australian teens (ages 12-24) rose 81% among girls since 2010; among boys, they rose 51%.



Clearly, "...something big is happening, something changed in the lives of young people in the early 2010's that made their mental health plunge" (p. 23).

Haidt argues that the most likely explanation for the plunge is "The Great Rewiring" of childhood social interactions. The Great Rewiring resulted first from overprotective parenting practices since the late 1980s that restricted free play, and second from the widespread adoption of social-media platforms and smartphone technologies from 2010-2015. Childhood went from "play-based" (primarily embodied and in-person, unsupervised free play in community) to "phone-based" (primarily digital and on-line social media interaction in networks). The harm to mental health corresponds with the time period during which these great changes occurred. Correlation is not causation, of course, but Haidt rules out other explanations that have been advanced. For example, some have argued that the recession of 2008-2009 begat declining mental-health trends since 2010, but this does not square with rising employment trends from 2009 to 2019 (pp. 36-37). Others have argued that the threat of climate change is responsible for rising anxiety, but Haidt argues that collective threats have not historically led to increased depression and anxiety (pp. 37-38). Instead, increased depression and anxiety happen when people become *lonely*.

Declining trends in mental health since 2010 did not occur in a vacuum. In Part 2, Haidt contends that overprotective parenting practices in the 1990s had set the stage for the current crisis. Unduly concerned about the prevalence of child abduction, parents permitted their children less and less freedom and became more and more risk-averse. The problem with such shifts is that, to develop socially and psychologically, children need to experience lots of unstructured free play and embodied interactions containing a certain degree of social and physical risk. Without such risk, children do not grow socially and psychologically stronger.

Haidt marshals several lines of evidence of these shifts toward risk-averse parenting practices and over-supervised childhood play. For example, time spent parenting by mothers, especially college-educated mothers, spiked during the 1990s and early 2000s (p. 84). Similarly, in his



many speaking engagements, he first asks older cohorts to shout out the age at which they were allowed to walk outside unsupervised; Boomers and Gen-X-ers shout “6,” “7,” or “8,” whereas Gen Z-ers say “10,” “11,” or “12.” (p. 83). Indeed, the sight of a 9-year-old walking alone would now raise concerns about child neglect. And in a fascinating line of observational evidence, Haidt points to changes in playground equipment that diminished physical risk—and physical thrills—along with the proliferation of suffocating lists of playground rules (e.g., “FOOTBALL CAN ONLY BE PLAYED IF AN ADULT IS SUPERVISING AND REFEREEING THE GAME.” p. 90, capitalization in the original).

Haidt calls this trend of increasing risk-aversion, *safetyism* (pp. 88-90). He first became aware of safetyism when college undergraduates in the early 2000s became increasingly unable to tolerate uncomfortable situations, such as when visiting campus speakers espoused views with which they disagreed. In this vein, he notes that the term *trauma*, which was in the past reserved for life-threatening physical or psychological events, now encompasses almost any uncomfortable experience. Similarly, creating “safe spaces” in schools became ubiquitous, and younger people became increasingly unable to tolerate discomfort.

Thus, over-protective parenting led to reductions in free play and a decline in play-based childhood, where children’s play was “...embodied, synchronous, one-to-one or one-to-several, and in groups or communities where there is some cost to join or leave so people invest in relationship” (p. 53). Because children experienced less risk, they became less and less able to handle simple social challenges such as starting a conversation, asking someone out on a date, or just getting out of the house for an evening with friends. And although by 2010, children were still not more depressed and anxious, they *had* become more vulnerable to the social-experience-blocking effects of communication technologies that arose after 2010.

In contrast to play-based community experience, childhood after 2010 gave way to phone-based (i.e., digitally based) relationships and interactions that were characteristically disembodied, asynchronous, one-to-many (broadcast), and “within communities that have a *low bar for entry and exit*, so that people can block others or just quit when they are not pleased” (pp. 9-10, italics in original). Phone-based relationships do little to train adolescents about managing relationships, which is perhaps *the* key skill in maturation. “...[W]hen children are raised in multiple mutating networks where they don’t need to use their real names and they can quit with the click of a button, they are less likely to learn such skills” (p. 10).

In sum, “Children and adolescents, who were increasingly kept at home and isolated by the national mania for



overprotection, found it ever easier to turn to their growing collection of internet-enabled devices, and those devices offered ever more attractive and varied rewards. The play-based childhood was over; the phone-based childhood had begun” (p. 118).

In Part 3, Haidt explores the four major harms of a phone-based childhood: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction.

Whereas the first wave of the Internet involved sitting at a desk and dialing up on a modem, smartphones now remain on our physical persons most of the day, allowing people continuous access to the World Wide Web. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that *smartphones allowed the World Wide Web to gain continuous access to people*. Constant access to people was a game changer; the commodity now sought by advertisers was attention. Companies such as Meta were now incentivized to keep people clicking. Similarly, changes in social-media platforms, such as the ability to post selfies, user-generate content, network and receive likes, also enabled platform managers to sustain users’ attention.

One reason the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media almost certainly led to the first major harm of social deprivation is the sheer magnitude of opportunity costs. If one is engaged in clicking, posting, surfing and waiting for likes, one has less time for relationships. For example, from 2003 to 2020, Americans spent less and less time with friends each day, but the decline was especially sharp for 15-24-year-olds (from 152 to 42 minutes on average) (p. 121). The percentage of US 8th, 10th and 12th graders who met up with their friends “almost every day” declined from 50% in 1991 to 25% in 2017. The average number of “evenings out for fun” per week that adolescents experienced also dropped sharply from 1976 to 2020; these trends generally accelerated in the 2010-to-2015 time frame.

Increased time spent using smartphones and social media also crowds out sleep, which is the second major

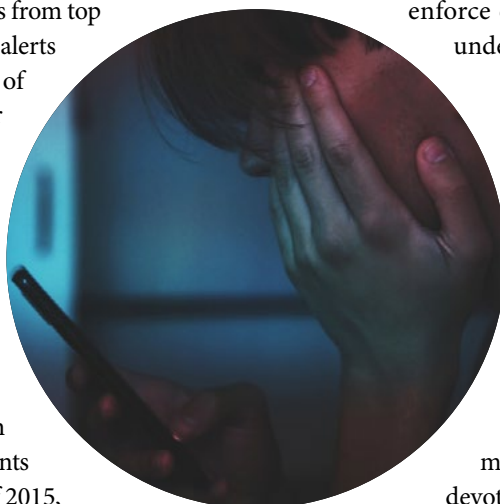
harm. The percentage of US adolescents sleeping less than 7 hours per day rose from approximately 30% in 1991 to almost 50% in 2021; these trends were worse for girls than boys and accelerated sharply in 2010-2015. Increased use of smartphones and social media also led to attention fragmentation, exacerbated attention-deficit symptoms and interfered with executive function (staying on-task and resisting off-ramps to attention). This third major harm is unsurprising given that the average number of notifications on young people's phones from top social and communication apps is 192 alerts per day; this translates to an average of *one interruption every 5 minutes*. For heavy users, the interruption rate is *one every minute* (p. 126). Haidt notes similar increases in the addictive tendencies of younger cohorts, the fourth major harm.

In some of the most heart-rending sections of this text, Haidt details how social media has been especially harmful to girls. Haidt presents a drawing by a 12-year-old in April of 2015, where the words on her laptop, “worthless, die, ugly, stupid, kill yourself,” were replicated in her thought bubble, “stupid, ugly, rumours, kill yourself, bitch, no one loves you, Idiot, Go Die, Fat, weirdo, Freak, Fag, retard” (p. 144). He argues that she struggled with eating disorders and mental illness in large part because of social media. Girls, compared to boys, absorb greater harm because they use social media more frequently, are more affected by visual social comparison, are more relationally aggressive, more easily share emotions and disorders, and are more often targets of predation and harm (ch. 6). The harm to boys, while not as widespread, has manifested in an increasing inability to engage in life (e.g., “failure to launch”), greater addiction to pornography, and the higher opportunity costs of increasingly heavy-use video gaming (ch. 7).

In Part 4, Haidt helpfully explores what tech companies, governments, schools and parents can do to return to a play-based childhood. Among other suggestions, he recommends that parents delay smartphone use until age 14 and social media until age 16 and that schools enact no-phone policies, build larger playgrounds, and institute more extended recess periods.

I found Haidt's arguments and evidence compelling. He has made sense of the now ubiquitous sight of children, students, employees, friends and family hunched over a small screen despite sitting next to one-another, in captivity, unable to break away yet unsatisfied, caught in a dilemma reminiscent of Edmund's encounter with Turkish Delight in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Reaction has

been overwhelmingly positive, and Haidt has noted strong agreement from all quarters, both political ideologies, and an unexpected lack of push-back. As one podcaster stated, “People are ready for change.” This is true. Due in part to the influence of this book, I think we will soon see the widespread adoption of phone-free school policies and stronger parental and government limits on phone and media use. In 2024, we saw Australia ban children under 16 from social media use, and measures to meaningfully enforce existing social-media age limits are under consideration in many countries.



The most intriguing portion of Haidt's text considers the *spiritual de-formation* rendered by social media and smartphones. Haidt shows how the spiritually attuned life is on the opposite path from the smartphone-social-media way of living. He argues that religious participation and ancient spiritual disciplines show us a way out of the mental-health crisis. In an entire chapter devoted to this topic (ch. 8), Haidt contends that “The phone-based life produces spiritual degradation, not just in adolescents, but in all of us” (p. 199). He explores how the phone-based life works negatively by “...blocking or counteracting six spiritual practices: shared sacredness; embodiment; stillness, silence and focus; self-transcendence; being slow to anger, quick to forgive; and finding awe in nature” (p. 202). His insights are worth an extended unpacking here.

First, *shared sacredness* refers to how religions create times (e.g., holy days), spaces (e.g., temples), and objects (e.g., holy writings) that communities share and set apart from the “profane” (i.e., ordinary) world. For 20 centuries, Christians have been together in shared physical spaces during particular days of the week/calendar, read Scripture, prayed, sang hymns / spiritual songs, listened to preaching and partaken in a communal meal. These sacred, rhythmic, embodied and communal rituals vanish in the virtual world.

Second, *embodiment* refers to the shared physical presence among community members—eating, singing, worshipping, baptizing, marrying—anyone who has participated on-line in these events knows firsthand how the virtual experience strips such rituals of power. Attending online just doesn't cut it.

Third, *stillness, silence and focus* are characteristics of meditation and contemplation—these core religious experiences are diametrically opposed to the busyness, noise, and attention fragmentation characteristic of smartphone and social-media interaction.

Fourth, *self-transcendence* is characterized by a diminished sense of self and is central to spiritual experience. In contrast, social-media platforms intrinsically promote an *enlarged* sense of self. “Social media ... trains people to think in ways that are exactly contrary to the world’s wisdom traditions: *Think about yourself first; be materialistic, judgmental, boastful, and petty; see glory as quantified by likes and followers*” (p. 209, italics in original).

Fifth, *being slow to anger and quick to forgive* are virtues from ancient traditions, but social media trains us in the vices of outrage, judgmentalism, unforgiveness and entrenched polarization.

Finally, *finding awe in nature* has received much recent research attention. Awe is a sense of beholding something incomprehensively vast, immensely powerful, intensely beautiful, or profoundly true. The beauty of nature is reliably awe-inspiring. Our sense of self becomes small in the face of such grandeur. However, phone-based life is characterized by seeing a screen and spending less time beholding nature. Is it not now a common driving experience that we behold a beautiful scene that our passengers miss entirely while fixated on their small screens?

One would expect that the author of such insights is religious and possibly Christian, but Haidt is neither. He states that he is an atheist (p. 201) but that he “...sometimes need words and concepts from religion to understand the experience of life as a human being” (p. 201). I admire Haidt’s honesty and insight; he is like many secular persons I know who need to borrow, if only in a *de facto* fashion, elements of a theistic worldview to make sense of life. Haidt finds common ground with his religious friends in that he believes, “There is a hole, an emptiness in us all, that we strive to fill. If it doesn’t get filled with something noble and elevated, modern society will quickly pump it full of garbage [and]...the garbage pump got 100 times more powerful in

the 2010s” (p. 216). This is a peaceable and profound insight, one that itself points toward a personal God. That is, the use of the word “garbage” presupposes an independent reference point by which to judge trash from treasure. As C. S. Lewis put it, atheism is too simple: without light, “dark” wouldn’t have any meaning. Thus, in the current context, “garbage” would have no meaning.

All Christian disciples, not just Gen Z Christ-followers, can benefit from Haidt’s analysis of the degrading effects of our phone-based world. We can raise sobering questions for self-examination; I offer three here, building on Haidt’s insights. The first question pertains to the habits of attention: *To what extent have I become a “disciple of the Internet?”*⁴ A disciple of the Internet is someone who is daily devoted to the machinations of the World Wide Web, someone who’s first thought when encountering a spare moment is to attend to one’s feed rather than to be fed from the Word, prayer, a psalm or fellowship with the person standing next to us. A second question pertains to my sense of *shalom*: *How are social-media and smartphone use affecting my ability to enact a lifestyle of moment-by-moment resting in the Lord?* Internet disciples are trained to be impatient and anxious. We have become accustomed to receiving quick answers rather than developing a tolerance for uncertainty. The digital world thus makes it harder to adopt a posture of trustful waiting amidst uncertainty. Thirdly: *How is the Internet shaping my attitudes toward others?* Internet disciples are trained to see enemies and to hate them. We witness almost non-stop models of outraged opinion-makers and newscasters delivering revelations designed to make us angry or derisive: “*Breaking News: Trump[Biden] caught in lies!*” “*Watch Sam demolish this Christian[atheist]!*” The ideas offered by Haidt will help followers of Christ take a hard look at how social media and smartphones may be stumbling blocks and encumbrances to running the race set before us.

Ubiquitous social media and smartphones interrupt our peace, disrupt our focus, shape our affections and displace our relationships in a worldly direction. [Tweet this...or maybe just sit with it quietly for a moment].

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⁴ John Eldredge, *Experience Jesus. Really: Finding Refuge, Strength, and Wonder through Everyday Encounters with God*. (2025). Thomas Nelson. (p. 2).

