

“The Anxious Generation”

Recently, I read a book by Jonathan Haidt called, “The Anxious Generation – How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness” The 380 pages are filled with tomes of research, insights, and developments on how social media continues to impact children and how both governments, schools, and parents need to be aware of the consequences and what they can do to correct the trend before it is too late.

The author begins by showing how we transitioned from a “Play-based childhood” to a “phone-based childhood. Play based play saw children playing outdoors with other kids of mixed ages, embracing a certain degree of rough and tumble activities that involved a certain degree of risk. Play becomes important in developing social skills, conflict resolution. Somehow, along the way, we developed a suspicion that the world is full of dangers, that it is filled with crime, violence and predators. This makes it harder for children to care for themselves and to deal with conflict, risk and frustration.

Haidt suggests that if we want children “to have a healthy pathway through puberty, we must first take them off experience blockers so they can accumulate the wide range of experience they need, including the real world stressors that their antifragile minds require to wire up properly. Then, they should give children a clear pathway to adulthood with challenges, milestones and a growing sense of freedoms and responsibilities along the way.”

One researcher said that the phone generation “is the modern day hypodermic needle, delivering digital dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation.”

Studies indicate that the average teenager is spending more than seven hours a day on smartphones, not including school or homework time. Through the use of smart phones, the initial harm is social deprivation. Time with friends face to face has plummeted. The second consequence is sleep deprivation because social media is available 24/7. The third consequence is a lessening of the ability to focus. Staying on script and focused is impossible because of the instant pushing of new information. A fourth consequence is that of addiction. Social media hooks them into its suction web.

Social media affects girls and boys differently. According to the author, social media harm girls more than boys because they prefer visually oriented platforms, especially the desire to connect with others. Secondly, that girls are more sensitive to visual comparisons with focus on image focus of oneself. Secondly, because of image focus, girls tend to be more aggressive than can lead to self-harm. Thirdly, because girls are freer in sharing their emotions, that is often carried to online social media.. Fourthly, the internet has made it easier for men to stalk women. Finally, because girls are more into the desire to connect; by connecting to so many online, greatly lessens any quality connections.

Boys connect and are impacted by social media in various ways also, Boys begin to pull away from the real world and begin to immerse themselves in the virtual world. Boys can now spend more time playing video games and viewing pornography in the privacy of their own room. Pornography companies have made it easier for boys to satisfy powerful evolved desired without having to develop any skills that would help them make the transition into adulthood. Boys, by being connected with others online, increases the quantity of social interaction but decreases the quality of social relationships.

Haidt goes on to designate a chapter of his book to what he calls, “Spiritual elevation and degradation.” He says, “It feels that something very deep changed in the 2010’s. On college campuses, there seemed to be a shift from discover mode to defend mode. In American politics, things got even stranger. What is happening to us? How is technology changing us? The phone-based life produces spiritual degradation, not only in young people but in all of us.”

He goes on to show how phone-based life affects peoples lives spiritually by blocking or by counteracting six spiritual practices: shared sacredness, embodiment, stillness, silence and focused self-transcendence; being slow to anger, quick to forgive, and finding awe in nature.

There is an ongoing battle between the sacred and the profane. Pulling us either up or down. He suggests that we can create healthier environments for everyone by reconnecting with the rhythms of the calendar and our communities by involving in religious rituals as well as creating our own family rituals.

Such rituals involve movement, gestures, activities. Stillness, silence and focus become a pivotal part of the ritual. Whereas social media encourages us to be judgmental, the sacred, reminds us to be slow to anger and quick to forgive. We have lost the sense of moral beauty, awe in nature, music, visual arts, life and death, epiphanies.

In a phone based society, we are bombarded with a plethora of content chosen by definite algorithms that is being pushed at us from all sides. On the other hand, French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, suggested that there is a “God-shaped hole in every heart.”

Haidt says that “there is a hole, an emptiness, in all of us that we strive to fill. If it doesn’t get filled with something noble and elevated, modern society will quickly pump it with garbage.”