

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 384: JONATHAN HAIDT

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build teams of high performing people -- because organizations don't disrupt, people do.

Let's start today's episode by running through some numbers. In 2022, 46 percent of American teens said they were online almost constantly. Around 80 percent of high school seniors said they use social media nearly every day, but only 30 percent say they meet up with friends every day.

Sure, we've heard the argument "phones are bad" before. Our own parents used to say TV would rot our brains. But here are some more statistics. Since 2010 -- roughly the year touch-screen smartphones and social media apps blew up -- the number of girls between 12 and 17 that reported a major depressive episode more than doubled, to 28 percent. Emergency room visits and hospitalizations for girls harming themselves skyrocketed too, along with the suicide rate amongst teenage boys. These stats hold true across most developed nations, as well. And all this, as the hours spent parenting per week has continued to climb since the 1990s.

Clearly, this goes beyond just "hey! put the phone down." Our guest today calls it a total rewiring of childhood, as smartphones and overprotective parenting warp those crucial formative years into a rollercoaster of anxiety and depression. Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at the NYU Stern School of Business, and the author of several books -- his latest is *The Anxious Generation - How*

*the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness.*” So, what do we do with these heart wrenching statistics, as parents and leaders, and consumers?

I hope you enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, John, let's start, if I may, with your children, both teenagers 14 and 17, in that critical period of anxiety that your new book is all about. So how do your children feel about the dad who's trying to get the smart phones out of their hands?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Well, it's complicated. And I mean, a general principle is that young kids desperately want everything. They want the smartphone, they want TikTok, they want everything because everyone else has it. All their friends have it. And that's now creeping down into elementary school, into fourth and fifth grade. On the other hand, older kids, when you talk to kids who are 18 or 20, they generally say that this stuff was bad. It messed them up, and they're very understanding of limits. So, with my kids, I said absolutely no social media until high school. And my son felt left out in sixth grade because when he moved from elementary to middle school in New York City, all the New York City public school kids in his school at least had phones and they were beginning to, oh, had Instagram. They were getting Instagram. So, he resented that a little bit. But he understood it. And then when he was in 10th grade, he created an Instagram account for himself without telling me. But by that time, he had shown that he's actually a very responsible kid and he had joined the track team and he needed to keep in touch with the track team. Uh, so sorry. Let me turn it off. Ah. So sorry. Okay. Hold on.

**Whitney Johnson:** I think it's fitting that you just got the boing while we're talking about social media. Very fitting,

**Jonathan Haidt:** I know. Yeah, it interrupts everything.

**Whitney Johnson:** Alex, we're going to leave that in. That's good.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Leave it. Leave it all in. That's right. This thing runs our lives now. So, with my son, he did start an Instagram account, but he tells me that he hardly, that he almost never posts. And so, with him, everything's okay, and he doesn't have anxiety problems. My daughter is 14, and same thing when she was going from elementary to middle school. She, at the time she just had a phone watch and she, but this was during Covid, so everybody had to have a smartphone according to the school. And all the girls had Instagram and she wanted Instagram, and I said no. And a year later she told me that she she's actually glad she's not on Instagram because she can see that the Instagram girls are stupid. It just it makes these girls stupid, and they're focused on their looks, their clothing. So, that hasn't been a problem. Except that once she, now she just started high school, and now she really wants Snapchat because the kids don't text that much. They all use Snapchat. And I've said no to that as well. And so, that I am imposing a cost on my daughter for now, which I hope will be a benefit in the long run. And my campaign is that no parent ever has to do this by themselves again. No parent will ever be the only one saying no. That's the way we beat this.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mhm. That's so good. Oh. All right. We're going to come back to that because that's that I love that that rallying cry. Alright. So, let's now talk about you and your childhood. So, the subtitle of the book talks about the great rewiring of childhood. What was your childhood like? Where did you grow up? What did you love?

**Jonathan Haidt:** So, I was born in northern New Jersey. I don't have any memories of it. When I was five, we moved to Scarsdale, New York, a town north of New York City. And I had a great typical, you know, American suburban childhood. By third grade, I'm certain that by third grade, me and my best friend were riding our bicycles all over town, and there was some woods, and we were finding, like, hideouts, like rocks where you could crawl under. And we're making forts. By fifth grade, we, I remember we had a rock fight with boys at a neighboring school over territory. So, it was adventurous. We didn't really do any shoplifting, but we did steal

shopping carts because you can bash off the top of a shopping cart and then you have these wheels. You can make a go cart. So very typical, you know, but it was all outdoors. There was no adult supervision, certainly from the age of eight on, third grade on I'm sure there was no adult supervision. And sometimes we got hurt. Sometimes you fall on your bicycle, and you discover that yeah, it really hurts and you're bleeding, but you can still limp home. Your friend helps get you home. And if anything really serious, you know some other adult will call your mother. So now I grew up in a very safe town. I just want to point out, had I grown up in New York City, it would have been the same thing. There are all these videos from the 70s and 80s of kids playing outdoors in New York City. So, this is the way almost all kids in America were raised. It was just, it would be absurd to have adults supervising ten-year-olds.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, well, it's interesting you've used the word typical twice. And I think it's important to argue it was typical for this 70s or 60s or whenever it was you were a child.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Yes. I'm sorry. Yeah, typical for, let's say, the 1940s through the 80s. Certainly there were kids in the Industrial Revolution who didn't get to play, and there were kids in the early agricultural revolution who didn't get to play. So, yeah.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know, it is funny. It's, I have two memories that are coming up for me, and I think this is fun. And I would encourage everybody who's listening to reflect on some of your childhood memories. But I remember two in particular. We lived on a street corner in a suburban, in San Jose, California, and my sister and I, when cars would come past, we would pretend like they were going to attack us. So, we would, like, dive into the ivy so that they couldn't see us. I remember being 11 or 12 and hitting seventh grade, and my friends and I riding bikes all around the neighborhood, you know, no hands. And that sense of freedom that we felt. Yeah, it was just it was glorious. It was glorious.

**Jonathan Haidt:** That's right. But you know what? Your story is actually amazing because what I, you know, I think what made my book different. My book isn't just social media is bad. The first third of the book is about childhood and play. It's not about social media. And I review research on how play is a universal feature of being a mammal. All mammal babies play. They have to play to wire up their brains. And a lot of what they're doing is practicing the skills they need to survive in their environment. So, you grow up in San Jose where there were no predators. You didn't have any predators to actually run from, but you needed them to practice. So, you said, hey, let's pretend that this car coming along is like a lion, and let's practice our childhood survival skills. And it's great fun. That's what we're all doing. We were building, we were negotiating. We were, and so, this was, you know, this is what childhood, I believe needs to be, and this is what my book is about, is about why did we stop doing that in the 90s? And then why did we really end it in 2010?

**Whitney Johnson:** I want to go there now, John. Is, you know, this book, *The Anxious Generation*. It's been six years in the making. Probably longer than that. I want to understand, why does this topic matter to you so deeply? Like why did you feel like you were maybe even called to write this book? What happened?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Yeah, and it was a roundabout path because I, my research is centrally on morality and politics, the way that our political lives are an extension of our moral lives. And I study moral tribalism, the culture war. I'm extremely alarmed about the direction of American democracy That has been my passion since the 2000. And my book, *The Righteous Mind*, that's been my focus. But I did this side project because in 2015, the university started melting down in a weird way. And my friend Greg Lukianoff, I think, figured out what was going on. And we wrote a whole book called *The Coddling of the, The Coddling of the American Mind*, which laid out how vast overprotection and the deprivation of play and a bunch of other things. And the culture went all sorts of things combined, so that the students coming in in 2014, 2015 were really different from the college students we'd seen in 2012. And we didn't. We thought they were all millennials. We didn't have a term called Gen Z back then in 2014, but now we know the reason they were so different is they were a different generation. They were a generation with much, much higher levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide. 50 to 150% on almost all these variables depends on the study. But we're not talking 10 or 20% increase. We're talking 50 to 150% increases in all of these variables. So, you know, if you were born in 1993, you're a millennial. You probably have pretty good mental health. If you were born in 1997, you're Gen Z. You have much worse mental health.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So anyway, so that book and the decline of universities, which has continued to the present day, you know, universities used to have the greatest brand in the world, Americans, America's elite universities were the greatest in the world. Everybody wanted to come here. And now we're a laughingstock. We've ruined our reputation, and it's our own fault. So that's what I was working on. And then I was going to write a book. I got a contract to write a book called *Life After Babel*, adapting to a world we may never again share, because it was clear to me that social media was changing relationships in ways that were making academic life really difficult. We couldn't have open discussions anymore. If you say any word that someone objects to, it becomes a whole big thing. So, everybody's been walking on eggshells and teaching on eggshells since 2015, and I hate that. So, that's what I was really focused on. And then I was going to write about how that is now affecting our whole democracy. And my plan was because I had all this data on teen mental health, and I just written this book on Gen Z. So, my plan was to say, okay, I'm going to start off chapter one showing, look what happened to teenagers who were the first ones to move their social lives on to social media. I'll do that in chapter one. Say, look, it drove them crazy and now I'll spend the rest of the book looking at what happens when America's civic life, or any democracy, when your civic life is conducted not in the public square, not in newspapers and editorials and letters to the editor, but on Twitter and Instagram and a few other platforms.

**Jonathan Haidt:** How does that distort democracy? So that was my plan. But once I got that first chapter written and I laid out all the graphs, showing these incredible hockey stick shapes, these incredible inflection points, around 2012, I said, wow, I can't just present this and move on. This is a major mystery, especially because even though I knew it was happening in the UK as well, I discovered it's also happening in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the Nordic countries. Something is happening in the developed world to our children, and it began between 2010 and 2015. So that is the mystery. I decided I have to write a whole book on this now. Like, I can't wait three years to finish this big book on democracy. Yeah, so I asked the publisher, can we split the book in two? Let me get out this book on teen mental health first, and then I'll go right back to the democracy book. I'll start working on that in the fall of 2025. It'll be great. And then what happened was this book has blown up, and part of the reason is that we can actually solve this problem, which we'll get to. But that's why I'm so excited about this, and that's why I'm putting all my effort into this. Our democracy is in huge trouble, but frankly, this is even more urgent. We've got to we've got to cut this off now.

**Whitney Johnson:** And this is more foundational. If we can solve this, then it will, it will there will be a positive outcome for our democracy as well. Okay.

**Jonathan Haidt:** That's right, that's right.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. So, at our firm Disruption Advisors, we, we focus on the S curve as a model for what growth looks and feels like the launch point of a curve almost always, almost always involves discomfort, awkwardness, frustration. Like when you said, you know, you're debating an idea. There's we don't know what we think. It's uncomfortable. What does the rewiring of childhood, what does that doing to our children's ability to be agentic? So, what are some of the implications?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Mhm. All right. I'm going to try out a crazy metaphor for you.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, I love crazy.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Okay. Suppose we were to give everybody a cyanide pill so that they could kill themselves whenever they wanted to because, you know, people should have that right. That would be a completely insane thing to do, because people sometimes hit a hard part of life or they're suffering, and a lot of people would choose to end it, but if they just stuck it out. So, I mean, it's a completely insane idea. By analogy, what if we all had a little pill that said, whenever anything is difficult, any real challenge, any unpleasantness, we should take the pill. And now everything feels great. I bring this up because I'm just rereading *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley's book that we all read, you know, we read in high school. It's an amazing book. And everyone just, if there's a problem, just take some and problem solved. This is also a completely insane thing to do because we don't want, especially our children, but even us, we don't want to give people a way out of every problem, a psychological way out. Just make the suffering go away. Or what if, what if I'm sitting at my desk and I'm trying to write, and

every time I get to a hard passage, I have 100 other things that I can do, which is what I do. Like, I actually don't have problems with my phones because I don't use my phone that much.

**Jonathan Haidt:** I'm always on my computer and whenever the writing gets hard, I check the weather, or I see what someone said about me on Twitter. I do use Twitter to some extent. I kind of have to. I recognize it's bad for me, but I try to keep it low anyway. My point is, life is full of hard challenges and if you always have an escape hatch, always you just press a button and you're out. That's terrible. It's a terrible way to live. It dawned on me; I don't think I've read a book in five years now. I've listened to books on tape, you know, or audiobooks because that goes on and on and on. You can't stop it. Whereas when I try to like read a book, I get distracted. I do other things. So, I mean, obviously I'm reading a lot to write books, but I haven't read like a whole book in a long time other than on audio. So back to your S-curve question, a distinction that I learned, especially from talking with Andrew Huberman, is between fast dopamine and slow dopamine. If you have, obviously dopamine is the, it's not, as Huberman says, don't think about it as a reward. Like I did work, and I got the reward, I feel good. Think about it. And I say this in the book to think about it as, as the reinforcer that makes you want to keep doing it.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So, when you, you know, when a rat presses a button and gets a treat, it doesn't stop pressing the button. It's more likely to press the button because it's gotten quick dopamine. And so now think about your children. Do you want your children to have instant entertainment? Amazing entertainment with them all the time? Even in class, you're bored. In class. Pull out your phone. This is a terrible thing to do to our children. So, I think the S curve is really powerful, because what it's saying is you have some hard things to do, and they're going to be a lot of times when you want to bail out because it's hard. And if you stick it out, you'll get the slow dopamine, which is incredibly rewarding, because it's not just like a feeling of pleasure. It's a feeling of satisfaction that you've done something. My students spend, some of them spend five hours a day on TikTok, and they say at the end of that they like, what have I done? I have accomplished nothing. I don't even know what I saw. I don't even remember what I saw. So, they had lots of little quick dopamine from the from seeing enjoyable things, but it didn't add up to anything. Whereas the S curve is about living your life again, I'm just putting words into your mouth. I'm guessing this is what it is.

**Whitney Johnson:** Feel free.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Okay, the S curve is about how, you know, you have to kind of climb a mountain to, to really do anything important in life. And if at every point there's a little ski chute that allows you to just sit on a sled and go, go down to the bottom, it'll be fun. It's a, you know, it's a joy ride. Like then nobody ever gets to the top of the mountain.

**Whitney Johnson:** I love that. Something that you just said that I thought was interesting is that ability to help you persist, to get the slow dopamine. And so, so basically what I hear, you know, you talked about this movement and we're going to come back to the parents. But it's a movement to also or, or an outcome of this is that people are going to be agents in their own lives by understanding this work.

**Jonathan Haidt:** That's right. Agency is such an important word. And this is something that has really dropped in Gen Z. Even though in a sense a phone is a multifunction tool that should make you into somebody super powerful. You know, we basically we have omniscience. When you and I were young, you know, if someone if God came to you and said, would you like to know everything at your beck and call, would you like to be able to just know everything within two seconds? Like we would have said, yeah. And I'm glad that we do. Like you know, I love Google. I love being able to search. But so, these things should make us super powerful, super productive and super happy. But they don't. And I mean, often they don't even make us productive because the original iPhone was just a digital Swiss Army knife. It was not addictive. There were no, there were only the apps that Apple gave you. So, it was a music player. It was a telephone. It was a web browser; it was a flashlight. And there was a I mean, there was, you know, there was a small set of tools. That was 2007. In 2008, Apple makes available these software development kits that other companies can now create apps. They also give us the App Store. So, by 2010, 2011, this thing is not a Swiss Army knife. This thing is now becoming a master for many people. Because it is now. You're not picking up when you want something, it is pinging you when it or somebody else wants something. And it's that, I think is really the turning point is the notifications when we turn our day over. You know, like my phone just interrupted me with something before because I had left my, my

ringer on, you know, when we're getting 2 or 300 notifications a day, which is what my students get, we're giving up our attention. We're saying, how about if I never think for 30 minutes straight? How about if I always get interrupted every five minutes? And that's tragic.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. It is. Okay, so one of your mic drop moments in the book and which I think is, I'll share this with you and then we can go to some of the foundational reforms that you recommend is overprotection in the real world and under protection in the virtual world is why this has become the anxious generation.

**Jonathan Haidt:** That's right.

**Whitney Johnson:** Do you want to say anything about that?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Sure. Oh no, well I'm happy to explain that and more. Is there a question that you want to add or just...

**Whitney Johnson:** Well, I was going to go straight to the foundational reforms, but why don't you, why don't you elaborate on that for a second and then talk about some of the foundational reforms that you are recommending?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Okay. Yeah. Good. Yes. Now, I'd like to elaborate on this, because I think this is really the crux of the book, and especially for parents, you know, we all are afraid for our children. We all, you know, when they're slow to come home from school, we think the worst. I mean, anything can happen. We think we all want our children to be safe. And, and we began really freaking out in the 1990s. Reports of child abduction, which are extremely rare. But we all started fearing our neighbors, fearing, you know, that our children were unsafe unless we were watching them or somebody we trusted was watching them. So, we became very overprotective in the real world in the 90s in America and Britain and Canada, actually. Um, and while that was happening, the internet was coming in and the internet was amazing. And personal computers with the internet were even, you know, that was like totally amazing. And kids loved it. Kids flocked to computers, especially boys. And so, we're keeping our kids in, but they're playing on the computer and isn't that good? They're safe and they're learning and it's technology and it's, you know, programing. Some were learning to program, so we were lulled into thinking that it's okay for us to pull them out of the world. It's okay that we've stopped letting them roam around and pretend that cars are hunting them like tigers. We stopped all that. But look, look what they're doing online. Isn't it great?

**Jonathan Haidt:** And at first it kind of was great. And the millennials, those born between 1981 and 1995, came out fine there. They had a different childhood. They grew up with the internet. Most of them, but they came out fine. They're creative. They travel around the world, they start companies. Something changed between 2010 and 2015 that made the environment much more toxic. Kids who went through puberty with smartphones and social media, they became Gen Z, whereas kids who went through puberty with the internet, on their family computer and a flip phone in their hand, they enjoyed technology that allowed them to connect to the world and connect to each other. They were not being manipulated by that world very much. So, everything really changes from 2010 to 2015, and what I'm hoping that parents will, will see, is that we have to lighten up and loosen up in the physical world where we've just, we've just gotten it totally wrong. Our kids need to have adventures and take risks in the real world in order to mature their brains. So, we've got to loosen up there and we've got to tighten up in the virtual world. I mean, especially for under 16s. Once you let your kid, once you give your kid a phone, you're giving them unlimited access to the internet.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Now, you can play the games. You can say, I'm putting on parental controls. You can say I'm limiting it to this or that, but it's going to be a struggle for the rest of the time your kid is at home with you. This is family life all over the world is now a struggle over screen time. And so, but so, we have to be more careful about what our kids are doing online. And the best way by far is just delay. Just don't let them have their own portal. I'm not saying keep them away from the internet. You can have a computer in the kitchen, and you can have your five-year-old do some things online. That's okay. It's that the internet is not intrinsically bad. It's intrinsically wonderful. Actually, I think for sure. But the day you give your child a smartphone or a tablet or even a laptop to have in their room and use on their own is the day you're saying the entire world can get to you, including all kinds of men who want photos of you. And you can get the entire world, including pornography and horrible violent videos, things like that. So how do we get out of this? That's what the four reforms are about. The reason

that we're so trapped in this is because, you know, we give our, like, as we were talking before, you know, everyone in sixth grade had Instagram that put pressure on everyone else to give their kids Instagram, even though it's wildly inappropriate for 11-year-old kids.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So, it's a collective action problem. We've been pushed by peer pressure and collective pressure to give in, and it keeps moving down lower and lower into elementary school now. So, the way out is collective also. And so, what I propose in the book is four norms. If we embrace just four simple norms, we can break this trap. We can break out. So, they are no smartphone before high school. So, in the United States at least, that's around 14. In Europe, that's often the middle of their secondary school. So, in Britain and Spain, the organizations there are saying no smartphone till the end of secondary school, which is more like 16. That might be difficult to implement because the world kind of expects you to have a smartphone if you're doing financial stuff and all sorts of things. But anyway, in the US, no smartphone before 14, no social media before 16. We need a national minimum age. It was supposed to be 16 originally it got pushed down to 13. With no enforcement. There's no enforcement. The companies have no obligation to actually check if you're 13. So, no social media till 16. The third norm is phone free schools when kids have phones in their pockets, they're not paying attention to the teacher very much. They're not even paying attention to the other kids. Right?

**Jonathan Haidt:** You know, in between classes, they're not talking and laughing. They're on their phones. And whenever a school goes phone free, whenever a school locks up the phones in the morning, you always hear the same thing. They hear laughter in the hallways again. It used to be silence in between classes. Now they hear laughter. So, it's so sad that our kids are so lonely. This generation is so lonely compared to any previous generation, and it's because they don't have any time with each other. And if we just take the phones for the school day, they'll actually talk and joke and laugh with each other a lot more. And then the final reform is far more independence, free play and responsibility in the real world. Because if we're going to take away most of the screen time, I mean, look, the kids are on, you know, the latest numbers are something like 9 to 12 hours a day of screen time, not counting school, just outside of school, 9 to 12. That's almost all the time. And if we're going to take almost all of that away, especially from kids through middle school, we have to give them something to do. And what better to do than normal childhood? What better to do than the freedom to play a game with your friend where you pretend that cars are tigers, and you jump into the bushes like that's what they should be doing. That's what we have to give them.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mhm. So good. It's so simple, so straightforward. Okay. So that's what parents can do and we collectively as a society can do. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called this week for warning labels on social media.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Yes.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Send me a pack of cigarettes, tells us they cause cancer. Still people smoke. What's the role of government and rewiring the anxious generation? And what's something that those of us who are listening were having this conversation that we can do beyond those four basic reforms as citizens. Is there something additional you would recommend?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Sure. Oh, absolutely. Yeah. So, you know, in general, I have some sympathies with libertarianism, and I have some sympathies that the government shouldn't be out telling us what we can and can't do as adults. But I have no sympathies for situation in which the biggest, most powerful companies in the world can get to our children, do whatever they want to them, show them anything. And Congress has said in its wisdom that we can't sue them. Section two...so, in a sense, Congress, the government, set up a lot of this problem. They created section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which said you can't hold the platforms liable for what other people put up. This has been broadly interpreted to say, even if TikTok has an algorithm that channels your daughter nothing but suicide content, well, you know, that's protected. No, this has to change. So anyway, so I wrote I wrote the book as an American, assuming that we might never get any help from Congress because Congress is slow to act on everything. Now, on this, there is actually bipartisan support because parents in both parties really have the same concerns. We all having the same fights with our kids. We all see the same threats. So, there are some bills that really might pass, especially for the Kids Online Safety Act. That's the one that might pass this year. So, I'm very hopeful about that.

**Jonathan Haidt:** But the big change, the real game changer is going to be age gating, is going to be when Congress says, you know, okay, we said the age was 13 to open an account, to give away your data, to sign a contract with a company, you know, to do all this without your parents' knowledge. First, how about if we make the companies responsible for actually enforcing 13 and then once we work out how they're going to do that, these are the smartest companies in the world. They'll figure out a mechanism too, to get parental. So, once they get that for 13, then I think we raise the age to 16, which is where it needs to be. I'm open, in Florida, that's what they're doing in Florida. They added on a provision that, well, with the parents' permission, you can get on at 15 or 14. I'm actually okay with that because if that, if it truly, if it truly is up to the parents and most parents are going to say no, then that's okay with me. So, there's some flexibility here about how we implement this, but we have to have a national and global understanding that 11- and 12-year-old girls should not be talking with strange men all around the world that our 14-year-old boys should not be able to be extorted by, you know, by sextortion gangs all over the world you know who, once they get a picture of the boy, you know, and his penis because he thinks he's flirting with a sexy girl. They then blackmail him and say, oh, we got you. Now we're going to send your photo to everyone in your contacts. And dozens and dozens of these boys have committed suicide. Those are just the known cases of suicides. So, we've got to start understanding. This is a really dangerous consumer product. And that was the surgeon general's point. That even though I am still engaged in a debate, Jean Twenge and I are engaged in a debate with other researchers. The science is not settled in the sense of science. You know, social science have not reached agreement. But I think what Doctor Murthy's point was we have a consumer product in which hundreds and hundreds of parents are saying, my kid is dead because of this. And it has to do with the design of the product, the product that fed my kid all this stuff, the product that linked strangers, criminals to my child. It's a design flaw. And so, it's a dangerous product. You know, if there was any other product that was killing dozens or hundreds of kids every year, the least we would do is put a warning label on it. We would probably pull it from the market.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Okay. All right. So. So, what I think I'm hearing you say is that we as citizens can do is just be aware of what's, what kind of laws are being enacted and support them. Is there, so there was one that you mentioned a minute ago that you think has a real possibility of getting passed. Can you say what that one is again?

**Jonathan Haidt:** That's right. Yes. So, the Kids Online Safety Act, it has a bunch of features modeled after a UK code. It establishes that there's some duty of care. It just forces the platforms to stop doing some of the more exploitative things to children. It says children are not the same as adults. You have to treat them different if they're under 18.

**Whitney Johnson:** Good. Okay.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So yes, as in as in any democracy, people should talk to their representatives, make it clear that they want, they think the government has a role to play. So that's what you can do with, you know, federal government, state governments are actually being very active. Most of the action is in state capitals. Florida, Utah. My governor here in New York has proposed a, some really good limits on what companies can do to our kids. The governor of California just announced yesterday he's going to push for phone free schools all across the state. I think we're going to get that in New York, too, New York City and New York State. It's good. So local and state governments are really acting. Parents everywhere see the same thing. We all share the same concerns, we all are have the same fears.

**Jonathan Haidt:** And so, this is moving very, very fast. And that's why I'm so excited because, you know, we're, you know, years and years of waiting for Congress to act. And they've done nothing since 1998 when they created the problem. Nothing. But we can actually move this not just on the state and local level. We can move it in our in our own schools. And that's where we're seeing the most activity. This is so exciting all over the world now, at least all over the Western world, parents' groups are coming together and saying, we're going to support each other. We're going to delay giving our kids smartphones till 14. We're going to follow those four norms. And one of them is we're going to go in to see the principal of our kids' school and say, please give the kids six hours a day to talk to each other and the teacher, like, get them away from their phones for six hours a day so they can learn. This is happening very, very fast just in the last couple of months. So, I'm actually pretty confident we're going to win. Like things are. I've never seen social change happen this fast.



**Whitney Johnson:** I just got chills. That's really wonderful. It's really, really good. Ah okay. So, a pressing question. If you're a 20 something like our producer Alex, he grew up in this transition from flip to smartphones, or anyone actually reading your book or listening to this podcast and thinking about the damage that has already been done to our brains. How do you alleviate how terrifying that is? And what do you do? And yeah, you've got some spiritual practices that I want to talk about, but let's start there. What, what's your thought process? How do you help people not freak out?

**Jonathan Haidt:** So yeah. So, you know, so, part of the narrative structure of my book was a sort of descent into darkness, going through all the problems, but then an ascent back into light, because we can, we can actually fix this. And, and I'm very fortunate that I teach at the NYU Stern School of Business, where I have flexibility to teach whatever I want that's relevant to the students. And so, I chose to teach a course called Flourishing, which I used to teach back at the University of Virginia when I was there, and I taught it for a long time as an MBA course, you know, 28-year-olds mostly who wanted it. Just how do you enjoy your career more? And we talked a little bit about the phones because the phones dominated their lives, too. But they were all millennials. They all they all had flip phones through puberty. So, it didn't, so it didn't change their brains during that sensitive period of puberty. Well, the mental health crisis is so severe in every school in the country that I switched. I created an undergrad version of the course that I started teaching two years ago. So, I've gotten to know the undergrads much better. And they're mostly, let's say, 19. They're mostly sophomores in my class. And so, if you're if you're in your late teens or early 20s, you know, the brain doesn't really sort of lock down into place until the mid-twenties. But even if it has, even if it has, what we're finding is if you change your habits, you change your life.

**Jonathan Haidt:** And right now, the phone is like your own personal dog trainer, where you're the dog and it's the trainer. And, what? So, I'll just tell you a couple of things we do. Actually, you know what people can find the that you can find the, the syllabus for the course on our website. So, if you go to [anxiousgeneration.com](http://anxiousgeneration.com), that's the website for the book. Go to take action, actions for Gen Z. Actions that young people can take themselves. And one of the actions there is look at the, here's the [syllabus](#) for my course. Here's all the readings and here's all the lectures, like I have all the lecture slides. So, you can actually follow along with what we do in each in each in each session of the 14 sessions. And the foundation of it all is taking back control of your attention. If you give your attention away to every company that asks, you have no attention to do anything that matters in life. You're just going to be a passive consumer. You're going to be swiping and scrolling and liking, and you're not going to do anything. And these are business students. They're ambitious. They want to actually have an effect on the world. So, they love it. They take to it right away. And so, we work really hard on improving their morning routine and their evening routine. Actually, we start let's do evening first because let's think about you have this period from, say, 10:00 at night to 8 or 9:00 in the morning when, which is not your workday.

**Jonathan Haidt:** What are all the things you need to do to recharge, to be healthy, to take care of in your life? So, let's make sure you're getting good sleep. What are your habits? And for almost all my students, you know, because I make them count back. Like, what's the last thing you do before you close your eyes? Like you've turned out, you know? Is it turned out; you know. Well, yeah. What's the last thing? And for the great majority, the last thing is check their notifications, texts, things that are coming in, and then they close their eyes. Lights are already out. They brush their teeth. And then, so really? So, you're spending, like, almost all of this time, you're spending this recharge time actually hooked up and responding to the rest of the world. You're not taking control of it. And then, you know, most of them get enough sleep, but about a third don't. So, for that third, like, okay, you know, you need to actually get at least, you know, seven hours sleep. You need to lengthen your sleep. Or at least get as much as you can. So, we'll work on that. And then in the morning, what's the first thing you do? And for almost all of them, it's check your notifications very first thing. Don't get, don't go to the bathroom. Don't get out of bed. Check your notifications. And so, once they see that, that their entire day is basically checking notifications and responding, responding, always responding rather than being an agent, rather than saying, here are my goals for the day, I'm going to face constant pressures to not do them. I'm going to face constant interruptions and demands from other people that I do something. What kind of life do I want to have? Do I want to have a life spent entirely responding to other people's notifications and interruptions? Or do I want to actually get a few things done every day and prioritize those? And we get amazing results?

**Jonathan Haidt:** So, it starts with taking back your attention. The students, they I, we work with them to turn off almost all of their notifications. Most of my students get a notification. Their phone vibrates every time an email comes in, an email, even junk mail. So, because they don't know that their attention is a precious resource, they think, well, it might be valuable information. I don't want to miss it. I don't want to miss any information. And that's the wrong way to think. What you have to think is you have a very limited amount of attention. You know, think about, you have like 100 drops of attention to spend during your day. Do you want to give away a drop to every, you know, every little thing? No. You have to guard it like its gold.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mhm.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So anyway, my point is, my point is advice to anyone in their 20s regain control of your attention. Become the director of your life. Get a good evening routine. Get a good morning routine. You'll find handouts on the on the website. A very simple handout that helps you organize. What do you what are the last five things you do before you close your eyes? So, take control of your attention. Take control of your time, get that really good recharge period. And then for the rest of the day, the workday or the school day, you know, let's call it 8 or 9 a.m. to 9 or 10 p.m. now, we'll, we'll do, we'll deal with that in later classes. But we have to get the foundation first.

**Whitney Johnson:** These routines. Okay. All right. So, just a couple more questions as we start to wrap up. You talk in the book about a number of spiritual practices we can engage in to counter the trends of a film-based life. I think there were six of them. We won't go through all six. I want to just pick 1 or 2 that I would love for you to talk about either embodiment or slow to anger, quick to forgive, and you get to choose your own adventure.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So just for listeners, just a tiny bit of background is my first book was called *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, and it was ten chapters on the psychological wisdom of the ancients. What are some insights that they had East and West, from thousands of years ago? And so, I wrote that book. It's a really, it's my only really positive, you know, uplifting book. And when I was almost done with this book, which was all about what's happening to kids, and I realized, wait, I haven't said anything about adults, and we're all feeling this. We're all feeling fragmented. We're all feeling confused. It's not rewiring our brains as much because we made it through puberty, but it is damaging our quality of life to be overwhelmed all the time. And I started saying, okay, well, what should I put if I'm going to have a chapter on how adults can have a better phone-based life, you know, less, less draining, what would I say? And what I realized is that the phone-based life is basically pushing us to do the opposite of everything in *The Happiness Hypothesis*. You know, it's almost as though, you know, the designers of social media said, what's a recipe for a flourishing life? Hmm. Let's try to reverse it. Like, obviously they didn't say that. I think they thought they were doing good originally, but as they battled with each other to grab our attention, you know.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So, so let's take embodiment. I'm, you know, I'm an atheist myself, but I've come to have tremendous respect for religion and religious practices because religious people are happier. Religious communities bring out the best in people, at least in the United States. If not, it doesn't, not necessarily always, but in the United States, they do. And I, as a person interested in anthropology and evolution, I've studied rituals a lot, and I'm very interested in rituals and, religions that bind people together. You move in unison; you kneel to express subordination to God. You sing, you put your arms around, you do I mean, religious worship is usually not just cerebral. It's physical. And there's good psychological reasons for that. We are embodied creatures. Our thinking, in a sense, it goes on just in our brain. I mean it literally. I think that's true. But our brain represents our body so much that our body is really all over our brain. And, you know, kids need to run around together, and people would say, well, what's wrong if they're running around in the virtual world? What's wrong if they're running around on video games? And you might think, well, maybe it's just as good, but it turns out it's not.

**Jonathan Haidt:** On video games, you know, my son, he wanted to play Fortnite in sixth grade, and I said, no, I did let him start in eighth grade and in limited amounts. I think it's okay, but a lot of boys get hooked anyway. The point is, they're having adventures. They're jumping out of airplanes. They're attacking other groups of boys. That's fun. That's definitely fun. I don't want to take away from that, but it's nothing like what I had with my best friend, because they're getting just lots and lots of quick hits of dopamine. Whereas my friend and I, we it was really hard to do the things we did. Like we would build a fort and we would stock it with rocks in case we were

attacked by another group of boys, like, which only happened once. But it was, you know, we so we were preparing for war. That was slow dopamine. Whereas boys on video games, they're getting lots and lots of quick, quick dopamine. And I wonder, you know, like my best friend Christopher and I like, we reminisce about all these adventures and boys who grow up on video games. What are they going to say? You know. Hey, Bill, you remember that Fortnite game number 23,764 where you were trapped behind the you know, that storefront and I had to shoot you out. And Bill is going to say no, I don't remember that game. Yeah, because it was all disembodied cheap, easy dopamine.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right. So, the...

**Jonathan Haidt:** So that's the first.

**Whitney Johnson:** So just on the embodiment, I think, you know, again, thinking of this as a spiritual practice, is this idea of doing things that where and this is for children, but also for adults, of doing things where we're in our body. And I think it's interesting because I found myself recently, you know, I tried surfing over Christmas and I just went and did tennis lessons, and I did rappelling and one of the things I'm hearing you say, or I'm interpreting is like, we can counter that foam-based life by doing things that require our body. I think you also talked about eating together and having those meals. So being fully present in our physical being.

**Jonathan Haidt:** That's right. Being fully present in our physical being in close proximity to other people, friends and family. The best is moving together in time. So, singing together, swaying together, praying together, playing sports together, moving together in time. It makes you fully present and it activates all of your mind. Because again, the body is just all over the mind. The body is very woven into, to the mind. And that is a recipe for healthy experience and for close relationships. What's so striking about what happened to Gen Z is as soon as the girls moved their social life on to social media and were hyper connected, you'd think they'd be hyper happy. But no, they became, that's exactly when they became depressed. And they become lonelier. Well, you'd think when the boy is now, can you go home from school and any kid can find boys to play with in an online game. You'd think that would be great for boys, but it turns out that's when boys get more lonely. Because yes, it's fun. It's definitely fun, but it takes up so much time that you don't actually see your friends in real life. You have a disembodied childhood, and the most, the graph that gets the most comment in the entire book is the one where I show hospitalization rates for broken bones, and it used to be until 2012. What group do you suppose breaks bones the most? Teenage boys, they're, you know, they're riding their bicycle over jump ramps. You know, we used to climb on rooftops, and we would do all kinds of things. I never had a broken bone, but we took risks. And sometimes, you know, boys, you know, when you and I were young, didn't you sometimes see a kid with a cast in school? A kid would have a cast on his arm. You almost never see that now. It's very, very rare. And what I show in that graph from CDC data is that teenage boys used to be the most likely to break a bone. Now they're the least likely group of men. There's still a little higher than girls, but teenage boys are now less likely to be hospitalized for broken bone than their own fathers or grandfathers are today, because their fathers and grandfathers are doing things that might break a bone. Teenage boys are not, they're just on video games and pornography.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wow. Okay, so embodiment. Yeah. Kids have to be embodied. All right. I love it. Now, do you want to do the other one or. I want to be sensitive to your time.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Okay, well. Just very briefly, just, you know, slow to anger, quick to forgive. You know, every great tradition urges us, you know, judge not, lest ye be judged. In the Jewish tradition, there are a variety of quotes like he who the greatest conqueror is he who conquers his own anger. I forget the quote, but there's there are a variety of admonitions to not let anger take you away. Forgiveness. You know, all the great movements urge us to be forgiving towards our enemies. Well, if you grow up or if you spend as an adult any amount of time on Twitter or many other platforms, what are the norms? The norm? What emerges is judge now, right now, lest others judge you for not judging. Judge hundreds of times a day. Hundreds of times a day, maybe thousands and move on. No worry about context. No worry about whether you got it right. If you got it wrong, you're not going to apologize. That would be embarrassing. So, in so many ways, a life online is this fragmented, scattered, angry, opinionated, me first egotistical life which is no life at all. And for thousands of years wise people have been telling us, slow down. Meditate. Don't rush to judgment. Be forgiving. Be loving. It's not all about you. Don't put yourself first. So, this is in, I don't know if it's in every religion, but it certainly is in most of the main ones. Most

of the ones that have spread around the world. So, yeah, that's why I wrote chapter eight, and it's the chapter that I'm proudest of in that it was just a bonus chapter, but it ended up, I think it came out really well, and adults seem to be really enjoying it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, that's interesting. I've really been on a jag recently about forgiving, giving forgiveness. And so, I'm, I'm glad that when I saw that, I was like, that's beautiful. I'm so glad it's there. Okay. All right. Three more questions. So, you talk about two reasons why you feel tremendous hope. Because this generation, Gen Z is not in denial. And also, they want to bring about change. And I wanted to share with you a proof point of that. So, one of my friends and colleagues, her name is Carrie Brotherson. She teaches at Southern Virginia University in Buena Vista, which is not too far from UVA.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Yeah, Buena Vista, I remember that.

**Whitney Johnson:** And here's what she said. She said, I assigned my first-year students to read Haidt and Twenge's op ed in the *New York Times* [*This is Our Chance to Pull Teenagers Out of the Smartphone Trap*]. My plan was to have them read an article I knew they would disagree with, and then teach them how to make a counter argument. Instead, they totally agreed. One student said, at 13, my dad left. Someone handed me a smartphone. How did they think that was going to turn out? Yeah, Haidt's articles have validated the emotional or traumatic experiences that many young adults had as teens, but more than that, they indicate a way forward, arming us with the data to initiate change.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Yeah. That's right. That's why I'm so optimistic, because it's not like it's us adults trying to take something away from the kids that they really want and that and that they love. As I said, the young ones think they want it all, but by the time they reach 18 or 20, they can see the devastation. And so, if almost, if most of the parents, most of the teachers, almost all the principals, if the politicians see it, if the kids themselves see it, why aren't we acting? We just never had a clear path. And that, and then Covid confused us for a few years, and we thought, oh, thank God for social media. The kids are on screens all day long. Isn't that great? But that's why I'm wildly optimistic. I do have a debate with some other researchers. I'm working on that, I think. I think that my side is going to win. That is ongoing. But as the Surgeon general pointed out, even if we, even if the scientific community hasn't reached full agreement, the fact that we have hundreds and hundreds of victims every year from a consumer product that is defective means we should be acting right now, and we are acting right now. It's happening all over the world just in the last few months.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's beautiful.

**Jonathan Haidt:** So, listeners, please, what you can do specifically.

**Speaker4:** Yes. Go.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Go to go to [anxious.generation.com](http://anxious.generation.com). Scroll through our main page. It sort of lays out the story and at the bottom please put in your name and your email address because we're just getting started. But we'll keep you up to date, you know, emails once a month, maybe twice a month, I'm not sure. But it won't be, won't be much. So, join the movement. Go to [[www.afterbabble.com](http://www.afterbabble.com)]. That's my Substack where Zack Rausch and I put out all of our research. We have all kinds of beautiful writing by members of Gen Z. We have a lot of good stuff. It's free. You don't have to pay anything. And third, if you're a parent with kids in eighth grade or below, please go to [letgo.org](http://letgo.org). It's a group I started with Lenore Skenazy who wrote *Free Range Kids*. We have all kinds of ideas for ways that you can bring more play and independence into your child's life. And we have some school programs that are incredibly effective and that cost \$0. They're free to implement. And they have amazing effects, giving kids a chance to try things on their own. And they're ecstatic when they do. The first time a kid walks three blocks to the store and comes home with a quart of milk, you know, it's just, yeah, I'm getting all, you know, because I get, you know, because parents send me these stories.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, I was going to ask you about your call to action. So that's fantastic. All right. Final two questions. Penultimate question. Jon, what's been useful for you in this conversation?

**Jonathan Haidt:** Oh, I think in this conversation, it's the s curve because I've been thinking about dopamine a lot. I like the difference between different kinds. And so, I, I have this, you know, this image of, you know, of a kid like being. I mean, I'm seeing it as like literally an s, but it's, you know, like a kid choosing do I climb up? Do I climb up the s or do I just slide down to the bottom? Because that's easy. So yeah, I think that's a good visual. For the importance of, of reinforcement that comes after hard work. That's the best kind.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay. Final thoughts.

**Speaker4:** Let's see. Beyond the fact that we're going to win. Beyond the fact that we're going to change this. Let's see. I'd like to end optimistically. So, my final thought is that all of this seems hard when you're acting alone. If you're the only parent doing this, or if you're a 28-year-old trying to regain control of your life. It's hard because these things are very addictive. Our habits are very hard to change. But if you do it with a group, it's a lot easier and a lot more fun. So, that's why I think why we get such great results in my Flourishing class, because it's 35 N.Y.U. students and they all work together. They support each other, they give each other ideas. And so, if you're a 28-year-old, you know, oldest members of Gen Z, or if you're a, you know, 33-year-old, a younger millennial, and you want to improve your habits, find at least a partner. But it's more fun if you can find a group to say, for example, as one young man told me, he uses a light phone, a little tiny phone that has very few functions. You have to own a smartphone nowadays. I'm not saying don't own a smartphone. If you're an adult, you have to. But he goes out at night, or he goes out with friends with only his light phone or flip phone like a flip phone. So, if you have a group of friends that commit to doing that, to say, of course we own a smartphone, we have to. But you know what? When we go out at night, we don't bring it. And we do things, we do new things together and we pay attention to each other. That's the way to do this.

**Whitney Johnson:** Jon. Thank you. This was very uplifting.

**Jonathan Haidt:** Good Whitney. Thank you. I got all choked up during it. And I love thinking about possibilities, so thank you. Whitney.

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What do you remember most about your childhood? Is it, like Jonathan said, defending a drainpipe or a cool cave you found from the other kids? Is it pretending to flee from a Toyota-turned-tiger? What parts of that childhood seem impossible now? And how does that make you feel?

Sad, for sure. Angry at the companies who took this away from an entire generation. Fearful for the damage already done. Uncomfortable at times with our own complicit role. As hard as confronting the present moment feels, it sounds a lot like the launch point of a new S Curve. The curve of re-wiring childhood, back into a world of exploration and play.

But as with any S Curve, Jonathan reminds us of a couple key factors that scaffold our growth. First, we are not alone, and honestly can't be alone, in this fight. Whether its parents teaming up to set standards for their kids as a collective, or teenagers opening up about how social media has warped their perception of themselves, no one is an island. Smartphones promised connection and then stole it away from us, so connection is how we fight back.

Jonathan also reminds us that, frankly, there's nothing wrong with us as individuals. This anxiety and depression is piped in by outside actors trying to make a buck, trying to keep you eternally worried about the next notification. A book like *The Anxious Generation* brushes off some of that shame and guilt, reminding us that it's not our moral failing when we are lied to and taken advantage of.

And the last thing – getting hurt is part of growing up. That statistic about broken bones really sticks out in my mind. Remember signing casts, choosing the best real estate for your John Hancock? The more we shield ourselves from pain and suffering, the less we learn about the world, and the less we identify with what – and who – is around us, the less we know how to navigate the adult world. Embrace child-like play, and all the cuts and scrapes that come with it.

For more on this marketplace of self-image that is social media, there's [episode 359](#) with Dr. Michael Gervais, where we break down why we betray ourselves, for just a glance and a nod from others. If you're looking for a dose of optimism about the future of technology, I'd point you to [episode 261](#) with quantitative futurist Amy Webb. And if you're a parent who might be a little freaked out about what you didn't know, you're not alone – take a listen to [episode 274](#) with Lindsay Shipley.

Thank you again to Jonathan Haidt and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. If you want to know more about how DA can support you and your organization through upheaval and change, you can reach us at [workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com](mailto:workwithus@thedisruptionadvisors.com). Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.