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Kids These Days

A looming crisis and how to avert it

By Michael Shermer

Something is amiss among today's youth. This observation isn't the perennial "kids these days" plaint by your middle-aged correspondent. According to San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge, as reported in her book *iGen* (Atria, 2017), to the question "Do you have [a] psychological disorder (depression, etc.)?" the percentage of college students born in 1995 and after (the Internet Generation, or iGen) answering affirmatively in a Higher Education Research Institute study rose between 2012 and 2016. For men, the figure increased from 2.7 to 6.1 percent (a 126 percent increase) and for women from 5.8 to 14.5 percent (a 150 percent rise). The National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that between 2011 and 2016 the percentage of boys who experienced a depressive episode the prior year increased from 4.5 to 6.4 and in girls from 13 to 19.

iGeners began entering college in 2013. Between 2011 and 2016 there was a 30 percent increase in college students who said they intentionally injured themselves (for example, by cutting), and according to the Fatal Injury Reports by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates increased 46 percent
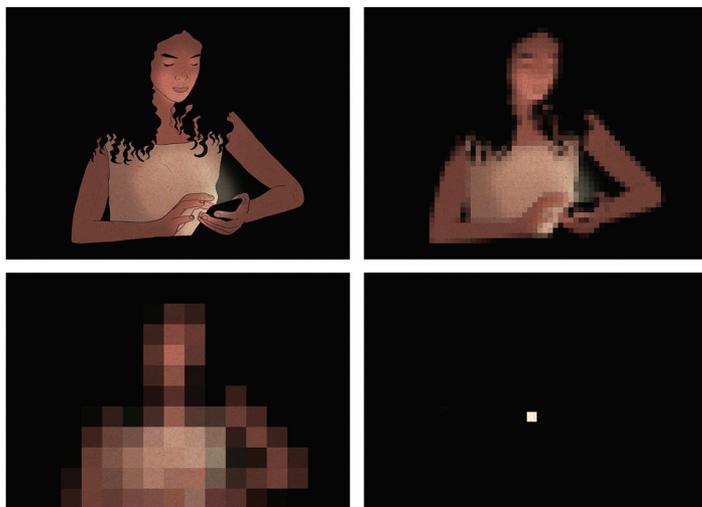
between 2007 and 2015 among 15- to 19-year-olds. Why are iGeners different from Millennials, Gen Xers and Baby Boomers?

Twenge attributes the malaise primarily to the widespread use of social media and electronic devices, noting a positive correlation between the use of digital media and mental health problems. Revealingly, she also reports a negative correlation between lower rates of depression and higher rates of time spent on sports and exercise, in-person social interactions, doing homework, attending religious services, and consuming print media, such as books and magazines. Two hours a day on electronic devices seems to be the cutoff, after which mental health declines, particularly for girls who spend more time on social media, where FOMO ("fear of missing out") and FOBLO ("fear of being left out") take their toll. "Girls use social media more often, giving them more opportunities to feel left out and lonely when they see their friends or classmates getting together without them," Twenge adduces. This, after noting that the percentage of girls who reported feeling left out increased from 27 to 40 between 2010 and 2015, compared with a percentage increase from 21 to 27 for boys.

In search of a deeper cause of this problem—along with that of the campus focus of the past several years involving safe spaces, microaggressions and trigger warnings—Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind* (Penguin, 2018) that iGeners have been influenced by their overprotective "helicoptering" parents and by a broader culture that prioritizes emotional safety above all else. The authors identify three "great untruths":

1. **The Untruth of Fragility:** "What doesn't kill you makes you weaker."
2. **The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning:** "Always trust your feelings."
3. **The Untruth of Us versus Them:** "Life is a battle between good people and evil people."

Believing that conflicts will make you weaker, that emotions are a reliable guide for responding to environmental stressors instead of reason and that when things go wrong, it is the fault of evil people, not you, iGeners are now taking those insalubrious attitudes into the workplace and political sphere. "Social media has channeled partisan passions into the creation of a 'callout culture'; anyone can be publicly shamed for saying something well-intentioned that someone else interprets uncharitably," the authors explain. "New-media platforms and outlets allow citizens to retreat into self-confirmatory bubbles, where their worst fears about the evils of the other side can be confirmed and amplified by extremists and cyber trolls intent on sowing discord and division."

Solutions? "Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child" is the first folk aphorism Lukianoff and Haidt recommend parents and educators adopt. "Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded" is a second because, as Buddha counseled, "once mastered, no one can help you as much." Finally, echoing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being," so be charitable to others.

Such prescriptions may sound simplistic, but their effects are measurable in everything from personal well-being to societal harmony. If this and future generations adopt these virtues, the kids are going to be alright. ⧉

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