Jonathan Haidt of New York University was awarded a 2023 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. In this video, Margaret Chisolm of Johns Hopkins University interviews Dr. Haidt about his pathbreaking research on the impact of smartphones and social media on adolescent mental health, and how it relates to his previous research on large-scale dysfunctions in modern social institutions.

Margaret Chisolm, Johns Hopkins University

Jon, I am so excited that you're able to be with us today and chat for a little bit. We met last year at the American Academy of Sciences and Letters gala at the Library of Congress, when you received a Barry Prize, so that was October of 2023. You've been very busy since then, and I'm delighted to have you here. For those of you who don't know, Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University Stern School of Business. You're also a social psychologist; you work at the intersection of morality, emotions, and culture. You've written several bestselling books, starting with *The Happiness Hypothesis, The Righteous Mind, The Coddling of the American Mind*, and your most recent book, *The Anxious Generation*.

Jonathan Haidt, New York University

My pleasure, Meg. I'm very grateful to the American Academy of Sciences and Letters for the Barry Prize and for that beautiful evening. That building, the reception was just gorgeous, so thanks to the academy for that.

Chisolm

I want to start by asking you to shed some light for those who might not be as familiar with your work on the intellectual through line of your work. What's the thread that connects your work and ideas?

Haidt

Until recently I thought there wasn't exactly a thread because my first book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, was not on my work. It grew out of my teaching Psych 101 at the University of Virginia, and a psychological analysis of 10 ancient ideas that are great truths, East and West. That seemed to be off to itself, but it comes back later. My next book, *The Righteous Mind*, is the story of my career, my research, what morality is, where it comes from, how it develops, how it varies across cultures, moral foundations theory, politics, everything, and religion too. I thought that was really my great work, my main book. Then I was going to write a book on capitalism

and morality, kind of an extension of *The Righteous Mind.* I'd moved to New York University Stern School of Business in 2011. And the cultural war was raging over economic issues—austerity versus stimulus—so I thought I'd write a whole book on that. I got a contract for it.

Then weird stuff started happening at Yale and many other schools. We now know it as the "great awokening." But my friend Greg Lukianoff came to me and said, "Jon, weird stuff is happening, and I have a hypothesis about how we're teaching people to think in distorted ways that are making them depressed and anxious." Greg and I wrote *The Coddling of the American Mind.* I thought that was a separate project. I brought a social psychological, a moral psychological lens, and also some developmental psychology into that book. So, I thought I had three separate books that were not really connected.

Then I set out to write a book on what social media is doing to democracy, and I got a contract for that. The book will be called *Life After Babel: Adapting to a World We Can No Longer Share.* I was going to return to my work on morality and society. I had all this new data on what social media is doing to kids. This was also, I thought, a side project. I'd been collecting it for years and analyzing and organizing it. I thought, let me just write one chapter on what social media did to teens when they moved on and then look at what social media and the whole digital world did to democracy when we moved our public life onto these platforms. I wrote the first chapter, which became chapter 1 of the new book, where I laid out what has happened to people born after 1995. What has happened to them? Why are they so anxious and depressed and experience such high suicide rates? Once I laid that out and saw that it isn't just us, it's international, I realized this is a much larger story, and I have to get this out right away. So, I split the book in two and wrote *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness.*

The throughline turns out to be that human systems are really complex and they often malfunction, and that's what intrigues me. That's what I'm always looking at. How is it that human systems go wrong because of our psychology? That's the social psychology element. I discovered early on that the ancients had brilliant insights into consciousness and social relationships. I've quoted them in every one of my books, especially Marcus Aurelius and Buddha, Jesus, and then more recently, Shakespeare. All my books are really, really broad because I'm interested in everything. I majored in random studies as an undergraduate. I took lots of different courses because I was just interested in lots of things. So, the through line is our complex systems are malfunctioning in ways that are really puzzling to us, and frightening. But we can actually understand some of the complexity if we draw on the social sciences and history and the humanities and ancient wisdom.

Chisolm

You certainly struck a nerve with this latest book. It's really resonating with a lot of people. It resonates with me as a psychiatrist who treats patients and as a parent. So, thank you for your work.

I want to take a little deeper dive into *The Anxious Generation*. You describe, as you've alluded to, how basically there are two problems that have emerged that have, as you say, messed up

childhood. One is overprotection from the real world, and paradoxically, or maybe ironically, the under-protection of children from the virtual world. You outline in the book lots of evidence to support the kind of damages that have been done by the phone-based childhood, as you call it. You outline the collective action that we need to take as individuals, as communities, as society to reverse these damages, these harms. Really, you're leading a movement, and I'm hoping that you can tell us what we need to do. What are you calling us to do?

Haidt

I'm calling on parents all over the world and schools and politicians to restore the essential element of childhood, which is play, especially unsupervised outdoor play. We grew up, we evolved in the natural world. Children play in a very predictable way, just as they walk in a very predictable way. They need huge amounts of experience, thousands, tens of thousands, of repetitions of various things, physical development, climbing trees, jumping over rocks, getting into arguments, getting out of arguments. They need a lot of this in the real world. Gradually, it wires up their brain and they become competent adults. Also, along the way, there has to be a very long period of intense socialization with cultural content coming down from the elders.

That's the way it was for literally millions of years until around 2010, and then we changed it. We began to change it in the nineties when we stopped letting kids out to play. It's too dangerous. You'll get kidnapped. Everybody is a sexual molester. We can't trust anybody. That hits us in the nineties, even though the world was actually getting much safer then. Crime plummeted, drunk driving plummeted. We made a mistake by overprotecting our kids in the nineties. We blocked them from going out to play. That hit the Millennials especially, but they didn't get depressed. Their mental health was actually a little better than Gen X before them. But any kid born in 1996 and later is very different, not everyone, but on average. I'm a social scientist. These are averages based on large data sets. We find on average that kids born in 1996 and later, Gen Z, have much, much higher rates [of mental illness]. You go along steadily through late Gen X and into the Millennials with stable levels of mental illness. Then, right at 2012, 2013, is a huge inflection point, a hockey stick. Young people get really, really anxious and depressed. Millennials who were in their twenties were not much affected.

The key is, did you go through puberty with a flip phone, meeting up with your friends, in which case you're a Millennial and you probably are not suffering from an anxiety disorder. Or did you go through puberty on a smartphone with a front-facing camera, high-speed internet? Everyone else was on Instagram, so you got on Instagram after 2012 when Facebook bought it. If you went through puberty on your phone, instead of in the real world, it interfered with the sort of brain development that is expected. There's a concept called *experience-expected neural development* with which phone-based childhood interferes. Now, it's not that the majority are anxious and depressed; among girls, it's about 40 percent. That's a lot of girls suffering. It's more than double what it used to be.

My point is, we made a huge mistake in overprotecting our kids in the real world. That was pointless, and it made them less bold, less tough in some ways, but they didn't get depressed. It wasn't until we changed puberty. In puberty especially, kids really need information from the

elders. That's why cultures around the world have initiation rites. Cultures have to socialize their kids. But what did we do? Once kids are hooked up on Instagram or TikTok or Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts—and a third of them say they're on those social media platforms *all day long*, almost all the time, and half say they're on their phones almost all the time—their brain development is blocked. Instead of getting socialization from the elders, kids are getting it from random weirdos on the internet who were chosen for them because of their emotional extremity, which got them likes and the algorithm found them related to something that the kid lingered on. I really focus a lot in the book on puberty. We messed up childhood by not letting them play. We messed up puberty by letting bizarre 30-second videos socialize them.

Chisolm

I was really impressed by the data that you present about even if our phones aren't on or we aren't looking at them, if they're in our proximity, if they're reachable, how distracting that can be all day long for kids.

Haidt

I should just note that a recent meta-analysis came out suggesting that if the phone is simply on your desk and you can see it, that may not have much of an effect. That's controversial. There are studies on both sides of that. But, if your phone is around and you're getting notifications, that clearly is disruptive. The fact that our kids are getting notifications all day long in school and they're responding to them and they're texting and they're looking at videos and porn is completely insane.

You asked me before what I am calling on people to do. I'm leading a movement at anxiousgeneration.com. I hope everyone who watches this will go sign up, because despite the size of this mess—it's affecting people all over the developed world, we don't know about the developing world—we got into it because it's a collective action problem. Every kid has to be on Instagram because every other kid is on Instagram. That's the reason. By the time they're in high school or college, they often say, "I wish I wasn't on this. This is really messing me up, but I can't quit." My students at NYU tell me, "I can't quit because everyone else is on it. I don't want to be left out." So, it's a collective action trap, and the way to get out is with collective action solutions.

I'm proposing four norms. We don't need everybody, but if we can get a lot of people, maybe a majority, to adopt these four norms, we can solve the problem for almost zero dollars. The first norm is no smartphone before age 14. Parents should not give their kids the entire internet so that strangers can reach them while they're in bed, while they're in school. This is just complete insanity. Give them a flip phone, give them a phone watch, give them a way they can text, but not the whole internet and all the platforms.

Second norm is no social media before age 16. The internet's really useful. In the nineties, the Millennials loved it and they flourished and they created companies and they're doing fine. But things changed with the introduction of super-viral social media around 2009. There's the like button, the retweet button. Things really get intense in the early 2010s. Don't expose your 12-

year-old to that. That's the beginning of puberty. I can't believe we're even having this conversation about whether it's okay for a 10-year-old to be looking at pornography and beheading videos. Talk to your child!

The third norm is really powerful. It's phone-free schools, and this is so exciting. This is happening all over the world now in 2024. A lot of people are ready. All the teachers hate the phones. All the principals hate the phones. My book came out in late March, and that gave a lot of schools the ammunition they needed. It energized parents to push. Movements were happening, especially in the UK, before my book came out. But I think my book really came at a time when everyone was seeing that this is crazy. We can see that it's harmful, but what do we do? It's very easy: phone-free schools. When the kid comes in, they put their phone in a locker, a special phone locker or a Yondr Pouch, a lockable pouch. Then they have six and a half hours to talk to each other and listen to the teacher. If they have their phones, they don't do much of either.

The final norm is the hardest because it's the one where we parents, we elders have to actually change ourselves to give kids far more independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world. If we're going to take away the phone-based childhood, we can't just expect kids to sit quietly at home doing nothing. They could read books. That would be nice, but they're not going to read that many books. We have to give them back a fun childhood like we all had, where we had some ability to have adventures with our friends and take risks and sometimes get hurt and fall in love and have exciting times and laugh our heads off. Think about the amount of time you spent joking and laughing with your friends when you were young. We hung out a lot. Now, imagine taking all that time you spent with your friends, joking and laughing and hanging around, and cut that by 70 percent. Imagine taking 70 percent of that away from your child because everyone's just on their phone. Yes, you've got emojis and yes, memes are funny. It's not that there's no laughter, but it's not shared physical laughter. There's something about laughing together that really bonds people. As soon as teen social life moved on to social media around 2012, teens started getting really lonely. Our teens are so lonely. These platforms are designed to connect them to thousands of people, but there's an opportunity cost there. If you're connecting with thousands of people, that means you have no time for your friends and your family in the real world. You're not going to be seeing them in the real world. Everything's on the phone.

Chisolm

As an adult, obviously, we can all connect with these ideas too. We all have had these experiences of being distracted by our phones, not spending time with the person in front of us because we're scrolling endlessly. But thinking about how magnified that is coming at these critical times of psychological development, it's astounding really.

I'm really excited about your work. I'm glad that it's had such traction. It's very clear that you're leading a revolution, which is tremendously important.

I'm just curious what's next for you. You allude in the book that you're trying out some ideas on your Substack, After Babel. I'm hoping that it has something to do with Durkheim, because I loved that section of the book on spiritual degradation. So please tell me what you're up to next.

Haidt

We're talking about the complete transformation of childhood, and we have to change it back in a lot of ways. We're talking about the complete transformation of the technosphere, the world of technology that we live in. Right now, you and I are on Zoom. I've got my AirPods in. The technology is great. The technology is amazing. It's a great tool for adults. It's said that culture is upstream from politics, but technology is upstream from culture. The goal isn't to get rid of all the technology. The goal is to learn how to live with it. The most important thing seems to be to recognize kids aren't adults. Kids need to grow up in the real world, and then we can give them all kinds of technology when they're adults.

So, what's next? I have this great Substack. I resisted getting a Substack for a long time because I thought I didn't have time to write. But it's an amazing format, where you can just put ideas out. We invite all kinds of interesting people to write. So, what's next is a few things, a few themes. One is the community theme, which you alluded to. In the book, we look at why it is that not everybody is getting depressed by this. It looks as though kids from religious families or conservative families are somewhat protected. Their rates do go up, but not as much as kids in liberal or secular families. We think the reason is very Durkheimian. Religion, conservative religion especially, roots kids in a network of dense obligations that might seem repressive and sometimes is. But they are anchored into real people, older people, traditions, religion, ideas, meaning. They were anchored when the tsunami came in around 2010 to 2015. Kids who were not anchored got washed out to sea and they are anxious. They are more fragile. They're in bad shape. Again, not all, maybe not even a majority, but we're not talking 5 percent or 10 percent here. We're talking somewhere between 20 percent and 50 percent who are less than they would have been if they had had a normal childhood. We have a lot of new writing by Zach Roush on the Substack and about religious communities.

Another theme that I'm looking into, an area I'll go next, is educational technology. In schools, kids are on screens all day long. Sometimes it's their phone. Sometimes it's an iPad. Sometimes it's a Chromebook. Sometimes it's some other computer. It's screens all day long, from the time they wake up to the time they go to bed. So, step one is to get the personal phones out so that they're not texting as much, but they can still text on some of these other devices. It looks as though educational technology is backfiring. It all came in around 2012, and that's exactly when test scores all over the world began to decline. Educational technology has benefits in theory, but the distraction effects are so massive they wipe out any conceivable benefit. I'm not certain of that yet, but I need to look into it. That's where I'm going for schools.

Then I'll expand out to adults, especially young adults. The book is really strong on children and on adolescents and through puberty. But what about the hundreds of millions of people in their twenties and thirties and even older people like us? I'll be looking at dating apps and gambling, because even though those aren't widely used by kids under 18, there is gambling for kids under

18 in certain ways. The really hardcore gambling that's destroying so many boys and putting them into debt is more for young adults. So, I'll be looking at gambling and dating apps, and a bunch of other things that I think are really cutting off human potential.

I want a flourishing society. I want a flourishing liberal democratic society. There are a lot of areas that I could be pushing on or studying. I've decided that this one, restoring the play-based childhood, rolling back the phone-based childhood, is where, if I push for the next two or three years, I think we're going to see gigantic changes. Those are already happening. I urge people to visit anxiousgeneration.com. That has all kinds of resources for parents and teachers and legislators. I hope you will sign up for my Substack. Go to afterbabel.com. It's free. We put out lots of great content. If you have kids under about, say, 12 or 13, I hope you'll go to letgrow.org. I cofounded it with Lenore Skenazy. It gives you ideas on how to give your kids back a free-range childhood, a real-world childhood.

Chisolm

The book is fantastic, so I highly recommend. Thank you, Jon, for being here with us.

Haidt

My pleasure. Thanks so much, Meg.