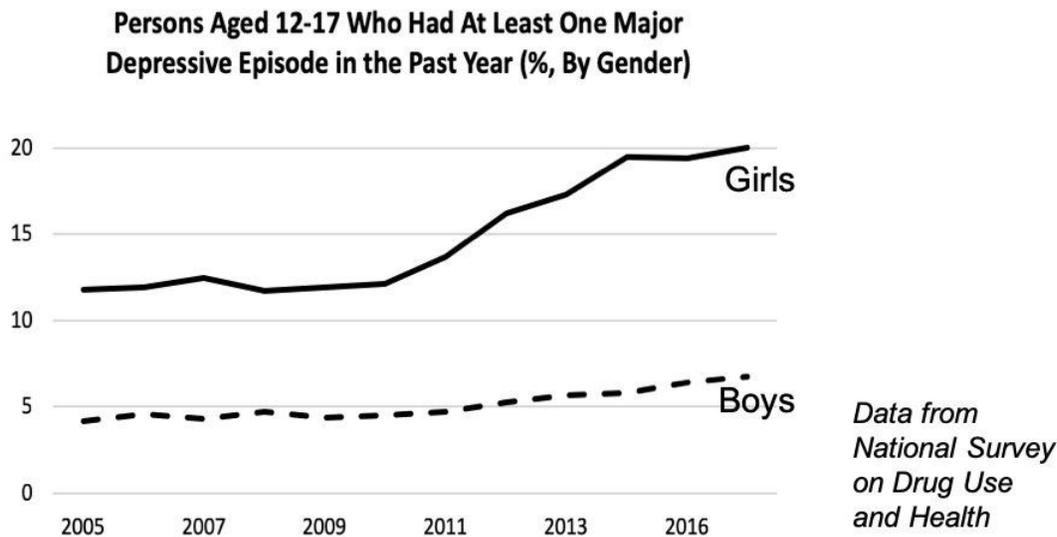


Social Media Use in Generation Z: The Rise in Anxiety and Depression

Sudipti Kumar

Director of Research and Content Development

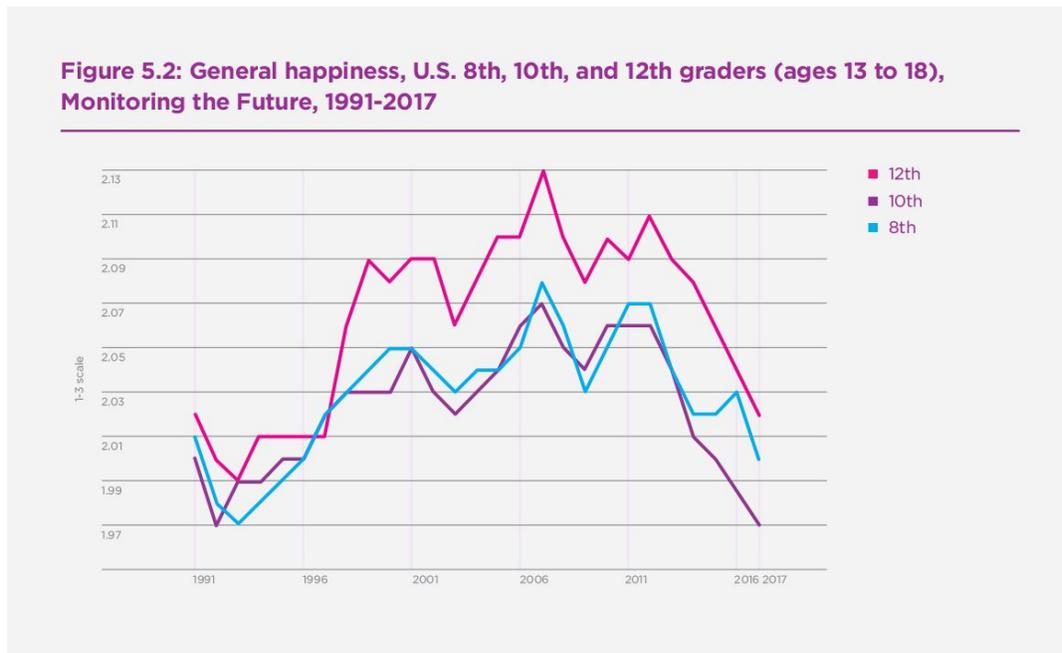
At the recent National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) annual conference, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Coddling of The American Mind*, shared alarming data around the rise of anxiety and depression in teens. The correlation between this spike and the timeline of social media uptake paints a disturbing picture of what generation Z students are facing in schools today, and how middle school girls are a particularly vulnerable group.



The Research

Much of the research that Haidt discussed reflects the findings of researchers Dr. Jean Twenge & Gabrielle Martin, professors at San Diego State University. In particular, their 2018 analysis of over one million 8th, 10th, and 12th graders between the years 1991–2016 showed that psychological well-being declined precipitously after 2012. The data from their study also

found that teens who spent more time on electronic communication and less time on non-screen activities had lower overall psychological well-being.¹



Mean happiness, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, Monitoring the Future Source: Jean Twenge

Another paper just released in February 2020 by the same authors in the *Journal of Adolescence* studied more than 200,000 young people from the US and the UK. In this data set, they compared heavy users of digital media (five or more hours a day) versus light users (one hour or less a day). Heavy data users were 48-171% more likely to be unhappy or have suicide risk factors such as depression or suicidal ideation.² The study also found, as Haidt mentioned in his talk, that girls were more likely to spend their online time on social media sites and boys were most likely to spend it on gaming devices, thus compounding the issue for young girls versus boys.

¹ Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Decreases in psychological well-being among American adolescents after 2012 and links to screen time during the rise of smartphone technology. *Emotion*, 18(6), 765–780.

² Twenge, Jean & Martin, Gabrielle. (2020). Gender differences in associations between digital media use and psychological well-being: Evidence from three large datasets. *Journal of Adolescence*. 79. 91-102. 10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.12.018.

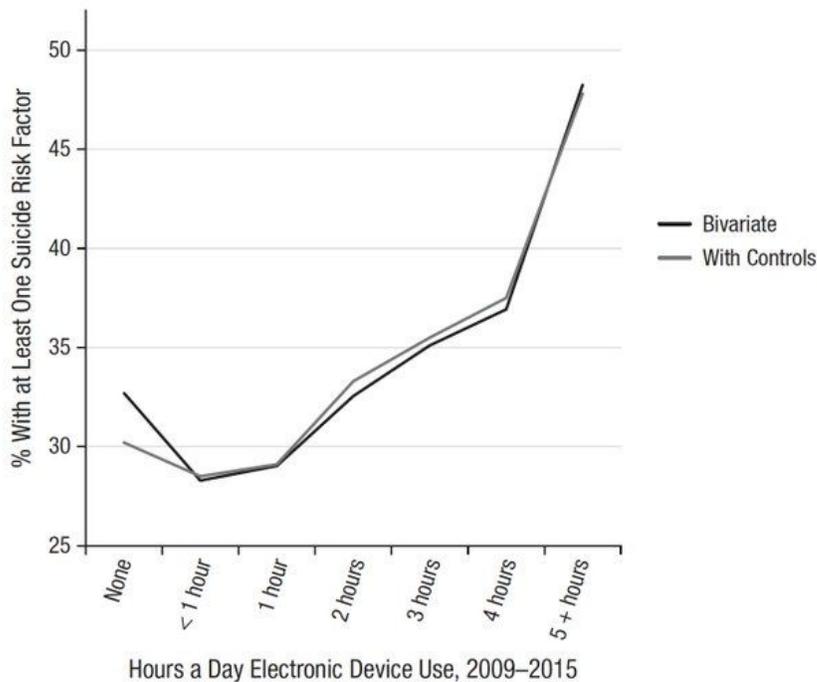


Fig. 2. Exposure-response relationship between electronic device use and having at least one suicide-related outcome, bivariate and with demographic controls for race, sex, and grade, 9–12th graders, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS), 2009–2015.

A 2017 study in the journal *Child Development* also found that teenagers’ cell phone usage at night increased both anxiety and depression, and also reduced self esteem.³ This was in part due to the cell phone replacing hours the teen could actually be sleeping, but the study also discussed how the content teens were viewing was so stimulating to their brains that it was hard to shut off or have a restful sleep. Following the overall trend, the study found that teenage girls, whose sleep tends to be more fragile than boys to begin with, were the more vulnerable population.

What Do We Do?

One of the recommendations Haidt made was for schools to consider eliminating or limiting students’ cell phone access and usage throughout the school day. His rationale was that for many of our students, cell phones are basically an addiction. They can’t control their ability to constantly check them and then have an emotional, potentially negative, reaction to that checking. His analogy of likening cell phone usage to a drug addiction sends a powerful

³ Vernon, Lynette & Modecki, Kathryn & Barber, Bonnie. (2017). Mobile Phones in the Bedroom: Trajectories of Sleep Habits and Subsequent Adolescent Psychosocial Development. *Child Development*. 89. 66-77. 10.1111/cdev.12836.

message to schools: we wouldn't allow students to keep anything dangerously addictive in their lockers so why are cell phones still within bounds?

In an interesting study in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, researchers examined the prevalence of characteristics of a cell phone addiction among a university student population, along with possible predictors of high frequency use. The hypothesis was that anxiety would increase when cell phones were limited. However, anxiety *only increased* when participants had their cell phone sitting in front of them and were instructed not to use them.⁴ One potential conclusion to take from this study is that the proximity of the cell phone is the impediment for schools to overcome - having phones not accessible at all during the day could actually produce a calming effect for students whose anxiety might ramp up, unbeknownst to them, as soon as they see the device sitting in their locker in between classes.

School could therefore be a respite from the mental overload cell phones can cause and free students up to be in a safe space for several hours, focused on learning rather than on what is happening (or not happening) on their phone. It could also be an opportunity for students to limit their ability to comment and share every little thing happening in their day, further decreasing the amplifying effect of social media.

Examples From Other Countries and Schools

France has taken this type of recommendation to heart: In 2018, the government banned cell phones in schools for students up to grade nine. The law states that children cannot use their telephones inside school grounds or even at school-based activities outside of school, and they cannot connect via any device to the internet.⁵

Closer to home, some public school districts in the United States have also taken on cell phone bans as part of their overall technology policies. The Forest Hills Public Schools, in a suburban township in Michigan, banned cell phones in schools in 2019. Their policy notes the following:

“Beginning with the 2019-2020 school year, students will not be allowed to carry or use cell phones during the school day. Phones are available in the office of each school should a student need to contact a parent. If families believe that their child needs access to a cell phone before

⁴ Sapacz, M., Rockman, G., & Clark, J. (2016). Are we addicted to our cell phones? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 57, 153–159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.004>.

⁵ France Moves to Ban Smartphones in Schools. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/03/663858905/france-moves-to-ban-smartphones-in-schools>. Retrieved March 4, 2020.

or after school, it will be the student's responsibility to ensure that their phone remains stored while they are at school."⁶

In another example, The Park School, an independent PreK-8 school in the Boston area also has a strict no cell-phone policy. In the morning, students check their phones into a locking station if they bring it on the premises. According to the school's adolescent psychologist, Olivia Moorehead-Slaughter, the plan was initially met with, as expected, resistance from some parents. She noted that the school had to "remain steadfast in their policy, with no exceptions". They repeatedly shared the options parents had in order to reach their child in the case of an emergency. Moorehead-Slaughter also voiced that many parents actually appreciated the fact that the school double downed on this approach: "Some parents love that the school is the heavy. They wanted to do it themselves but were unable to set the limit with their children."

The Park School also regularly hosts technology evenings for parents so that the community can rally together and the school and parents can form a partnership around responsible technology use. In these evenings, schools seek to educate parents on the types of social media their children are using, the capacity the platforms have, and what their child may be doing on these sites. They also provide recommendations on the types of filters parents can set on computers and phones so that parents have more knowledge.

In Conclusion

The research between the rise in anxiety and depression and social media/cell phone usage is highly correlative and as of yet, causation has not been proven. However, as [this article](#) from Vox.com sums up:

"We don't need to completely understand the reasons for teens' mental health problems to be able to help. Therapists and science-backed therapies can help. Schools and teachers can help. Parents can help. Friends can help. Anguish is not inevitable."

While there is a significant need for more direct experimental studies of what is actually causing the rise in anxiety and depression in teens, this will of course take time. There are teens today who are struggling and there are ways our school communities can help. Cell phone bans or limits may be one of the first levers a school can pull.

⁶ FHPS District News.
<https://www.fhps.net/2019/06/student-cell-phone-use-during-school-day-changes-for-2019-2020/>.
Retrieved March 4, 2020.