

From Crisis to Confidence – Managing Mental Wellbeing In A Digital Age

In his bestselling book, "The Anxious Generation", social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, presents a compelling examination of the sharp increase in mental health issues experienced by today's youth. He attributes much of this rise to the pervasive influence of social media which has significantly disrupted children's social and neurological development. As parents, educators, and an invested society, the urgency of understanding the factors contributing to this alarming trend has never been more critical. It is a complex landscape to fathom before we devise effective solutions.

Haidt lays out the epidemic of teen mental illness that has simultaneously impacted many countries - depression, anxiety, self-harm, addictions (screen and substance) and self-destruction. Social media, he affirms, has caused foundational harms such as sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, addiction, social deprivation, loneliness, social comparison, and perfectionism. Withdrawal from the real world into a virtual one has unleashed disastrous consequences on young girls and boys, their families, and their societies. Haidt issues a clear call for collective action by teachers, parents, tech companies, and governments to restore things to a more humane childhood.

Recently, over a dozen Principals urged me to watch a four-part series, "Adolescence", on OTT. They insisted it must be made mandatory viewing for all parents and teachers. A serious crime committed by a 13-year-old minor requires imprisonment, turning his family's life into a horrific nightmare. "Adolescence" has sparked insightful conversations among families and educators worldwide about the influence of the dark side of the Internet on impressionable youth. Toxic messaging, 'manosphere' and 'incel'-led stances overlay double innuendo emojis that keep the adults completely out of the conversation. The series explores the complexities of modern boyhood and asks tough questions about parenting and societal influences.

"The context is different; it's a Western phenomenon. It won't happen in India," is another view to the series. However, school pastoral data reveals an increase in bullying, cyberbullying, screen and substance addiction and mental health problems. We are unaware of the type and nature of online content children are engaging in and the heavy impact on young minds. Cultural and societal changes alongside technological advancements, and globalisation, have shifted norms, values, and behaviours. Our children are taking their cues from insidious influencers and violent, misogynous online content rather than from home and school.

The Way Forward

What are the four rules of "The Anxious Generation" to deal with the malaise?

1. No smartphones before high school
2. No social media before age 16
3. Phone-free schools
4. More independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world

Do we have the strength of will and purpose to fight for our children's futures? Can we make the four rules a daily practice?

The McGraw Hill Global Education Insights Report 2025, 'Challenges, Opportunities, and the Future of Education in the Age of AI', cites Mental and Behavioural Challenges, not AI, as the topmost obstacle to educators.



In our social context, mental health issues are still viewed with fear, shame and secrecy. Can we set up student-led discussions to destigmatise mental illnesses and support each other as a team?

A family that plays together, deals together. Psychologists suggest that every child should have an hour of physical activity every day. Can we double that with morning and evening outdoor time? Physical activity every day as a family unit can maintain mental health, as also family bonding and values. Daily family time with shared home chores fosters self-efficacy, confidence, and trust.

The challenges of our digital age require immediate and decisive action. The merits of developing emotional intelligence and social skills in our children by limiting screen time and encouraging real-world interactions must be acknowledged. Building adaptability, problem-solving skills and a growth mindset takes diligence and effort, but it prepares children to navigate complex environments.

We need to be brave and run with Haidt's recommendations. We must encourage open, supportive discussions that empower us. Staying vigilant, choosing wisely and maintaining balance can restore childhood to its original 'anything-is-possible' wonder – endless hours of imagination building castles in the air, friendships, laughter and joy in the simplest things of life.

Our youth must be supported to reclaim their happiness, resilience and well-being.

Best wishes,

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