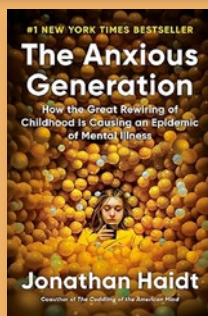


Books



The Anxious Generation
by Jonathan Haidt
Penguin Press
March 26, 2024

I just finished one of the hottest non-fiction books of 2024: *The Anxious Generation*, by Jonathan Haidt. I am left wondering how I – a Generation X elementary school Principal and stepparent of a 15-year-old – can not only *share* the important and alarming message of this book, but also do my *own* part to help combat the negative impacts of smartphone and social media use. As I read *The Anxious Generation*, I considered not only the need to share this information with students and families, but – as an adult who gets to work with hundreds of impressionable young learners each day – I realized that I might have some responsibility to be more responsible with my own tech.

The information in this book needs to be shared. Since we no longer live in a time of town criers, I settled on the most obvious contemporary solution: social media. And, yes: I recognize the irony in using our school's social media platforms to share information with families about the negative impacts of social media.

In an epic work session with two other elementary school leaders, we created a shared document of the standout tidbits from *The Anxious Generation*, and then jumped into Canva to create catchy social media visuals that we could share with our respective school communities, with full credit to the author, his book, and his research. We then relied on the single greatest time-management hack of the 21st century – Meta's "scheduled-post" feature – to

set up our posts for the weeks and months ahead. I also purchased extra copies of the book and, relying on the honour system, offered them to parents and teachers to borrow.

Spoiler alert: we have not gone viral with our posts and, so far, the book sharing strategy has been moderately successful with three parents borrowing the book. But our small school social media accounts haven't *lost* any followers; in fact, a few of our followers have even shared some posts. We persist because, like that story of the kid throwing clams back into the ocean, if this work is making a difference for just one learner or one family, then it is worth it.

The responsibility I feel around *sharing* the information from this book has not been quite as heavy as the responsibility I feel about *doing* something about it. *The Anxious Generation* is filled with information, but only a few action ideas. Fortunately, the first and most obvious "to do" has already been done, thanks to the Ministry of Education and Child Care: limiting cell phone use at school. At our K-7 school, we are trying to keep students' cellphones off and out of sight between the morning and end-of-day bells. There are challenges, but fewer than I had anticipated.

We have lock boxes in each of our Grade 6 and 7 classrooms, and a safe in the front office. The kids have been surprisingly accommodating at turning their phones over – but so far, only when they have been observed using their cell phone during the school day. We began the school year with the lofty idea that students would happily lock the phones in classroom lockboxes at 8:31am each day; while we are at about a 0% success rate on that score, we are all getting used to the new system.

As I read *The Anxious Generation*, I couldn't help but reflect on my own cell phone use. I would like to think that I am a wise, unaddicted user. But, as Jonathan Haidt points out, the concept of "time" is warped when we get lost in the quick hits of TikTok and Reels. So, to prove to myself that my relationship with my phone was not negatively impacting the young people in my life – 400+ students, and one teenager at home – I tried some things.

THE ANXIOUS GENERATION

A Gen-X Principal's Perspective

by

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If the learners at my K-7 school must be without their cell phones from 8:30 am - 2:13 pm each day, could I do this too? It has been easier said than done, but I am trying. My general goal is that, for most of the day, I keep my cell phone in my office – on my desk, next to my computer – where I am free to use it. If I must leave the office, I try to do so without bringing the phone with me. When I go out for morning, lunch, or after-school supervision, I do need to bring the phone, but tuck it deep in my pocket with the self-imposed rule to leave it there. No checking email, no texting myself reminders, and no responding to every notification sound. I am no longer checking my phone if I am in a conversation that leads to a question that we could easily answer using Google. As it turns out, there are a surprising number of moments in a person-to-person conversation that open the door for a smartphone to join the conversation. What year *did* Elvis die? When *is* the Easter Break this year? What does "skibidi toilet" *really* mean? How often *do* birds sleep? My favourite part of this whole experiment is the transparency. When those natural "let's check our cellphone" moments arise, I voice how hard it is *not* to check, and *why* I'm not checking. Depending on my conversation partner, the explanation will vary. Sometimes, I will reference *The Anxious Generation*, and data and anecdotes from the book; other times, I will simply explain that if the kids are not using their phones, then I can keep my phone away, too.

The one exception? Our school secretary knows about my goal, and I have programmed her number into my phone with a special ring and text tone. If there is an emergency, she will call, or text. So far, the number of lunch recess emergencies that I have been called for is zero.

I also routinely used my cell phone to quickly text myself, or jot down those "in the moment" things that come up, like putting in a work order for a leaky fountain, or checking in with a student after the bell. With my new goal in mind, I am resorting to more ancient, analogue strategies, like moving a bracelet or my watch from my usual wrist to the other wrist. That way, when I return to the office, the wrong-wrist item is my reminder. The ancients were on to something with this one: having my watch on the

wrong wrist is a surprisingly effective way for me to remember things!

I do have an advantage in my goal to be off my phone and to be a better role model for students, and that's my personal penchant for paper-based systems, with a tangible notebook or a spiral-bound agenda. This is proving to be very helpful. I like my beautiful notebook, where I create my daily lists, jot down thoughts or ideas, and record notes from meetings. In this age where "Digital Literacy" is a common Pro-D theme, and there are so many options around digital organization systems, I used to feel like I was behind the times with my notebook, pencil case, and coil-bound agenda. The new digital systems are probably effective, efficient, and amazing, and they are tempting. But when I pull out my notebook at a meeting, no one mistakes my notetaking for an email check, social media peek, or other disengagement from the meeting. While I might lose efficiency points for not multi-tasking in every moment, that is a price I am willing to pay. In attempting to be a positive role model to youth, I am rooting for them to figure out their own healthy ways to engage in smartphone use as they grow and learn.

The other thing that *The Anxious Generation* has brought to my consciousness is the location of my cell phone when I am with others. Is it out of sight, or present? Is it in my hand, or on the desk? If I am talking or hanging out with colleagues before, during, or after a meeting, I am now conscious of not pulling out my cell phone at every available moment, and this has resulted in an overwhelming awareness of how frequently this can happen in groups.

At home, I am working on keeping my cell phone downstairs and away from the bedroom more often. I began to do this before I ever opened *The Anxious Generation*, but the book has nudged me to be more consistent with the practice. For example, before our teenage daughter got her cell phone, I was a very informed victim of "The Knowing-Doing Gap". While I *knew* that I should not bring my phone in the bedroom, I didn't *do* anything about it. When our child received her first smartphone, I wanted to be a better role model, and have started to leave the



phone downstairs almost every night. Was it hard? Yes. Do I miss a few Wordle games? Yes. Do I sleep better? Absolutely. Do I miss my phone? Yes. Full disclosure: if there is a snowstorm in the forecast, I will bring my cell phone into my room at night. I wouldn't want to miss an early morning snow-day phone call!

In my goal to be a good role model for my students and my kid, I am *not* writing off all technology. I like our shared school calendar, and only add to it when I'm in my office or on my laptop. I like using Canva, and only do so when I've carved out the time. I like sharing TikTok videos with my teenager, and I have added "screen time" limits to my social media apps. I am a proficient smartphone user, know how to

complete a multi-factor authentication, can create a killer Excel spreadsheet, and can trouble-shoot most tech issues that pop up. I can do *all* these things and still aim to decrease my reliance on this very handy, pocket-sized computer that follows me around.

Jonathan Haidt has taken what we probably already knew, and provided compelling data – and graphs! – in an accessible, easy-to-read book. If his fact-based argument that less screen time + more play time = happier and healthier kids, then I am sure the same can be said for adults. And, if we happen to be adults who get to work with hundreds of impressionable young learners each day, then we probably have a greater accountability to be more responsible with our own tech.