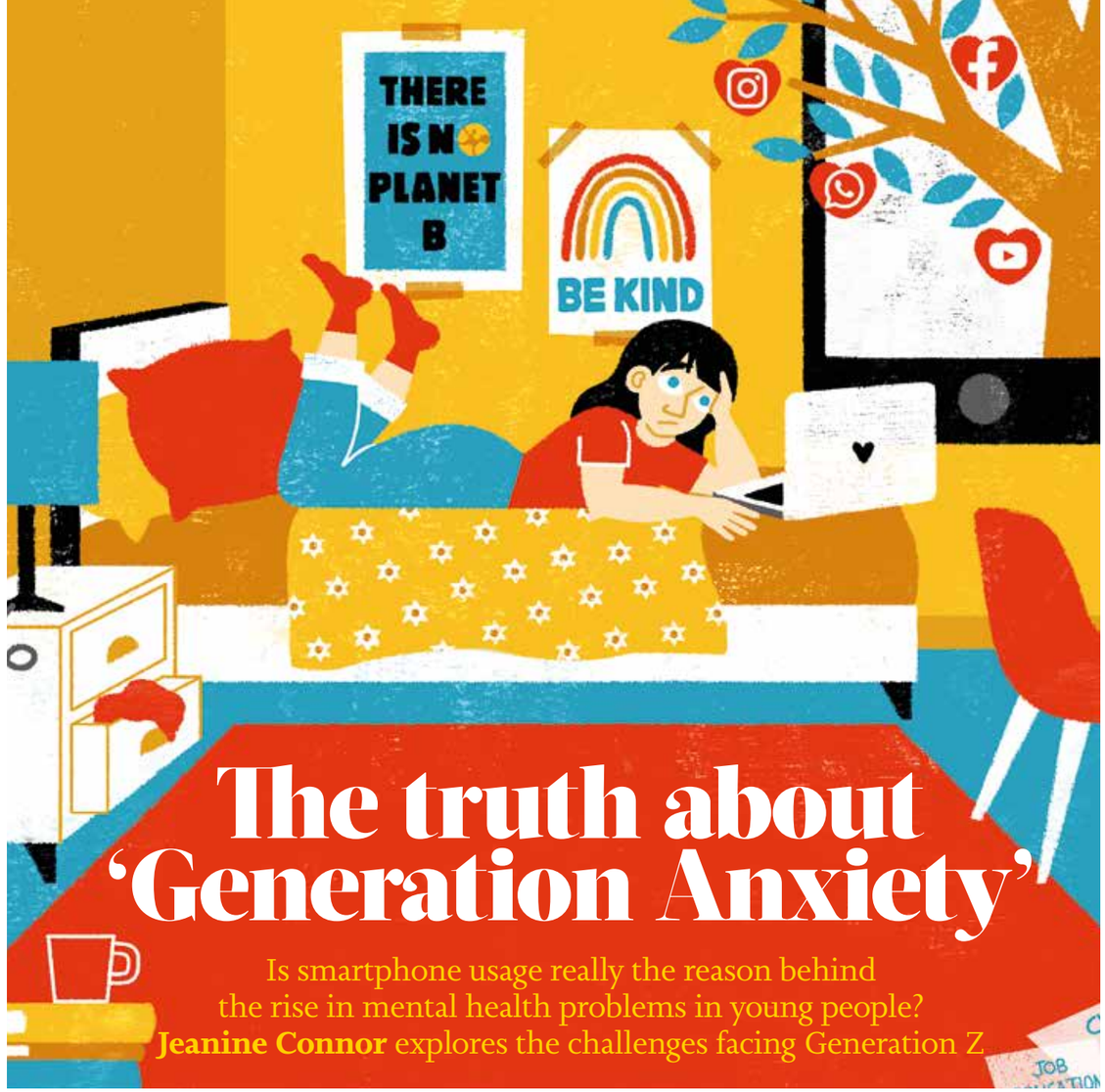

The truth about 'Generation Anxiety'

Is smartphone usage really the reason behind the rise in mental health problems in young people? **Jeanine Connor** explores the challenges facing Generation Z

Generation Z – young people aged from 13 to 26 – have acquired a new label: Generation Anxiety.

According to a recent report from the Resolution Foundation, under-25s are now more likely to be out of work due to anxiety and other mental health problems than older generations.[1] In 2022 more than a third (34%) of 18- to 24-year-olds said they suffered from anxiety or depression, up from 24% in 2000. Other reports paint an even bleaker picture – research by Girlguiding[2] found that 89% of young women and girls felt worried or anxious in 2023, compared to 78% in 2016, and the number who reported feeling happy with their appearance fell from 72% to 59%.

According to some commentators there's a simple reason for young people's spiralling mental health – smartphones. Gen Z are the first generation to grow up with widespread digital technology. Zoomers, as they are colloquially known, a generation that currently straddles adolescence and early adulthood, are digital natives, engaged in online and offline worlds, which older generations often misunderstand and misinterpret.

According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation: how the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness* (Allen Lane), smartphones have ruined young people's lives.

It's a bold claim among many bold and controversial claims at the heart of his new book. Haidt traces the problem back some 40 years, to a time when parents started to prioritise their children's safety above all else, leading, he says, to overattentive, overinvolved, overprotective and overly fearful 'helicopter' parenting. Children stopped playing out, he continues, 'and parents discovered that if you gave them a smartphone, [they're] happy, you're happy and the "phone-based childhood" was born'.[3]

For some concerned parents, teachers, politicians and media commentators, the answer is simple – restrict access to smartphones and social media. But what's the true picture? If we accept young people are in the midst of a mental health crisis, can it really be solved by changing their screen habits?

Digital revolution

There is no doubt that the digital revolution has changed much about the way we live in the space of two decades – coinciding with Gen Z's lifetime. At the beginning of the 21st century few of us had mobile phones, and even if we did they weren't 'smart'. There was no social media, and we couldn't 'google it' because we didn't know what Google was (it was registered in 1997, just as the first of the Gen Zs were born). People were less subject to 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) because what they might be missing out on wasn't broadcast in real time to handheld devices 24/7. Doomscrolling didn't exist, and young people were not at risk of online grooming or cyberflashing, and did not carry pornographic videos around in their pockets.

UK figures suggest that 98% of 16- to 24-year-olds own a smartphone.[4] Estimates of screen time usage vary, but a 2023 Ofcom report cited an average of four hours and 36 minutes a day for young adults, adding up to 56 days each year online.[5]

Much has been written about the impact of screentime in particular, increasing vulnerability to 'visual social comparison' and body image dissatisfaction, online emotional bullying, online sexual predators and 'sociogenic epidemics', defined as the rapid spread of signs and symptoms of illnesses/conditions depicted online.[6] In the UK 73% of females aged 13 to 21 said they had received unwanted sexual images, and 83% reported seeing upsetting content online. The number of 13- to 21-year-old young women who had received sexist comments online more than doubled to 57% in 2023 compared to 24% in 2018.[2]

Young men meanwhile are undergoing what Haidt calls the 'great rewiring' – isolated in their bedrooms, gaming online, he asserts, they never develop a 'sense of masculinity' through rough and tumble play. With limitless access to online porn, he argues, they don't have to take the 'confidence-building risk' of approaching girls in real life'.[6] The rise of so called 'incel' extremist groups that perpetuate abuse and hatred of women, along with the idolisation of social media personalities such as Andrew Tate, currently charged with rape and sexual trafficking of women, is one frightening result.

Uncertain world

According to Haidt, the solution is simple – ban phones in all schools, restrict access to the internet for all under-14s and ban all social media for under-18s. If recent media coverage and debate is anything to go by, an increasing number of parents, teachers and politicians agree. But they are all missing the point, according to clinical psychologist Meg Jay, author of *The Twentysomething Treatment: a revolutionary remedy for an uncertain age* (Fourth Estate), who has spent 25 years working with young adults. She argues that Gen Z's mental health issues are not about their phone use at all, but are a reasonable response to the environment they are growing up in and the uncertainty they face about their future. This generation are facing adulthood with the knowledge that many will never be able to buy their own home. In big cities, even renting their own place is out of reach for many young people on zero hours contracts – often with huge student debt – and no clear career progression. Jay points out that the young adult brain skews uncertainties into what can look like negative thinking and catastrophising. And I agree – that's not clinical anxiety, it's situational; Gen Z are anxious about *something in particular*.

Jay is shocked by the number of young adults who are prescribed medication for anxiety and/or depression, and favours a 'skills not pills' approach to help them to manage their feelings rather than turn them off. As a private practitioner specialising in working with adolescents and young adults, I share her concerns about the number I meet who come with a diagnosis. It begs the question, why? Is the real story that the way we think about young people and the social norms, expectations and constructs that define them shifted? Child and adolescent psychiatrist Sami Timimi thinks ▶

THE REAL GEN Z

DÁLUA DILLON

There's more to Gen Z than anxiety, says former headteacher and coach Alex Atherton, who has identified seven key characteristics of this generation:

- Well-behaved: less likely to smoke, drink alcohol or have casual sex
- Prudent: more careful with their money
- Pragmatic: valuing stability over enjoyment
- Diligent: more likely to have higher academic achievements than previous generations and better work/life balance
- Diverse: broad-minded and anti-discriminatory
- Patient: delaying marriage, home ownership and parenthood and have a less linear educational and career path
- Apprehensive: about reputation management, social isolation, FOMO and mental health.

Source: Atherton A. Gen Z: who are they? Why are they different? (www.alexatherton.com/blog/who-are-they-gen-z)

so. He's been on a mission to make sense of why young people are more likely than ever to be diagnosed with a mental health condition. He says diagnosis might 'satisfy our understandable thirst for certainty' but warns that classification systems are social constructs that exist within a society based around an economic need for profit.[7]

A 2022 study of more than 20,000 British, US and Canadian students identified a link between increased parental expectations and perfectionism in young people. Lead researcher Dr Thomas Curran, Associate Professor at the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE said, 'Parents are not to blame because they're reacting anxiously to a hyper-competitive world with ferocious academic pressures, runaway inequality and technological innovations like social media that propagate unrealistic ideals of how we should appear and perform. Parents are placing excessive expectations on their children because they think, correctly, that society demands it or their children will fall down the social ladder. It's ultimately not about parents recalibrating their expectations. It's about society – our economy, education system and supposed meritocracy – recognising that the pressures we're putting on young people and their families are unnecessarily overwhelming.'[8]

Expectations

The developmental stage of adolescence, from puberty to around 25, is turbulent. It leaves young people flummoxed and floundering, and those around them flummoxed and floundering too. Everyone is clutching at straws and searching out certainty:

'I can't cope!' declares Gen Z.

'You're suffering from anxiety,' says the doctor, 'take this pill.'

'No, they're not,' declares another. 'You just need to take away their smartphone!'

Gen Z mental health speaker Abz Abby agrees that his generation face more challenges than previous generations, citing higher expectations, fewer job opportunities and a lack of economic stability. He believes the main cause of the decline in mental health, particularly among younger Gen Zs, is lack of investment in education and mental health services, exacerbated by the pandemic. 'Many were already struggling with the pressures of school, the expectation to go to university, the cost of it all, the anxiety about getting a job afterwards, and then the pandemic happened, and it all got a whole lot worse,' he says. Not surprisingly, Abby is frustrated that when young people react to these very real concerns, they're dismissed as 'snowflakes'.

Maligned

Working predominantly with Gen Z, I am frustrated that they remain so maligned and misunderstood, which is what inspired me to write my previous book about 16-year-olds. In my new book, I widen the lens to encompass the whole Gen Z demographic, within the current political, socio-economic and environmental 'permacrisis'. Pandemic lockdowns left them learning and then working from home, feeding their social isolation and reliance on social media for validation and connection, through absolutely no fault of their own. Social awareness – or being 'woke' – both educates and fuels their anxiety about global conflict, gender and racial politics and prejudice, climate change and a lack of confidence in government leaders, and yet further anxiety about saying or doing the 'wrong thing' and a fear of being 'cancelled'. Emotional literacy means Gen Z have the words to talk about how they're feeling and ask for help – but sadly, for many, the help is not there. Statistics from the Children's Commissioner for England suggest that more than a quarter-of-a-million young people were still waiting for mental health support in March 2024 after being referred to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) in 2022-2023.[9] Adults over 18 referred for NHS Talking Therapies should wait no longer than 18 weeks for treatment, but a Freedom of Information request by the British Medical Association found that in 2023 almost 4,000 people waited more than six months, and 1,500 waited longer than a year.[10]

Headteacher turned leadership coach Alex Atherton argues that each generation is shaped by the impact of significant social events in their early lives, and for Gen Z it's the cost of living crisis that has impacted them most, starting with the global economic crisis of 2007-2008 and the ensuing years of austerity politics in the UK, exacerbated by the pandemic. 'I hear young people being described as "snowflakes" too many times,' he says. 'But Gen X needs to look at themselves before they point the finger. Gen Z are the first to grow up with digital technology that parents and teachers knew nothing about at the time, and tech companies aren't doing enough to regulate. They've grown up with enormous financial and economic challenges.'

Financial hardship creates a vicious circle – children from the poorest families are four times as likely to have a mental health problem by the age of 11 than children from financially better off families,[11] and young people aged between 11 and 16 with poor mental health are more likely to miss school, three times more likely not to pass five GCSEs and more likely to be in a low-paid (if any) job. According to research by The Prince's Trust, around half of 16- to 25-year-olds feel anxious about the future on a daily basis, citing the impact of COVID-19 and the rising cost of living as the main reasons why; 35% feel as if their life is spiralling out of control and 60% say they lack the confidence to make a decision.[12]

Future

Adolescence is a time of hormonal turbulence when there is often conflict between the drive to explore personal identity and individuality and the equally strong need for peer group acceptance. Young people are told that these are the best years of their lives, and they are under enormous pressure to broadcast how they are #livingtheirbestlives on social media and be 'liked'.

Gen Z are navigating this turbulence against a backdrop of unprecedented uncertainty. In my professional opinion, most don't have clinical anxiety but have good reason to feel ordinarily anxious about both their own individual future and the global future.

There is no doubt that the smartphone in their pocket has the potential to be a toxic influence. However, it could also be argued that the internet and social media have shaped Gen Z into the truly remarkable generation they are – emotionally literate, passionate about justice, accepting of difference and diversity, they are using technology to learn about the world and expand their horizons, and to connect and build relationships. According to Ofcom's Online Nation survey of 18- to 24-year-olds, young people use some of their time online for studying (81%), building and maintaining friendships (68%), supporting their creativity (81%) and helping them get better at things they like doing (86%).[5]

The working title of my new book while I was writing it was *Modern Life is Rubbish*, borrowed from the Blur album of the same name. I wanted to explore the themes that Gen Z tell me they're grappling ▶

CASE STUDY

The moniker 'Generation COVID' is not one I'm fond of, but the fact that the label exists illustrates the significant impact that the pandemic had, and is continuing to have, on this demographic. According to UNICEF the pandemic 'has redefined childhood on a global scale'.

Stanley* was one of those adolescents who were significantly impacted by lockdown. He was a Year 11 student preparing for GCSEs followed by a summer of carefree abandon when suddenly the world as he knew it was cancelled. Fast-forward two years and he was studying for A-level exams when he was referred to me for psychotherapy. Like all of us, he'd been told that everything was back to normal, post-COVID. But he didn't feel normal, he felt panicked. What if it happened again? What if it didn't and he had to actually take his A-level exams? What if he f*cked them up? What was the point of anything if it could all be taken away so easily?

'You know how it is,' he said. 'They tell you one thing, then they do another.'

'Who are we talking about, Stan? Who is "they"?' I asked.

'All of them. Teachers, parents, politicians…' he trailed off.

'Psychotherapists?' I wondered.

'Yeah, sometimes. Your lot are not immune to a bit of fanciful fabrication.'

I liked his poetic use of alliteration. 'Tell me more,' I encouraged.

'Making out like everything will be OK if we just get in touch with our feelings, work hard and play nice.'

'Is that what you think I think?'

'Well, don't you?'

'No, I don't think it's that easy. I wish it was.'

'What do you think, then?'

'About how we can ensure that everything will be OK?'

'Yeah.'

'I don't think we can. I think we can decide what "OK" looks and feels like for us so that we have something to aim for.'

'What does it look like for you?'

'For me?' I didn't want this to be about me; I wanted it to be about Stan, but I also had a sense that I needed to give a little, to ease him into his first session. So I said, 'I think, for me, OK means feeling contented, satisfied, feeling that I have choices about how I live my life, within reason.'

He didn't say anything but looked at me expectantly, as if he wanted me to say more, so I continued: 'There are always some things that we can't choose, some rules that we have to abide by that we might not like.'

'What rules don't you like?'

'I don't like that often the people who make the rules don't understand what it's like for the people they expect to follow them. You know, like teachers making rules for students without consulting them. Or politicians making rules for all of us when many of them are out of touch with what life is like for most of us.' Although I was answering his question, I was also trying to make links to the teachers and politicians included in Stan's 'all of them'.

Stan was bright – I experienced him as articulate and eloquent, with a wide vocabulary. He was expected to be knee-deep in revision by the time we first met but he hadn't been able to muster the motivation even to begin. As the final exams came within touching distance, he found himself paralysed by feelings of panic.

'What if I f*ck up?'

'What if you do?'

'It would mean it had all been for nothing! It would mean I wouldn't be able to get out of here, go to uni, live my life.'

'And that's what you want?'

'Yes!'

'And passing your A-levels would give you a ticket out, a ticket to the world?'

'Yeah, I suppose. That's what we're told.'

'Told?'

'Yeah, by teachers and, you know, "them".' He jerked his head, as if signalling the collective 'them' we'd spoken about before that also included parents, politicians and the occasional psychotherapist.

*Stan is a fictional character and case study

• Extracted and edited with permission from *'You're Not My F*cking Mother' and other things Gen Z say in therapy* by Jeanine Connor (PCCS Books, 2024)

'Pandemic lockdowns left Gen Z learning and then working from home, feeding their social isolation and reliance on social media for validation and connection'

IS THE EVIDENCE RELIABLE?

Although Jonathan Haidt's argument that smartphones are the primary cause of the increase in adolescent anxiety and depression might seem compelling, it's a complex area and research can be contradictory.

- According to statistician Aaron Brown, the only robust finding appears to be that people who report zero symptoms of depression also report zero social media use.[1] A strong result might be expected to link 10-20% of depression to social media use, but Haidt's research typically explains just 1-2%, which is at best a correlation that can be found even among totally unrelated variables.
- Recent research from the Oxford Internet Institute, which looked at data on two million people aged 15 to 99 over 16 years in 168 countries, suggests that internet use improves both physical and mental health in all groups apart from women aged 15 to 24.[2] Eight indicators of wellbeing were studied: life satisfaction, daily negative and positive experiences, two indices of social wellbeing, physical wellbeing, community wellbeing and experiences of purpose. Co-author Andrew Przybylski, Professor of Human Behaviour and Technology at Oxford University, said it confirmed previous research on global Facebook adoption that found no evidence of a link between widespread use of the platform and psychological harm. He said: 'Overall we found that those who had access to or actively used the internet reported meaningfully greater wellbeing than those who did not.'

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with – the legacy of lockdowns, exams, social media and internet dating, privilege, race, religion, gender, sex and sexuality, domestic and sexual abuse, parental separation and bereavement, compliance and choice. I wanted to reveal their external and internal worlds so that they could be better understood and empathised with. By the time I'd finished writing, the title *Modern Life is Rubbish* felt reductive and bleak, like many of the media headlines I'm seeing now. Sure, there is a lot about modern life that's challenging, but also modern life is hopeful. I'm hopeful. Even the most reluctant and resistant Gen Z carries at least a nugget of hope that things will get better, tucked in their pocket alongside their smartphone. Meg Jay cites research which suggests that by about the age of 35 most people report feeling much better than they did 10 years earlier, and she agrees with me that 'if your 20s turn out to be the best years of your life, something has gone terribly wrong'. It's up to us, the Millennials, Gen Xs and Boomers, to help Gen Z make the best of it they can, rather than take away their phones or write them off simply for being young. ■

'Children from the poorest families are four times as likely to have a mental health problem by the age of 11 than children from financially better off families'

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