

The great rewiring: is social media really behind an epidemic of teenage mental illness?

By [Candice L. Odgers](#)

Two things need to be said after reading *The Anxious Generation*. First, this book is going to sell a lot of copies, because Jonathan Haidt is telling a scary story about children's development that many parents are primed to believe. Second, the book's repeated suggestion that digital technologies are rewiring our children's brains and causing an epidemic of mental illness is not supported by science. Worse, the bold proposal that social media is to blame might distract us from effectively responding to the real causes of the current mental-health crisis in young people.

Haidt asserts that the great rewiring of children's brains has taken place by "designing a firehose of addictive content that entered through kids' eyes and ears". And that "by displacing physical play and in-person socializing, these companies have rewired childhood and changed human development on an almost unimaginable scale". Such serious claims require serious evidence.

Hundreds of researchers, myself included, have searched for the kind of large effects suggested by Haidt. Our efforts have produced a mix of no, small and mixed associations. Most data are correlative. When associations over time are found, they suggest not that social-media use predicts or causes depression, but that young people who already have mental-health problems use such platforms more often or in different ways from their healthy peers¹.

These are not just our data or my opinion. Several meta-analyses and systematic

reviews converge on the same message²⁻⁵. An analysis done in 72 countries shows no consistent or measurable associations between well-being and the roll-out of social media globally⁶. Moreover, findings from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study, the largest long-term study of adolescent brain development in the United States, has found no evidence of drastic changes associated with digital-technology use⁷. Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University, is a gifted storyteller, but his tale is currently one searching for evidence.

Of course, our current understanding is incomplete, and more research is always needed. As a psychologist who has studied children's and adolescents' mental health for the past 20 years and tracked their well-being and digital-technology use, I appreciate the frustration and desire for simple answers. As a parent of adolescents, I would also like to identify a simple source for the sadness and pain that this generation is reporting.

A generation in crisis

Two things can be independently true about social media. First, that there is no evidence that using these platforms is rewiring children's brains or driving an epidemic of mental illness. Second, that considerable reforms to these platforms are required, given how much time young people spend on them. Many of Haidt's solutions for parents, adolescents, educators and big technology firms are reasonable, including stricter content-moderation policies and requiring companies to take user age into account when designing platforms and algorithms. Others, such as age-based restrictions and bans on mobile devices, are unlikely to be effective in practice – or worse, could backfire given what we know about adolescent behaviour.

A third truth is that we have a generation in crisis and in desperate need of the best of what science and evidence-based solutions can offer. Unfortunately, our time is being spent telling stories that are unsupported by research and that do little to support young people who need, and deserve, more.