

Opinion: Teens are more anxious than ever: Is social media to blame?

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Anxiety is now the most common mental health disorder in the U.S., affecting nearly one-third of adolescents and adults. It's also the most common reason students seek counseling in college. Photo by: Prasit/Getty Images

We live in anxious times — and I'm not talking about the politics dividing the country. Or the shootings. Or the flood of abuse and harassment accusations aimed at Hollywood movie-makers and other powerful men.

I'm referring to the bite-your-nails, terrified-before-a-big-test anxiety many teens are experiencing. As we spend more time online, as we measure our worth by Likes and Followers, our young people are developing a distorted view of life.

Online, Life Always Looks Wonderful

On the screen, we usually don't see people as they really are. No one posts a photo where they're not looking their best, unless, of course, it's some kind of humblebrag. (Check social media if you doubt.) In the virtual world, the messiness of life has been scrubbed out. Parties are joyous, friends loyal, the scenery breathtaking, clothes fashionable, food gourmet, travel adventurous. In short, life is fabulous.

The tough daily slog all of us face? Since that doesn't translate well into Facebook or Instagram posts, our plugged-in children see mostly fakes and lies on social media.

But sooner or later, our young people compare their very real lives to the make-believe of screens and find that their lives are falling short. They grow worried that they are missing out on something. The gap between pretend and real often seems impossible to bridge.

"Overwhelming Anxiety"

No wonder teachers are reporting more anxious students and college counselors are warning that young adults are overwhelmed. The American College Health Association reported a big jump in undergraduates feeling "overwhelming anxiety." It went from 50 percent in 2011 to 62 percent in 2016. A recent newspaper article showed that high school administrators are seeing more anxious students in school, too.

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Certainly, we can't blame the Age of Anxiety on social media alone. Storm clouds were gathering long before Facebook or YouTube took over our lives. Modern life has become a maze where unreasonable expectations and too many choices nibble away at our peace of mind. With our kids, their schedules are already packed with sports and clubs and homework, but many of them try to fit in one more. Don't forget the private SAT tutor to help them ace the college entrance exam or the private sports coach to give them an edge in soccer or hockey or baseball. We want to ensure our children have a bright future and they succeed, regardless of the cost.

Everywhere A Screen

For a long time, I agreed with the widely held belief that today's teens were too protected, too fragile, and too scheduled. They lacked the resiliency of my generation. I blamed overprotective parents, but now I realize this was too simple. These kids live at a time when technology is transforming everything at a dizzying pace. Shootings are far too common, and the economy favors the rich and keeps middle-class families struggling.

Thanks to screens, adolescents have a front-row seat on all of this.

As parents, we must balance pushing too hard with making life easier for our kids. We must also balance our desire to rescue them with the need for them to learn life's hard lessons. The path to doing all of this isn't always clear, and I write this from experience. We shouldn't — and can't — promise our children everlasting happiness, nor protect them from the common irritations that make up everyday life.

But I wonder if, in this hyper-connected world, we shouldn't also make a special effort to remind them that what people post on Instagram and Snapchat are two-dimensional. It is about as real as shape-shifters and fire-breathing beasts.

Quiz

- 1 According to the author, which of the following MOST affects anxiety in teens?
 - (A) the relationships that social media encourages teens to have
 - (B) the comparisons that social media encourages teens to make
 - (C) the commitments that social media encourages teens to make
 - (D) the work that social media encourages teens to do

- 2 Which answer choice would BEST describe the author's reaction to the rise of anxiety in teens?
 - (A) The author is worried and critical.
 - (B) The author is worried and sad.
 - (C) The author is angry and neutral.
 - (D) The author is angry and hopeless.

- 3 How does the author develop her own perspective in the article?
 - (A) by using a complicated argument that comes from years of research
 - (B) by using a complicated argument that comes from personal experience
 - (C) by using sarcastic, general language to describe how teens experience social media
 - (D) by using sharp, specific language to describe how teens experience social media

- 4 Which answer choice BEST explains why the author wrote this article?
 - (A) to provide advice to parents who want to control the screen time of their children
 - (B) to provide advice to parents who want to help manage their children's anxiety
 - (C) to help teens better manage their busy schedules
 - (D) to help teens better manage their time on social media