The Anxious Generation Resource.

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During the Summer I came across a book review in a magazine called Position Papers. The review was by a lady called Margaret Hickey from Blarney and following that I got a copy of the book. It's an interesting work by an American academic entitled: The Anxious Generation: How the great rewiring of Childhood is causing an epidemic of Mental Illness. It explores many of the themes that I hear parents, teachers and safeguarding personnel around the diocese talk about regularly.

The author, Jonathan Haidt is a Professor of Ethical Leadership in New York. This work is a comprehensive exploration of how young minds are damaged by the addictive use of electronic devices. Haidt, a parent himself has the experience of negotiating a fine line between contemporary culture's obsession with what he calls 'safetyism' and the risks and hazards of digital, and in particular, social media.

His main concerns are around the addictive nature of digital technology and its adverse impact on developing and malleable young brains. It's important, he claims that children have the right learning experiences at the right time, because "neurons that fire together wire together".

In childhood and adolescence, people develop in response to the social and cultural stimuli experienced. If young minds are to develop in a healthy way, they need real life interactions as opposed to virtual ones. On digital platforms, "friends" are acquired with a click and can be lost as quickly. In real life, people can't be so easily disposed of. Relationships with real people are rooted in shared spaces whether in school, neighbourhood or home. Real life interactions teach children self-governance, negotiation, understanding of and respect for difference and a host of other skills that prepare them for adult life.

The virtual world of digital media magnetises children and teens into a highly manipulative and addictive realm that can be almost impossible to escape from. Haidt shows that the addictive quality of digital media is cynically intentional. As the technology develops, more and more "hooks" are added to hold the attention of users.

Social Media Managers, he says, "have developed addictive apps that sculpted some very deep pathways in our children's brains". Many studies have shown that brain pathways developed at formative stages of life are hard to erase.

We adults who are not digital natives but have a childhood experience of growing up without the ubiquitous connectivity of digital devices know how hard it is to ignore the pings that alert us to new notifications of one sort or another. More and more workers in various countries are being encourage by unions to practice their 'right' to disengage outside of work hours, this being a major challenge to some. For children whose sense of self can be so bound up with their online activity and that of their friends or role models it is easy to imagine just how difficult it is to disengage from their devices once habits are set.

Haidt finds that it is Generation Z, born after 1995, who are most damaged because they grew up in a world of "hyper-viralised social media". As they entered their teens, Facebook added the "Like" button and Twitter the "retweet" option. Instagram with its focus on the visual arrived around the same time. We all have a need for validation and affirmation, but it can be emotionally critical for the young and insecure. "Likes" can become the measure of self-worth but keeping up is not easy with the plethora of new posts and updated profiles. Yesterday's "likes" mean nothing if one's latest offering is ignored or thumbed down, especially by someone with social prestige.

The digital giants understand well how to entice users of all ages, genders and dispositions and keep them engaged to maximise commercial revenue. Digital media feeds on our desires, needs, insecurities and natural curiosity about the lives of others. As with all addictions, overcoming dependency requires making a decisive break with entrenched habits and filling the space with healthier and more life enriching alternative pursuits.

Haidt offers very specific advice to parents on how to fix the problem. It's not just the children but also the adults who need to change their digital patterns of activity. Good examples must be set by parents. Boundaries must be defined and perhaps first negotiated. Unlike forms of substance addiction, moderation and regulation rather than

elimination is the best approach to digital addiction. It might strike some readers that Haidt's approach is overly liberal and accommodating.

Haidt of course is right in emphasising how healthy maturation requires giving children a rounded experience of life in all its aspects. The disembodied interactions of social media are stunting and alienating. Connecting with real people in the pursuit of real life activities like sport and other pursuits teaches all kinds of life skills and nurtures deep enriching friendships.

Haidt also grasps that the needs of heart and spirit can't be fully satisfied without some connection to the "sacred" as well.

Arguably, the digital world is neutral in this regard since it gives access to high culture as well as low and offers a tremendous array of worthwhile resources and platforms relating to spirituality and faith. Haidt is an atheist and his idea of "self-transcendence" is secular. It involves exploring the beauty of the natural world and mindfulness. Self-transcendence takes us beyond the boundaries of our usual routines and self-absorption but it's a limited understanding of transcendence. Self-transcendence can be the gateway that leads to the Creator.

Haidt makes a very convincing case and issues a necessary and serious wake up call to parents, media regulators and to society in general.

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