GROWING LEADERS

MASTERING SOCIAL MEDIA

as you launch a new school year

Tim Elmore

Mastering Social Media in the Aftermath of a Pandemic

The stories I hear from students today get me a bit emotional. I see cynicism in many of them that I haven't seen since Generation X was attending college thirty years ago, only it's worse today thanks to a pandemic. One high school student said, "It's not that I'm mad that I missed events. I wouldn't have gone to prom anyway. I just feel bad about all the experiences I missed that never had the chance to happen. I wonder what those years would have been like if none of this (COVID-19) ever happened."

This is a mild problem for many students. For other kids, the impact of the pandemic was much worse. I've heard stories of children as young as eight years old who have punched through plate glass windows with their fists out of frustration because they couldn't go outside. Others in middle school or high school have been unable to manage their emotions and acted out in similar ways.

It seems like every teen I encounter knows at least one person who's completed suicide.

Sometimes, young people commit mass shootings before they take their own life. Did you know that by spring 2022, there were more than 140 mass shootings in America?[1] That's well over an average of one a day. Something sinister is going on.

Is This a National Emergency?

I believe few people, except for perhaps psychologists and social scientists, had any idea what a two-year pandemic would cost our young people in terms of their mental health. Andrea Hussong, professor and associate director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina, stated that adolescent mental health has been deteriorating since as early as the first few months of the pandemic's onset, with varying severity, depending on the individual teen. "Youth in the United States are reporting that the biggest impact of the pandemic is on their mental health," she notes.

Some mental health practitioners believe the fallout in some teens should be labeled as a "full-blown trauma" and should be treated as such. In fact, the current state of child and adolescent mental health is a national emergency, according to a joint statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association.[2]

Seems like we have a bigger problem on our hands that we first expected.

It's more than a long "pause button" that was pushed for two years, between 2020 and 2022. For a few of us, the COVID-19 quarantine was a welcome "reset" on our lives. However, for millions of others, especially minors, it was a huge percentage of their life that got postponed or pushed away permanently. This type of global reality, where millions lost their lives as we all went home and stayed there for months, is the type of thing teens felt only existed in dystopian movies. I spoke to a mother who told me her two children, ages five and six, are still cowering in fear when they get in social settings because they haven't been around larger clusters of people for the better part of their last two years.

A middle school teacher told me she still has a difficult time getting students to speak up in class and engage in the lesson. And she often has to intervene in conflict resolution because the tens lack interpersonal skills, having not exercised them in several months. The joint statement I mentioned above summarizes the issue this way:

> *Rates of childhood mental health concerns and suicide rose steadily between 2010 and 2020, and by 2018 suicide had become the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10–24. The pandemic has intensified this crisis.*[3]

Dr. Mark McDonald, a child and adolescent psychiatrist and author of *United States of Fear: How America Fell Victim to a Mass Delusional Psychosis,* said, "My concerns now are actually worse than they were a year and a half ago. I just saw it as a temporary disaster. We're now seeing this as an ongoing problem."[4]

What concerns me most is not only the mental health of our young people today. It is how this period could negatively affect them as they grow into adulthood. Will their narrative be full of anxiety, or will it be filled with anticipation? Will millions suffer from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), or will they enjoy PTG (Post-Traumatic Growth)? Will they see themselves as victims, always deserving a special break, or will they become resilient through this period?

I believe the adults who lead them will play a large role in determining the outcome. "We're going to start to see more and more evidence and reports of lingering chronic trauma, injuries, ongoing abuse of children just like we're now seeing with the speech problems, like we're seeing with the drug problems, like we're seeing with the lack of socialization with children—anxiety and depression disorders—all these problems that we just ignored...are now coming back and rebounding much, much worse than they were in 2020," Dr. McDonald said.[5]

I have been keeping my ear to the ground on mental health in youth for thirteen years. I first reported it in my book, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future.* That was a decade before the pandemic. In fall 2020, I released a book called, *The Pandemic Population,* where I offered both data on the mental health crisis in kids and also some ideas to lead them into post-traumatic growth. Parents and educators cannot ignore this issue. Dr. Mark McDonald updates us by revealing today's numbers, which are nothing short of devastating:

> *These problems I have never seen in my career; not to this degree. Anxiety is up 300 percent. Depression is up 400 percent... Every single mental illness, every behavioral problem, including substance abuse in the older kids, is going through the roof.[6]*

I remind you of these realities for one reason. Mental health has been a problem for more than a decade. The pandemic has only made it worse. And thanks to social media usage during this pandemic, the problem has been compounded. I believe our connected world actually could have helped us through this COVID-19 season, but instead of connecting us, it conquered us.

People endured past pandemics over the last century by controlling their narrative coming out of it. Kids that grew up during the Spanish Flu and Great Depression embraced gratitude and grit and became the "Greatest Generation."

Today—a pandemic plus a portable device makes our kids' narrative difficult to control. That is my hypothesis, and I'd like to invite you on a journey in this e-book to recognize why and what we can do about the role of smartphones in the aftermath of a global quarantine and the bleak and uncertain future a teen may feel when they have a portable device in their hand. Before I am finished, I will leave you with a doable game plan to conquer this crisis.

Do you see any of the realities I've described so far here?
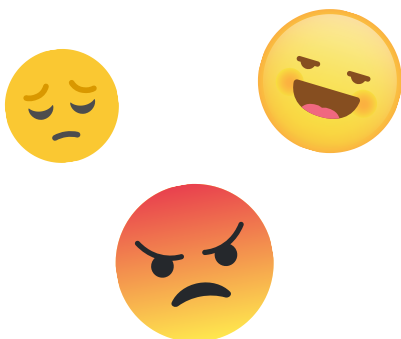
The Slavery of Social Media

Everyone has something to say about social media, and opinions vary like our views on politics. Most admit that social media platforms started as helpful additions to our lives, helping people to learn from and connect with others around the world.

Millions of people, however, have changed their opinions about the contribution of it all. NYU sociologist and leadership ethics professor Jonathan Haidt reminds us that social scientists have identified three major forces that bind successful democracies together:

• *Social capital*—extensive social networks with high levels of trust
• *Strong institutions*—such as civic organizations, churches and schools
• *Shared stories*—the ones we share about our history and our families[7]

Haidt suggests that social media has weakened all three. How? you ask. By the way it has morphed over time, especially since 2009. Early platforms such as Myspace and Facebook enabled users to create pages where we could post photos, family updates, and links to static pages of our friends or favorite brands. Over time, buttons were added that allowed people to "like" certain posts and to "share" them. In a relatively quick fashion, social media shifted from a place to "connect" to a place to "perform."[8] People now perform on social media, working the system to get more "likes" and "views" and "shares" and their posts are less authentic; it's a show. It's all about going viral. And most people admit posts are more disingenuous than they used to be. Not only that; they've become superficial and crude. We have far too much time on our hands.

What's Happened to Us?

Our appetite for notoriety consumes us. People are, by and large, insecure and self-centered, and these kinds of platforms help us to feel better about ourselves. Let's be honest. Why else would educated people tweet or post such narcissistic messages? Many certainly are not educational or redemptive in nature. It's all a game to go viral.

Jonathan Haidt continues, "This new game encouraged dishonesty and mob dynamics: Users were guided not just by their true preferences but by their past experiences of reward and punishment, and their prediction of how others would react to each new action."[9] With the "retweet" option (2009) and "share" option (2012), human addictions and appetites took over. A frenzy occurred, driven by emotion more than logic. Research reveals posts that trigger emotions——especially anger at out-groups——are the most likely to be shared. One of the engineers at Twitter who helped create the "retweet" button later revealed he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place. "As I watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool," he thought to himself:

"We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon."[10]

I dread the fact that a generation of youth will reach adulthood witnessing the example millions of adults have set. Social media platforms are full of hateful, vindictive, judgmental, and narcissistic remarks. Many are screaming, claiming they're "outraged." (I'm sorry, but if we're truly outraged, we would have done something to right the injustices we tweet about, not hide behind a screen and yell.) If our human civilization was truly evolving, one would think we would be more civil than we are today.

Can you imagine our world in twenty years if we fail to equip kids to master social media?

The Social Dilemma

In fall 2020, Netflix released a 90-minute documentary by Jeff Orlowski, entitled The Social Dilemma. It's the story of the dark side of our consistent dependence on social media. The documentary focuses solely on the dangerous impact of social media, how addicted many have become to it, and how social media companies design their apps to adversely affect our lives. Whistleblowers and ex-employees of top social networking companies who helped develop many of the social networking products we consume today were invited to shed light on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and others. One of the most frightening revelations from it is that social media is actually designed to be addictive.

In short, the technology that connects us also controls us.

Neuroscientists compare social media interaction to a syringe of dopamine being injected straight into the system. The constant stream of retweets, likes, and shares from these sites affect the brain's reward area and trigger the same kind of chemical reaction as other drugs, such as cocaine. Journalist Nnaemeka Ugochukwu writes:

> It is important that you realize the extent to which our continued exposure takes a toll on our physical and mental wellbeing. The more frequently we use social media, the more likely we are to grapple with poor mental health, anxiety and depression. One of the reasons for this is that social media apps are designed to fuel unrealistic comparisons. By allowing you to see the carefully selected and beautifully captured best parts of everyone else's lives, you can't help but form unrealistic expectations of a "happy" and "successful" life. The result is that you will compare these curated and airbrushed versions of other people's lives with the "negatives" in your own life, become consumed by it and remain trapped in chasing the mirage that is a farce.[11]

A 2018 study by Harvard University shows how self-disclosure on social networking sites light up the same part of the brain that also ignites when taking an addictive substance, and the experts in *The Social Dilemma* documentary reiterate this fact.[12] They explain that the platforms are designed to hook you in and keep you scrolling because, according to Tim Kendall, former president of Pinterest, "*The business model is to keep people engaged on the screen.*"[13]

In addition, social media introduced our generation to FOMO and FOMU: The Fear of Missing Out and the Fear of Messing Up. When we see posts of that perfect vacation, engaging party or amazing meal, we feel we've missed out on something spectacular, as we sit bored gazing at our phone. FOMU is fostered because we fear if we make a mistake, someone will capture it (on their phone) and post it (on a social media site), and we will forever be known for the "fail."

Interestingly, social scientist Jonathan Haidt, who I mentioned earlier, appeared on *The Social Dilemma* documentary. He notes the "gigantic increase" in cases of depression and anxiety among American teenagers at the start of the decade, spurred on by social media addiction.[14] "Young girls aged 10–14 saw a 151 percent increase compared to the first decade of the century, and as if this isn't enough, cyberbullying has made a bad situation even worse. By enabling cruel people to tear into others online, with little effort, this form of bullying has become increasingly common and most of us have seen what it can do to a young person."[15]

Which leads us to another problem.

Social scientists now agree that platforms like the ones we've discussed are sources of loneliness. How ironic, right? Today, however, we have more people—especially young people—identifying as "lonely" than ever before in my lifetime. U.S. public health officials are taking note, recognizing the health risks of loneliness.

In her book, *The Lonely Century*, Noreena Hertz reveals that in terms of health outcomes, loneliness is comparable to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day and is worse than obesity. It is also strongly associated with cognitive decline and dementia.[16] The U.S. surgeon general Vivek Murthy has written a book that begins with these words: "During my years caring for patients, the most common condition I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness."[17] The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration has declared a "loneliness epidemic," specifically citing the increasing phenomena of "no participation in social groups, fewer friends and strained relationships" as the culprits.[18]

Our problem, in my opinion, is we've mistaken the artificial relationships we have on social media for the real thing. We may have 500 friends on Instagram—but are they really friends? I don' think so. In fact, the insurance company, Cigna, has devoted significant resources to understanding why social isolation is increasing, finding that in 2018, 46 percent of Americans felt alone, and 43 percent of Americans felt that their relationships are not meaningful.[19] This produces another irony.
In short, the technology that connects us also isolates us.

What's the point I am making? Because our government has done little to curb this challenge, we must take steps ourselves. According to Nnaemeka Ugochukwu,

[16]Hertz, Noreena. The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That's Pulling Apart. , 2020. Print.

You could start by deleting the apps you visit more than the rest. If you have to rely on your browser to check your Instagram profile for instance, you can gradually wean yourself off the network by setting daily time limits. Use apps that help to track your usage, or if you have an iPhone, you can also check this by heading to Settings > Screen Time and > See All Activity) There are also search engines such as DuckDuckGo that help you visit websites without being continuously tracked. This means that fewer companies are capitalizing on your data and aren't profiting from influencing your online behavior with advertising and product recommendations. With that, you are more likely to read what you came to read and not get drawn into the rabbit hole of recommended videos, articles and other time-sucking items.[20]

One of my favorite phrases that summarizes our dilemma puts things quite simply: When our phones had leashes, we were free. Now our phones are free...and we have leashes. Due to the addiction, millions of people have a "love-hate relationship" with social media.

Let me offer some other practical steps we can take as well to break free.

When and where have you seen smartphone addiction in others?

Guidelines if You're Leading Students

For years, I have encountered caring adults—parents, teachers, coaches, guardians, employers, and youth pastors—who identified the challenges of social media and became intentional in their leadership of the kids who use it. They created guidelines and guardrails that kept the students on a healthy pathway and prevented them from damaging themselves and others. Here are some of the "best practices" I've seen around the world. If you're an educator, these are not only helpful ideas for the classroom, but to pass along to parents and guardians.

a. Clarify proper boundaries for smartphones up-front.
Too many adults got ambushed as social media and smartphones took center stage. We didn't know what to do as our kids became addicted to them. One antidote is to become intentional in our leadership. Clarify with your students the times and places where phones are "out of bounds" and when or where they are "in bounds" and OK to use. With no boundaries, the portable device becomes our master rather than our servant.

b. Enforce benefits and consequences for failing or following the boundaries.
Next, once boundaries are clear, we must be consistent in enforcing them. If we are wishy-washy about them, they do no good. If a student violates a boundary, one consequence could be the loss of their phone for a few days. Believe it or not, they actually can live without it, and they'll likely stay in bounds in the future. If we don't lead with this step, boundaries feel like mean-spirited rules to kids. This is unnecessary.

c. Use a basket or a pocket banner for phones during face-to-face times.
Families that have a basket in their kitchen where all members place their phones at dinner time enable everyone to enjoy face-to-face interaction with no distractions. In addition, teachers can hang a banner with pockets for times when phones are not in use in class. It's a visual cue that there are places to use phones and places to avoid using them.

d. Create a curfew for phones in class or at home.
As teens mature, they often need caring adults to put curfews in place, as their brain's prefrontal cortex has not fully formed. A teen brain feels more than it reasons. I know families who put a curfew in place at 9:00 p.m. before people go to bed. There is usually no reason a phone needs to be used late at night, and sleep time improves measurably.

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e. Use a phone contract when you purchase a phone for your child.

Most of the time, a student's first phone is purchased for them by an adult. Hence, the phone actually belongs to that adult. It's a perfect time to create a simple agreement for both parties to sign, clarifying the rules for its use (i.e., keeping grades up, following rules, and being honest about posts). Plus, they learn broken contracts have consequences.

f. Regularly discuss the positives and negatives of social media and smartphones.

Keep the topic of smartphones and social media front and center in your conversations. When we don't, we'll leave outcomes to chance. Teens should hear the data on phone addictions, and how they lead to anxiety, panic attacks, and even depression. Talking about the research keeps the discussion objective and factual. Everyone benefits.

> *Do any of these steps or ideas seem relevant in your context?*
> *Which could you utilize?*

Steps We Can Take to Overcome the Slavery

I recognize the term "slavery" is a harsh one, but I use it on purpose. When we have addictions, we are enslaved to habits, often bad habits. To undo such negative patterns, start here.

1. Begin with trust and belief.

"The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (an international measure of citizens' trust in government, business, media, and civic organizations) showed stable and competent autocracies (China and the United Arab Emirates) at the top of the list, while contentious democracies such as the United States, England and Spain scored near the bottom," Haidt reminds us.[21] Most Generation Z respondents report they've lost trust in traditional institutions. So, what do we do? Leaders must earn trust again. The rest of us must enter new relationships with belief. Give people at "A", not an "F", as you connect.

2. Send messages that are "for" something, not "against" something.

Too many of us today are known for what we despise and what we're against. That's no way to live a fulfilling life. If we believe something is wrong, why not speak out for what is right? Better yet, why not do something about what is right and just? Martin Luther King's speech is known as "I Have a Dream." Too often our message is: "I Have a Complaint." If we fill the internet with visionary voices instead of vindictive or even violent ones, we may just cultivate a society where positive change can take place.

3. Check your motives.

I do a motive check on my actions every week. When it comes to social media interactions, I believe that's a smart place to start. When you're ready to post a message, ask yourself: Is my motivation to be vulnerable or to go viral? Is this a performance or an authentic post? This single check may reveal what's going on inside of you and serve as a silent guide and accountability partner for you. Why you do something will ultimately determine what you do. It can enable all of us to be genuine in our words, thoughts, and deeds.

4. Follow the two-hour rule for social media usage.

How many times have you logged onto Instagram or some other platform, and before too long you feel anxious, jealous, or angry? Our emotions are hijacked by the artificial lives of others. This enslavement is unnecessary. A meta-analysis of social media use reveals that those who spend less than two hours a day on social media sites are measurably less vulnerable to anxiety and depression. Those who spend over two hours are more vulnerable to those anxieties. Technology makes a marvelous servant but a horrible master.

### 5. Don't "yell" on social media platforms. Use logic, not emotion.

We live in an age of hyperbole. In order to be heard or noticed, we feel we need to exaggerate and use all caps, emotional language, and several exclamation points. This won't win anyone to your point of view, and the message comes across as uneducated. We enter a blue ocean when we calmly send messages that are rational. Clamor may win instant attention, but reason wins the day. We may just stand out from the noise by not screaming. Even in the books I write, I rarely use an exclamation point. I think it's time for peace and reason.

6. Initiate a technology fast.

I know both adults and teens who've chosen to leave social media platforms for their own sanity. Some have permanently left Instagram and others may temporarily exit TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, or some other platform just to demonstrate they're masters of their own daily schedules. I recommend you do this for more than a day. Somewhere between three and seven days can impact your lifestyle. Two weeks is even better. The acid test is to see what you tend to think about when you're not on it. Freedom comes when you stop thinking about it. Freedom from anything that creates emotional bondage is possible.

7. Find realities that bind us together rather than divide us.

American forefather James Madison saw the potential for this kind of division. In his "Federalist No. 10," he wrote about the innate human proclivity toward "faction."[22] By this he meant our tendency to divide ourselves into teams or parties that are so inflamed with "mutual animosity" that we are "much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good." Madison worked to fight these "factions," and we must too. Obviously, people embrace different views, but we must focus on commonalities instead of differences. This is what causes civilization to move forward.
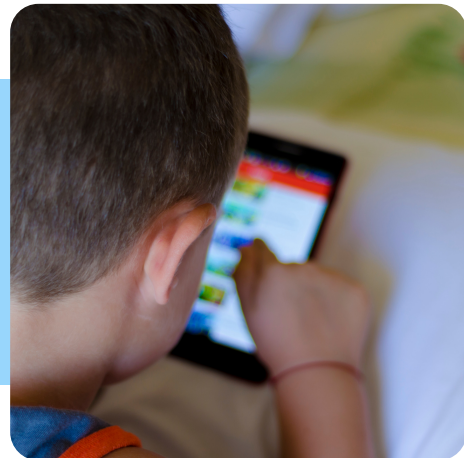
What's This Look Like in Real Life?

Gary Davison is the principal of Lambert High School, just north of Atlanta. He and his faculty were noticing that students were in a quandary during the pandemic, facing all the mental health issues I've spoken about here. Lambert High School is located in a high-achieving, high-stress suburban area where every kid is expected to attend college. In the midst of the lockdown and later, the return to the school campus, a growing number of the students were mismanaging their TikTok accounts. It became a place to be rude, crude, and sometimes even damaging. Threats were made, insults were slung, bullying was rampant—often from relatively good kids who just slipped under the negative influence of social media during a pandemic.

So, what did Gary's staff and faculty do?

They turned social media on its ear. They launched a new TikTok account enabling students to create positive, encouraging, and innovative videos about classmates and about the school. While this may sound unrealistic and even cheesy, it worked. This TikTok account blew up, as many students joined in the conversation. It seems all they needed was someone to redirect their energies toward something redemptive.

• *Social media doesn't have to be negative.*
• *Social media doesn't have to be damaging.*
• *Social media doesn't have to be self-centered.*

I heard a funny comment recently. A guy said, "I don't have a Facebook or a Twitter account, so I just go around announcing out loud what I'm doing at random times. I've got three followers so far...but I think two are cops."

What if we leveraged social media not to impress others, but to impact others? Remember: your worth is not measured in likes, comments, shares or followers but in your ability to love, keep comments to yourself, reflect, and lead. And what if we could not only advise but model the way for students—those young people behind us—to live a life of mastery rather than slavery to their portable device? It's never too late.

Let's keep our world real.

1. What is the most alarming discovery you've made about social media platforms?

2. How has the pandemic affected social media use in your world?

3. What have you seen happen to others that illustrates its negative effects?

4. What steps would be best for you to take in light of this social media dilemma?

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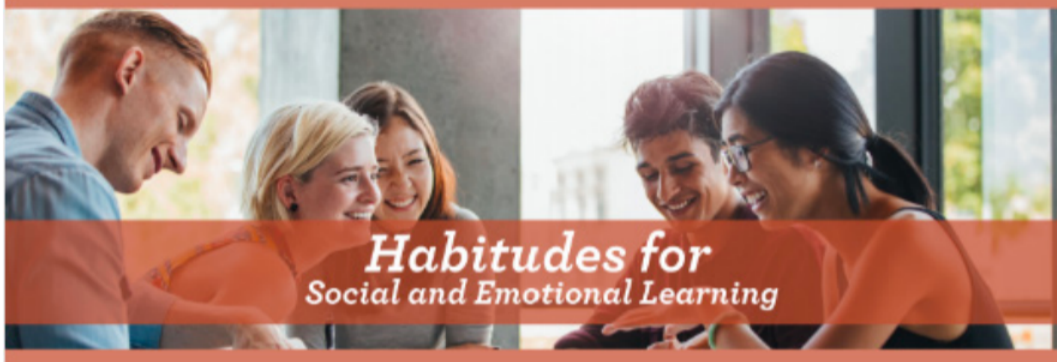
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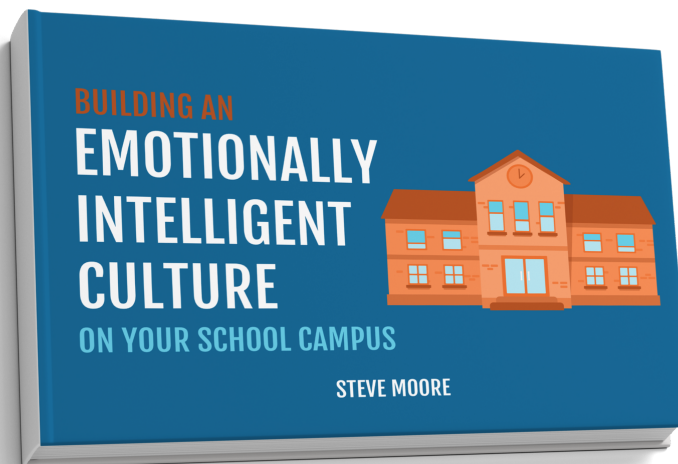
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