

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, a podcast all about leadership, change, and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. And now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, hey everybody, and welcome to episode 435 of the podcast. It's Carey here. I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. Thank you to everybody who's new to the podcast this summer. Thank you for leaving ratings and reviews wherever you listen to this podcast. Picking up a lot of traction these days on Spotify, Apple Podcasts. Where do you listen? Let me know. We got show notes for you and everything at careynieuwhof.com/episode435. This episode is brought to you by Ministry Grid. As a podcast listener, you get \$200 off the regular Ministry Grid price by going to ministrygrid.com/carey. And by BELAY, get a free download of their resource, 13 Ways to Build High-Performing Remote Teams by texting my name, CAREY, to 55123. That's CAREY to 55123.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, Jean Twenge is my guest. She is going to talk about rising anxiety, depression, and isolation and smartphones in Gen Z and what that means for them and for leaders. I have been following her work for years, I was so excited to be able to land an interview with her. She's a Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University and a global leader in generation research. She talks about the big spike in anxiety and it happened around 2012, and we explore why, what that means, and here's the reality, first of all, a lot of you are in that demographic, right? We have a very young listenership to this show and so a lot of you, this is describing your life and then for those of us like myself who are a bit older, well these are the people we're now leading and parenting. And what do you do in the midst of this?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Jean Twenge is a Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University, the author of more than 140 scientific publications, and six books, the latest of which is *iGen: Why Today's Super Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, and Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. That's a great subtitle. She holds a BA and an MA from the University of Chicago and a PhD from the University of Michigan. I'm so excited to have Jean on the podcast.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So pastors and church leaders, do you wish you could streamline and standardize your volunteer training? If so, you got to check out Ministry Grid. Everything you need, all in one place. It's the online tool to build, customize, and curate volunteer training in your church. And you can use their 700+ training courses and upload your own videos and resources. Over the last year, which has been a year, they have seen churches adding their own content to complement the Ministry Grid training and turn their new member classes, Discipleship Growth Tracks, theological training and other in-person classes into digital courses using the Ministry Grid platform.

Carey Nieuwhof:

My church, Connexus Church, uses Ministry Grid, has found it very helpful for our own training. And the best news, they're offering our podcast listeners \$200 off the regular Ministry Grid price. So, because

you listen to this show, for \$399 a year, you can get unlimited access for your church. So go to ministrygrid.com/carey to get this special offer. That's ministrygrid.com/carey to get this offer.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And as you know, the world has changed, and work has changed. Now more than ever, productivity is measured by results whenever and wherever the work happens. So productivity, believe it or not, can actually soar for a hybrid workforce and the key is for you as a leader to learn how to equip your team to maximize their productivity. The question is, how do you do this? Well, our friends at BELAY understand this. They're the incredible organization revolutionizing productivity with their virtual assistants, bookkeeping, and social media strategy services for growing organizations. And they're offering their free resource, 13 Ways to Build a High-Performing Remote Team today for free to everyone who's listening to this show. So to get this free download, just text my name, CAREY, to 55123. That's CAREY to 55123, and you'll get it today.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, let's talk about the next generation and everything that's happening. Here's my conversation with University of San Diego's Jean Twenge.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Jean, so good to have you on the podcast. I have been looking forward to this conversation for a while.

Jean Twenge:

Thanks so much. Thanks for having me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. So, you started about a decade ago, maybe around 2010, 2011 to start really noticing some changes in college students and teenagers. Do you want to tell us about that? I think it was your findings at that time all those years ago that first alerted me to your work.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. I've been doing this stuff on generational differences for a long time, about 25 years. So my first book, *Generation Me*, was about the Millennials and a lot of the individualism and self-confidence that shaped them. And then I started working with some big national surveys, mostly high school seniors is one of the populations, 17 and 18 years olds. And I started to notice some really unusual trends.

Jean Twenge:

I had gotten used to seeing generational shifts, they'd take a decade or two to roll out. Then with the teens in, yeah, about 2011, 2012, 2013, that data started to show some unusual trends that more and more teens started to say that they felt left out and they felt lonely, they felt like they couldn't do anything right, that they didn't enjoy life. And those last two are classic symptoms of depression.

Jean Twenge:

And it kept going. It wasn't just a year or two, then those trends kept building and they showed up in other national datasets on clinical-level depression, on self-harm behaviors, on suicide attempts, very serious issues in teen mental health, and I'd really never seen anything like that, that these changes

were so large and so sudden. So first seemed clear that there was a new generational transition, that Millennials were not going to last until those born in 1999 or 2002, as some people have theorized, that we already had, they were there, the post-Millennial generation had already arrived among teens and as time went on, young adults as well, that there was this noticeable shift. Did I mention the mental health things? But there were also some noticeable shifts in values, in personality traits, in self-esteem, life satisfaction, and just across the board, there was the most sudden generational shift I had ever seen in my whole career.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. And so you call this post-Millennial generation iGen. They're sometimes called Generation Z, depending on what you're reading. You broke down a little list there at the end, values shifted, personality traits shifted. What else did you say also? I'd just love for you to break it down a little bit further. What is so different about this emerging generation?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. Well, it's a really long list.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, we got time. This is long-form podcasting, so I'm curious.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah, absolutely, right? Yeah. So my book on this group is called iGen and it discusses 10 different trends that show, and some of them are things that are trends that have continued from the Millennial generation or even have been going on since Gen X or the Boomers, they just keep going, but then there's these others that are these really sudden shifts. So really, the most sudden shift is in terms of optimism versus pessimism. So, Millennials were, and I think for the most part still are, very optimistic, self-confident, at least as teens were pretty happy and satisfied with life. They showed some interesting patterns in terms of mental health with some more psychosomatic symptoms of depression, but at least on the surface, a lot of the trends are pretty positive. They had very high expectations, high self-esteem, even narcissism, higher entitlement, all of those things.

Jean Twenge:

And then it changed. So, some of those things, like entitlement and narcissism started to change around the time of the Great Recession. But then for mental health and happiness and life satisfaction and optimism, it happened later around 2012 or so that sudden shift toward... I mean, the graphs are just amazing. This is why I put like 100 graphs in iGen, in the book just because it just captures it, they're just shocking to see. Life satisfaction for example among 17 and 18 years olds, been measured since the 1970s in these big surveys, we headed all the way back to the Boomers and just it steadily goes up and then the Millennials who are very satisfied and it peaks around 2011 and 2012 and then just goes...

Carey Nieuwhof:

Off a cliff.

Jean Twenge:

It just falls off a cliff.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Like very dissatisfied with life?

Jean Twenge:

Crazy. You never see trends like this. You just don't see them. The things being so sudden. And that's just one example. You see the same for expectations, for self-esteem. And then in the opposite direction-

Carey Nieuwhof:

What happened to expectations? Did they go higher or lower?

Jean Twenge:

... depression... Right. So yeah, so life satisfaction goes down, happiness goes down, self-esteem went down, and then on the other side, stuff like depression and self-harm and suicide rate, opposite thing that that goes way up. So all consistent with each other.

Jean Twenge:

So as opposed to Millennials where sometimes you had some facets of some depression going up, some going down, some optimism, but then this underlying dissatisfaction in some areas. It was kind of a mixed picture with Millennials, mostly tending toward optimism. iGen is just really, really consistent, all these things going in this direction and more pessimism, less life satisfaction, less happiness, more depression, just much more negative. And in a very sudden shift that was really unprecedented.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. And so, you started to notice these a decade ago, have those trends held consistent? Because now, this is the thing, we have a bunch of iGen, Gen Z listeners to this podcast, they're not just high school kids anymore, they're college kids, what is the line just for clarification's sake in your view, the approximate year range for iGen? When were they born, starting from when to when?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. So I define iGen or Gen Z as those born between 1995 and 2012. So, admittedly, any birth year cut-off is arbitrary, so the way generations work, there's always people debating. For example for Millennials, did they start in 1980 or did they start in 1982? And people will fight to the death over these two years, right? And I think it doesn't matter a ton. Some people, like the Pew Research Center for Gen Z, I think they chose 1997. But I don't know. I think if you look at the patterns in the data, it's somewhere in the mid-90s very, very clearly. It's one of the few times when you can see a very clear generational break.

Jean Twenge:

Because between Gen X and Millennials, it's much more arbitrary. There's not a really super clear generational break in these trends, but there is between Millennials and iGen or Gen Z. It is there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. This is super helpful. In the mid-90s, this is when you start to see kids born then. Now, how has that tracked into 2021? Are they still pessimistic, low-life satisfaction, more prone to depression, low self-esteem? What are you seeing today?

Jean Twenge:

We don't know yet. There's a lag in these national data coming out, right? And a couple times in 2020, I was able to team up with some folks from the Wheatley Institution at BYU and also from the Institute for Family Studies, they funded a few studies. So we were able to get a few samples for mental health among teens during 2020. But, and here's the issue, we teamed up with really great national survey companies, however we had to get to people through their parents, just morally and ethically, that's the only way to do it during a pandemic when you can't do the survey at school, so we were probably missing a lot of kids who maybe weren't connected to their parents.

Jean Twenge:

So, I am not 100% confident that we know yet. I am really waiting for that national data to come out in a few months to try to see a more comparable 2020 versus 2019. So, we tried, we tried our best, but I won't be fully confident until we have the government-sponsored datasets coming out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I appreciate that. And just in case people miss the intro, you are actually a researcher, you don't just go out and do a Facebook survey and it's like, "Hey, Instagram poll. Are you depressed? Are you not?" This is peer-reviewed level research. Okay, so is 2019 the year you last had reliable data then that you would say, "Yeah, we had-"

Jean Twenge:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What was it like in 2019? Did you see the trends in 2012 continue into 2019 or did they adjust somehow?

Jean Twenge:

No. Yeah. So, they have continued, if not accelerated.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. So that's been the really stunning thing. That it wasn't, for example, that there was this spike in 2012, 2013, and then it just plateaued. That's not what it looks like. It keeps going up.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It wasn't just middle school. It wasn't like, "Oh, they had a bad middle school, junior high experience and now they're fine as young adults?" No?

Jean Twenge:

Right. Right. Yeah, so one great example is the national level data on clinical-level depression, because there we've got all the age groups, same method, really solid, big sample size, all that good stuff, and we can look at 12 to 17 year olds, so we're getting... So, say, seventh graders up to 12th graders and then they also have young adults, so 18 to 25 year olds. So we can look at those trends across all those age groups and see what's going on.

Jean Twenge:

So in that data, for 12 to 17 years olds you see that in 2011 or so, the rate for clinical-level depression was about 8% approximately. And then it starts to climb. After about 2012, 2013, and it keeps going. Every single year, pretty much, it gets higher and higher and higher until 2019 when it was 16%. So it doubled.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And that's statistically huge, right? That's not just a small variation.

Jean Twenge:

It is enormous. You never see things like that, that it doubled. It's crazy. And just for context, this is not over-diagnosis. This is not people being more willing to seek help, because this is what's called a screening study. They get a cross-section of the whole population, because they want to see, well, what's the prevalence in the population whether they're getting help or not? That's the whole purpose of this type of study. It's called National Study of Drug Use and Health. That's what they're trying to do.

Jean Twenge:

So, you can't explain it away with those types of explanations. You also can't say, "Oh, they're just more willing to admit to problems." Well if that were the case, you wouldn't see it in behaviors like self-harm and suicide, and you do. And those data look exactly the same. You see that increase beginning. It actually begins a little bit earlier in those, in the behaviors, but then also just keeps going, keeps up and up and up pretty much every year.

Jean Twenge:

Then for young adults, so for young adults, it takes a little longer. It's more like 2013 or 2014 when it first starts to tick up. Then it goes up even faster than for teens, so by 2019, their level of clinical depression has reached the same level as teens. So it also doubled, or almost doubled and in an even shorter period of time. And why was there the delay? I think because it was a generational effect, it took another few years for iGen to be in that group of 18 to 25 year olds and we're seeing it there too among young adults.

Jean Twenge:

And 26 and over, so that's going to be Millennials, Gen X, you don't see it as much. It's not as prevalent there. You see it a little bit among the people in their late 20s, a little bit of an uptick, but not much. For the most part, you're not seeing, at least in terms of depression, the same increases among those who are in other generations. You're not seeing it as much for them over the last few years. It's the teens and young adults.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So we're going to camp on why a lot, but before we go there, because everybody would be like, we got a lot of parents listening and they're like, "Wow, these are my kids," or a lot of leaders who's like, "Oh man, these are the people that are stepping into the work force now and I'm beginning to see that." But one more stat that really caught my eye, you say that Gen Z, iGen is a very safe generation statistically, in other words, not likely to get murdered, not as likely to... We live pretty safe lives, COVID notwithstanding, yet anxiety is at an all-time high. That's a really fascinating paradox. How does that happen and what does that mean, Jean?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. So, one of the graphs that I made for the book, every once in a while, I'll just stumble across something where I'm like, "Wow, that really shows what's going on." So one thing I did was graph the homicide rate for young people and the suicide rate for young people. So historically, the homicide rate is almost always been higher, in some cases, considerably higher than the suicide rate. So the 1990s, so I'm a Gen X-er, that's when I was a teen and young adult, and that was a terrible time for violent crime, and that homicide rate is just, I mean you graph it, it's sky high, it looks like unemployment during the great depression. It's just really, really high. Suicide was also fairly high during that time too.

Jean Twenge:

But as you transition from Millennials to iGen, what you get, really interesting pattern. So the homicide rate starts to fall and it really, really plummets, but the suicide rate's going up. So the lines cross. So for iGen, almost the whole time iGen's been in this age group, the suicide rate's higher than the homicide rate, and that shows up across the board. It's not just those extreme outcomes, it's also that in terms of physical safety, iGen is probably the safest generation in American history physically, outside of the mental health piece like suicide, we'll come back to that.

Jean Twenge:

They're less likely to get hurt in car accidents as one example. It's not just the murder rate, it's also they're less likely to get in any kind of physical fight, and that's across two different datasets we know. There's a CDC Youth Risk survey, it's one of the best sources of data on teens and their behaviors that shows that much less likely to get in a physical fight at school, bring a weapon to school, all of that peaked in the 90s.

Jean Twenge:

So, as parents and as a society, we've done a fantastic job keeping these kids safe. It's just we have what might be a trade off, that in keeping them physically safe, they're not as emotionally safe, that for example, that I think there's a lot of things going on, but here's two possibilities. In teens not being granted as much independence, and not wanting as much independence and not doing as much independently and they don't really have as much responsibility in terms of jobs or house work or any of those things compared to previous generations, they have those responsibilities for school work that has its own challenges, but we're not treating adolescents as adults as much as we used to. And we'll get to that in a second, that teens are taking longer to grow to adulthood, which is just the way the economy works, the way the society works now.

Jean Twenge:

That has big upsides in terms of physical safety for example, but it has the potential downside that might impact their mental health, that if they're not feeling useful, that that may have a negative impact on mental health. Then the other piece is, well one reason that they're not getting in fights and, to be blunt, they're not killing each other, is they're not with each other in person as much as they used to be. And this was true even before the pandemic. So teens are now much less likely to hang out with their friends, to go to parties, to go out without their parents. If it's about face to face social interaction, it started to decline around 2000 but only by a little bit, and then again, right around 2012, the exact same time, just another fall off a cliff in terms of how often they're getting together with their friends face to face.

Jean Twenge:

So, that can be great for physical safety, because they're not out driving around with their friends, getting in car accidents, and they're not hitting each other, right? But it's also not great for mental health to be stuck in your room only communicating with your friends via text or Instagram or TikTok. You can stay in touch with your friends constantly and that seemingly keeps you connected, but it is not as good for mental health as actually being in the same room with your friends.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Okay. So that is super helpful. Do you think some of it is parenting style? I mean, we've lived through so many metaphors of parenting, but helicopter parenting, parents who want to protect their kids, get them into the right schools, coddle them from all the consequences of their action. You can joke, and I'm barely a Gen X-er, so depending on how you slice it, one of the oldest Gen X-ers around, but if I was in trouble at school, man, my parents sided with the teacher. And we tried to embody that with our kids as well. Once in a while, the teacher was wrong and that's a separate issue, but these days teachers almost feel like, fear the parent because, "What are you doing to my kid?" That kind of thing. Is parenting involved? What's your take on that? I can be totally wrong on that one, but I'm just curious.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. I think that may have had more of an impact on Millennials, but there absolutely was that trend toward, "My kid can do no wrong and I got to tell my kid that they're special and they can be anything they want to be," and so on. And what you tend to get with that type of parenting, as positives, kids who are self-confident, taken too far what you get is entitlement and narcissism. However, I think that that shifted. I think that style of parenting with the parents of Millennials was focused on encouragement, sometimes too much.

Jean Twenge:

And then it shifted. I think it shifted from encouragement to fear, and then the parents of Gen Z or iGen shifted to more of that fear-based parenting. So it had some of the same characteristics in terms of protection, maybe even over-protection, but it had this undercurrent of fear to it that I think came across to their kids. So as one example, Millennials experience this as well, but I think it got taken next level with Gen Z or iGen, around income inequality, of this idea that, "You either make it or you don't, so you better make it." I think that anxiety did get passed onto kids.

Jean Twenge:

Now, I think it's pretty unlikely that that would explain the big uptick in depression, partially based on timing, because that trend had been in place for a while and we didn't start to see the uptick in

depression until 2012. If that had really been it, I think it would have started earlier. But I do think there was a little bit of a shift in parenting, but I think we also massively overestimate the impact of parenting on mental health in teens. Obviously, the relationship with parents is super important, but as long as that relationship is stable and loving, and that's probably even more the case of iGen than it was for previous generations, they get along with their parents great, they're very wanted children for the most part. Having kids now is a choice, so it is stable and loving fairly consistently, and as long as you have that, some of those things around overprotection or helicopter or so on, yeah they're going to have an influence, but they're not going to be huge.

Jean Twenge:

How that kid spends their time and the food they're eating and whether they're getting exercise and whether they're sleeping or whether they're seeing their friends face to face and what happened on Instagram last week with their friends, that's going to have often a bigger impact. As long as they have that basic relationship with their kids. If they don't, then we're talking about classic stuff around parent child and abuse and so on that are really not generational shifts, as much as just things that happen in every generation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. No, that's super clarifying. Yeah, because I do notice when you said, "We've raised our kids who are in their 20s now," but we have, by your definition, a Millennial and a iGen or Gen Z and it's funny, because I did see a lot more fear. We live in the country, but our kids played out in the backyard, a lot of young parents today afraid to put their kids in the backyard, afraid to see them unsupervised, that kind of thing. So you're talking about that kind of worry over your children?

Jean Twenge:

I think that's part of it. I think there's a couple of societal trends that go into this. So one is just, we've shifted as a society to protecting kids more, because and I think we have to put it in larger context, it's not that parents woke up one day and said, "Oh, I'm not going to let my kids play in the backyard." It's that, no, if you let your kid, say your 10 year old, walk home from the park for a mile, CPS might get called, because that's actually happened. There's a whole shift in the societal scene. There are laws in some states, I believe in Illinois you're not allowed, under the law officially, to leave your kid alone in the house until they're 16.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Really?

Jean Twenge:

So this has been codified into law in some cases. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Jean Twenge:

And it's not just the US either. There's places, I mean, so New Zealand is an interesting example. That's a culture has a lot of rural stuff going on, has a huge independent streak. I took my daughter who was 12

at the time in a hotel in New Zealand and there was a card in the room that said that she could not go anywhere in the hotel by herself unless she was 14. And we'd traveled all kinds of places, we'd just come from Hawaii and she would go to the beach and the pool by herself and come back and nobody cared. And it was especially strange that it was New Zealand, which is such a great country and has much more relaxed attitude in general.

Jean Twenge:

But these things are happening over and over, so it's not that all parents want to participate, it's that we're often forced to. So there's that going on too, and I do think there has been a shift in attitudes as well. So that's one piece of it. But you have to say, "Well, why? Why do we protect kids now more?" And one reason, and this also gets to the root of some of the other trends around Gen Z or iGen, is that the whole developmental trajectory has slowed. People are growing up more slowly over the whole lifespan.

Jean Twenge:

So, younger kids are less independent than they used to be. School-aged kids, less likely to walk home from school. Teens, less likely to get their drivers license or have a job or have sex or drink alcohol. All these things that Gen X-ers like me were doing with abandon in the 80s and 90s. So, it's called a slow life strategy. When people live longer, when healthcare is better, when education takes longer to finish, parents tend to make the choice to have fewer children, nurture them more carefully, and have them grow up more slowly.

Jean Twenge:

And that's the way we live now, and that wasn't always the case. Mid 20th century, it was fast-life strategy. People would have a lot of kids, and just hope it worked out. That's how you used to do it. And now that's different.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You're reminding me of two things. Number one, being five years old, my dad sending me to the corner store to buy him cigarettes by himself, and that's like, yeah.

Jean Twenge:

Right. Yeah. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. We never did that with our kids.

Jean Twenge:

Not just a coke, cigarettes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He'd be horrified knowing that now and he eventually quit smoking, but hey, that was the 60s, that's the way it was. Or the 70s, whenever that was.

Jean Twenge:

Totally. Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then I still remember, I have a degree in History, I think it was James, yeah, John Stuart Mill the philosopher, son of James Mill, had mastered Greek by the age of three. I'm like, "Are you kidding me? We're trying to figure out ABCs. I'm still trying to figure out my ABCs." But yeah, there is that, I like how you put that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. Now to the big question, why this spike? And this is where you've spent a lot of your research over the last 10 years and I think you had that article in The Atlantic, et cetera, et cetera that went viral, and a number of other talks and so on. But why the massive change? There are a couple of factors, but I think your argument is there's a big one.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. And I think there is more than one, for sure, but yeah. More and more it absolutely looks like there is at least probably a primary cause. So, at first when these big increases in depression and unhappiness started to show up, and a big decline in life satisfaction, I had no idea what was going on. The first couple years I looked at this and I'm like, "What the heck?" It really wasn't-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Water supply? The air quality? Right?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. So, when you think this through, you have to think of something that changed. It can't be just, what are the usual causes of depression? Well, genetic predisposition. Well, that's not going to change in two or three years, or even 10 years. So you have to think about overall. What's changing? That's your challenge.

Jean Twenge:

So, when you do cultural change research, sometimes you go, "Okay, is it the economy?" Well no, that's actually completely misaligned. So you get that beginning around 2012. Well 2012 to 2019, that was a great period for the economy. You had economic expansion, the unemployment rate was steadily going down. It's exactly the opposite of what you'd expect for economic trends for people to become more depressed. Plus, these are teens we're talking about here, we're not talking about people who are supporting themselves, usually economic factors aren't going to be as big as it would be for adults anyway. But still, totally opposite direction of what you'd expect. Okay. So you have to go elsewhere.

Jean Twenge:

Well, okay, any events that occurred around 2012 that hadn't been there as much before and then accelerated through 2019. It's tough to think of anything. There really is very little that fits that description, and the few that do, tended to be more isolated in their effects. So the opioid epidemic is a good example. So that did start around that time, however, mostly affected adults, not teens. You go "Okay, maybe it's their parents," but was mostly in certain areas and not others, yet these increases in

depression for teens are showing up everywhere across racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, region of the country, everything. Pretty uniform. So it doesn't seem likely that could be it.

Jean Twenge:

And so I puzzled over this for a really, really long time. And then I found a poll from the Pew Center for Research. It turns out the end of 2012 was the first time that the majority of Americans owned a smartphone. And then you look at teens themselves, that was also around the time that social media use moved from optional to mandatory. So there's no exact definition for that, but in 2009, only about half of 12th graders were on social media every day. And by 2017, it was about 85%. So I think there's a tipping point there, I think it's about, I don't know, around 75%. Then if you're not on social media, you're left out. So that was a big transition too.

Jean Twenge:

Partially because social media is social. It doesn't just affect the people who use it, it affects the people who don't use it. Because then if you're not on it, you're left out. And if you are on it, well then you might still be left out because, say, your friends went to a party, posted pictures on Instagram, and you weren't invited, so there's these elements. And then social comparison and body image issues and that it displaces time for other things, there's all these things going on. And it affects you whether you use it or not.

Jean Twenge:

So the other thing that happened is that shift that we touched on earlier. Teens started spending a lot more time online, and a lot less time with each other face to face, and a lot less time sleeping. And that is a terrible formula for mental health. Because you're spending less time on things that are very good for mental health, face to face social interaction in real time, and sleeping, and you're spending a lot more time on something that is either negative or maybe some people think it's a wash. Even if you think that spending a lot of time online is a wash for mental health, you still could get this negative effect because it's displacing time for other things.

Jean Twenge:

And what I'm often asked at this point is, how can you be sure that it's smartphones and social media causing depression, rather than the other way around? Well, among individuals, it could be either one. And we can talk about that. But when we're talking about the trends over time at the generational level, I think it's extremely clear that it's the technology leading to depression, rather than the other way around. Because if you make the argument that it's depression leading to the technology use, you'd have to say, "Teens became depressed for some completely unknown reason nobody's been able to figure out even 10 years later, and then that causes them to buy smartphones and spend more time on social media." That seems extremely unlikely, it seems much more likely that this technology became popular, especially among teens, they started to use it more, it took over, had these after effects on how they were spending their time, and then that led to depression. And that's exactly how the data looks. We did a more sophisticated statistical analysis once and matched it up, and there's about a year delay. The technology comes first, then the depression.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And you know what? Having read your research and some of your writing, your talks, I buy that. So I'm not going to argue with that because I want to unpack what that means. So we've got a lot of

iGen, Gen Z listening, we have younger Millennials listening, got a lot of Gen X and some Boomer bosses listening, and now we're onboarding this generation out of college into the workplace. One of the things I've heard a lot of leaders say, and I've experienced this to some extent in my own life having a pretty young team, both at the church when I worked there and at times in my company as well, is that often this generation doesn't emerge with life skills. Do you agree with that? That there's a little more nurturing of behalf of employers and bosses and leaders that has to happen with this next generation? And then if so, what does that look like, Jean? What do we need to do?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. Yeah, I think so. So, to put this in context, there's some big upsides for iGen coming into the workplace. So they have a strong work ethic, even compared to previous generations, it's stronger than young people 10 years ago. They're very practical. They are lower in narcissism and entitlement. So there's some big upsides with this group. But they are psychologically and in terms of their life experience, younger than previous generations when they're graduating high school, when they're graduating college. So, say coming out of high school.

Jean Twenge:

So I work in higher education, college faculty, and this is I think one of the biggest, if not the biggest challenges in higher education today that kids are coming to college without as much life experience, without as much experience with independence specifically. So, they may not have gone out of the house without their parents all that much or had a job or had much experience with sex or alcohol, and there's some big positives to that. But then they get to college and boom, they have to do all that. And it's like going zero to 60 in a short period of time, and they have those experiences often when they're away from home for the first time, very challenging.

Jean Twenge:

And then that happens again in the workplace, because college faculty and staff have a harder job. We feel that we need to bring them further in four years than we used to because they're coming to us with less independence. Often what I hear a lot from college faculty and staff is they see a lot of students who have more trouble making decisions, probably because they didn't have experience with making decisions. And I always want to be clear, I'm saying this in terms of empathy, not criticism. And I think if you do happen to be older and you put yourself in the shoes of someone who has not had those life experiences, oh my gosh, that is hard, that is so hard to come from that background just not having had those experiences and then have to make these decisions and have independence.

Jean Twenge:

I think that would happen to any generation. I don't think it's a sign of weakness, it's just a sign of how we live now that there's these challenges, and it's really, really hard. So we see that at the college level and we have to try to bring them farther and we're doing the best we can, so bosses, we're trying really hard not to coddle them, but sometimes we almost feel like we have to because they're coming to us with these just fewer experiences with independence, decision making, and so on. And we're trying to get them there, but we can't always do that.

Jean Twenge:

And it varies also from one campus to another. On some campuses that is, honestly, to criticize some folks in my own field, apologies, but I think there has been a little too much coddling in some cases of,

"Oh, you can take that exam whenever you want." Well, what's going to happen when you say... So here's an example, and I said no to this, but a lot of folks don't at the college level. I had a kid say, "I have to take the final late because I'm going to Vegas for my birthday." I'm like, "Oh, really? Well, we've got 300 other people in this class and I can't give 200 makeup exams, so that's not really a valid excuse dude." Very Californian now after 20 years here.

Jean Twenge:

So, my thought always with these things, I'm mostly teaching upper division undergraduates. In two weeks, they might be in spring semester, in two weeks, they might be on the job, a real job starting their careers. And this is always my thought, what would the boss say if you said, "Oh, I can't make the big presentation because I'm going to Vegas for my birthday?" No, or you're fired, or some version of that. Right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

Jean Twenge:

So I think about that a lot. I don't want to be the mean professor, I teach psychology, I try to have very open discussions and have empathy as much as possible. On the other hand, and I think about this as a parent as well of teens and two younger kids too, that I have to prepare them, I have to prepare them for what's coming. So as a parent, you're not raising children, you're raising adults. And as a college professor, you're not just teaching college students, you're teaching future workers. And the reality is, they are going to have to be prepared for that world. And too often I think as parents, we're not preparing them for that world. As teachers, we're not. And I think that can be a problem when they end up in the workplace with some of these attitudes and lack of experience that is not going to serve them well. I think it's a huge challenge for this generation and for leaders.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Without saying too much or being inappropriate, how did that conversation go with the student who wanted to go to Vegas for his birthday, or her birthday? Did you end up in a good place with that? Or...

Jean Twenge:

Well, the way most of these conversations go is that, I just have to say no, and what I almost always do, "Oh, but my other professors let me do it." I'm like, "Okay, great. That's them." So yeah, it doesn't always go great, but I just have to hold my ground and say, "Look, I'm trying to be fair to everyone." Because that's the other value system here, really. And there's no one right answer to this. The whole make up exams thing is, get any professor talking about it and you'll get 10 different opinions, but in my view, there are situations where you absolutely have to make accommodations, and then there's some that are a little bit more in a gray area, or in this case, a, "Seriously, you're really asking me that?" category.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Yeah. So, for students who are listening, and we do have a number of thousands of people in that demographic you're describing who are listening right now, what would you say to them? It's like, you're merging into life, they're over 18, 18 to 24 is the second biggest demographic for this podcast, so they're

merging into life, they're going to get a job, they're trying to get into grad school, whatever they're doing. What would some tips be for them? Because they're probably feeling like you heard them and understand them and they're like, "Okay, so now what?"

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. Yeah. So, just to put things in context, I always want to make sure that people are understanding where I'm coming from when it comes to talking about generational differences, because there is absolutely a natural defensiveness when you hear somebody older talking about your generation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

True.

Jean Twenge:

I vividly remember what that was like as a young Gen X-er, especially Baby Boomers talking about us and like, "You have no idea what you're talking about," was often my thought-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. As an older Gen X-er, I felt the same defensiveness.

Jean Twenge:

"How dare you criticize us?" Yeah, absolutely. There's a natural defensiveness, so I totally, absolutely get that. In my view, the best way to get around the danger of stereotyping a generation I'm not a member of is to try to rely on the voices and opinions and responses of the generation themselves. So, the data that I've been discussing is not based on older people observing the generation, it's based from younger people themselves, on surveys and interviews and other sources, what they say about how they're feeling, their values, what's important to them in life, how they're spending their time, all of those things.

Jean Twenge:

All of it is self report, all of it is from these generations themselves, and we're comparing their experiences to previous generations when they were young. So that's the other thing I think happens too often in generational stuff, is they'll do a survey and find some stuff, well maybe that's just because people are young.

Jean Twenge:

So taking that perspective of, this isn't stereotyping. In my view it's listening, it's listening to what young people have to say from as many sources as possible, but you have to be clear eye about the challenges, the advantages and disadvantages of your group. So in talking to college students and young workers in this group, I think it's important to recognize your strengths that your generation has a lot of amazing strengths. I mentioned work ethic. I think also how fantastically, wonderfully inclusive this generation is, they are just cool with no matter who you are, they're pretty cool with it. Huge strength.

Jean Twenge:

So, keep those in mind, hold those close, even as things feel challenging and I think there is a very strong belief among this generation that the world is a difficult place, that the world is an unkind place, try to

take a step back from that and put it in context and think, well wait, are things actually worse now than they were for Boomers getting drafted into Vietnam or Gen X-ers at the height of the crime wave or Millennials graduating into the Great Recession? Is it really that bad? And then you know what? Even if it really that bad, let's focus on what I can do, on what I can control, on the opportunities I can seek, and the things that I can do to make my life better.

Jean Twenge:

And this is another strength of iGen, they're often looking at not just, how can I make my life better? How can I make life better for everyone? So altruism and wanting to help has increased among young people in the last five to 10 years. So that's another huge strength is that this generation is looking to help others, looking to make the world a better place, and as always, there's big challenges in doing that, but they have that at their core.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, that's good to know. Any idea why the work ethic is higher?

Jean Twenge:

I think the Great Recession was a little bit of a reality check and that made young people realize that things are not always going to be easy in the workplace, that they can't always have the high pay, but then also, not work as many hours, because that was a disconnect that happened a lot when Millennials were young. I also think it's a by-product of the decline in optimism. So it's trade-offs. There's trade-offs in a lot of these viewpoints that pessimism sounds like it would be all bad, and it's not great, but you could also take it as being realism. That's what you could say. A lot of pessimists make that argument, and they have a point. "Am I being pessimistic or am I being realistic?" And I think that's where some of the work ethic comes from of moving away from this idea of, "Oh, I can get all this stuff without having to work for it." Just maybe coming away from some of that unrealistic optimism and saying, "Yeah, I know I'm going to have to work for this."

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do we live with our smartphones? Because they're not going away. How do we optimize? I mean, most of us have had the advice, limit your screen time, get out, do physical exercise, is it that simple? Just the self-discipline to do those things? Or is it deeper than that, Jean?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. Well, these are hard issues for a bunch of reasons. So one is that, smartphones are awesome. There are so many amazing, wonderful things that we can do with them. Social media, not quite as overall positive, but even that, there's a lot of social activism in keeping in touch with people that is hard to do any other way. There's huge advantages to these technologies. However, it is a very tough thing to put that self-control and regulation solely on the individual, particularly for social media because social media was designed to be addictive. There's really no other way to put it.

Jean Twenge:

And some of the folks who founded these companies admit to this. So, Sean Parker, one of the founders of Facebook, said, "Facebook exploits your vulnerability and human psychology, but we did it anyway." And that's the business model of... And not just Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, all of them, to get

people coming back as much as possible for as often as possible because that's how they make the most money. So when we as individuals try to resist this, it is really hard. And I think there's a lot of people who think it's just them who find it hard to put down the phone, find it hard to put away the social media. It's not. We're all in this together. We're all being sucked into it. It's how it works. So, it's a huge challenge. I do think there are some really straightforward concrete steps.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. Love to hear them.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. So one, no phones, tablets in the bedroom overnight. And that's not just for teens, that's for everybody. So we know from just so much research, sleep labs and otherwise, that having devices in the bedroom overnight leads to less sleep and less quality sleep, lower quality sleep. So even if it's off, even if it's on vibrate, it's there and almost everybody I talk to says that their phone is with them in the bedroom, usually within arm's reach.

Jean Twenge:

And then what I usually get is, "Wait, hold on. I have to have my phone in my bedroom overnight because it's my alarm clock." I have some advice for you, buy an alarm clock. Buy it on Amazon on your phone, and then put your phone away and get a good night's sleep. So, I like that solution because it's very simple, it's relatively easy, for most people anyway, relatively easy to implement.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I made that switch four years ago, would never go back.

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. I mean, I know that there's some situations where it's not possible, but for most people most of the time, that's a very straightforward solution. The other is to just carve out times and places that are technology free. So family dinner, family vacation maybe, or the hour right before bedtime, because that's another thing we know from sleep research is looking at phone before bedtime, very psychologically stimulating, winds you up at a time when you should be winding down, plus the blue light from the device, it shines into our eyes, tricks our brains into thinking it's still daytime and then we don't produce the melatonin, the sleep hormone that we need to fall asleep quickly and get a good night's sleep.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And is TV different in blue light radiation from your smartphones?

Jean Twenge:

A little bit. Yeah, yeah. And that's a great question. So TV, it depends. So first of all, TV tends to be more passive and not as psychologically stimulating. If you're watching TV on a traditional TV as opposed to, say, a tablet, it's also farther away. So then you're not getting as much blue light as if you're on a tablet that's right close to your face. So, TV's definitely better than, say, scrolling through Instagram or something like that or online shopping right before bed.

Jean Twenge:

It does still have the blue light. One thing that you can do is wear orange safety glasses. So, we have these in our house, you can buy them for like 10 bucks on Amazon and there's some that are the really high-end and there's some that are really cheap. And I don't know. I haven't yet seen the definitive studies showing that the \$70 ones work better than the \$10 ones. The \$10 ones definitely get rid of the blue light, and you can tell because people who are wearing a blue shirt, it looks green, and if you peek, you can kind of see that it's blue.

Jean Twenge:

So, it does filter out some of that harmful blue light. And you can turn down the blue light on the tablet or phone itself. So, night shift is what it's called on Apple devices, but that doesn't get rid of all the blue light. It definitely doesn't solve the psychological stimulation problem, so it's not a cure all. You still have to think through how to do this a little bit better.

Jean Twenge:

So, I think you can start there. Even if you're completely addicted to Instagram, start with just not having the phone in bed overnight. Then try to move to not looking at it in the hour before bed. And then you can move onto the hardest task of just limiting overall use, which I think is also a good idea, but those ones around specific times are probably even more impactful and also easier to implement. So they're the low-hanging fruit.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What is one question about the next generation that people should be asking that you don't hear many people asking?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. There's a bunch. So, I think one is in terms of values. I think that if you think about how, I mean just as one example, so one practical example of how to market to or how to advertise to this generation, I think there's a lot amiss about how their attitudes are. And it's hard to choose one, I'll probably end up choosing a few. One is I think it's so commonly assumed that, for example, iGen teens are just like Gen X teens, but they're really different. For example, this thing about having overprotective parents, you might think, oh my gosh, iGen teens are going to say, "Forget that. I'm going out of the house anyway." Have huge fights with their parents, that they're not on board with this. And it's the opposite. They're often the ones that say, "I'm not ready to get my driver's license."

Jean Twenge:

They fight with their parents less and they are very interested in safety and they're very, very risk-averse, and I think that hasn't been as understood. I think that's a huge opportunity for reaching them is understanding that aspect of their psychology that they just don't want to take risks. And it also means that if you think they're uniquely entrepreneurial, they're not actually. They're actually a little less interested in owning their own business than Gen X-ers and Boomers were at the same age. And it's because of risk. It seems like too big of a risk to take, and that applies across many areas of their lives, whether it's a physical risk or an emotional risk or a financial risk, they're just not as willing to take those risks as previous generations of young people.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. That's a surprise. Good to know, because I've seen some hustle in the next generation and it's just good to know what the data says. Jean, this has been fascinating. People are going to want to know more. Where's an easy place to connect with you and your work online?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. So, I recently revamped my website. It's www.jeantwenge.com and there's information on there about some of the speaking engagements that I do, both virtually and eventually again in person, traveling to companies and speaking to leaders and educational institutions and everything else. That's one of my big focuses these days, I try to put together a fun talk on these issues and get into the applications for life and for marketing and for managing and all that stuff. And there's also info on there about my research and books as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, this has been fantastic. Jean, thank you so much for being with us today.

Jean Twenge:

Thanks so much for having me. It was a fun conversation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, if you want more, we have show notes at careynieuwhof.com/episode435, including links to all kinds of things. We do that for every episode. We've also got this one on YouTube. If you haven't checked this out on YouTube yet, we have a growing channel over there. And I'm so grateful we get to do this. I've got the last What I'm Thinking About segment for a little while coming up because next episode, we're flipping the switch and we're moving to an Ask Me Anything About Productivity. I want to coach you and give me your questions. Give me your questions about productivity. What are you struggling with at work? At home? With time management? Energy management? Priority management? You can go to careynieuwhof.com/podcast, click on the start recording button, and then ask me anything about productivity.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But for this very last time, I'm going to talk a little bit about Tim Keller's new piece on social media identity in the church that came out earlier in the summer. First I want to give you a sneak peek of the next episode, Louie Giglio and I talked about all things church online in person and well, how to get the negative voices out of your head. Here's an excerpt.

Louie Giglio:

When I have conversations with other leaders, it's amazing to me how the elite leaders talk about things they're working on. And the next tiers down leaders talk about the people they're working with. And it's what separates the... It just separates.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's fascinating.

Louie Giglio:

It's the separator. And it doesn't mean that the elite leaders don't have relational issues, they just somehow have elevated out of security I believe, "I know what God's called me to do and I know what I'm able to do," they've elevated into, "Let me tell you what we're working on." You drop down to your next few tiers of leaders and as you go lower and lower, the conversations are, "Oh man, I got to tell you about this guy I'm working with. This guy is a piece of work." I think the difference between those two people is a sense of security.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So that's next time on the podcast. Of course, if you subscribe, I only listen to podcasts I subscribe to, you will get that free. Thanks for leaving ratings and reviews and being so encouraging. We have a lot of great episodes coming up. Pete Scazzero, David Allen from Getting Things Done. Kendra Adachi of Lazy Genius fame. Chris McChesney from the Four Disciplines of Execution. Amy Porterfield, who has a very popular podcast, Online Marketing Made Easy. And so much more coming up, and you'll get that all automatically if you subscribe.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, for our very last What Am I Thinking About? I'm thinking about an article that Tim Keller wrote a few months ago on his Gospel and Life site about social media identity in the church. And I have written a lot about this and this really evolved my thinking. So if you're a long-time podcast listener, you know in the last two years, I've done a couple of interviews with Tim Keller, and both times he's talked about identity, that that seems to be the defining issue of the day.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And he wrote a new piece that I just want to share a few ideas from because he really made me see how identity and our online personas are connected. And I thought it was so, so helpful. We'll link to the piece in the show notes so you can read the whole article. But let me just give you a couple of thoughts. Because we all know about the algorithm and we all know about confirmation bias and being sucked into the wormhole of extremist thoughts, but what I really like is Tim is actually reviewing another book, which we will link to, it's by a guy named Chris Bail, it's not Christian Bale, and it's about the prism of social media. Really good book I bought, haven't read it yet as I'm recording this, but I will read it over the course of the summer.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But it's about social media identity in the church. The book by Chris Bail is called Breaking the Social Media Prism, and here are just a few thoughts. So the research that Chris Bail has done suggests that really when you think about, why are people so extreme online? He says that actually, Irving Goffman, who he cites, has called that a lot of extremists online have a spoiled identity. In real life, they have not done well. Extremists often lack status in their offline lives and have experienced marginalization and so they jump online and they gain identity, they gain status, and they really get noticed online.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Second, their online personas are often, not always, but often much different and more aggressive than are their personalities. And the argument that they make is that most people really don't have extreme views and that the top 5% to 10% of extreme views in the world get magnified to the majority of social media. So it's really interesting. I've blogged in the past about the middle disappearing. The middle is there, but it kind of gets missed online, right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

And third he says that people who become extremists online are usually strongly opposed to being identified as extremist. In other words, "I'm not an extremist," even though they are in the top 5% to 10% of super liberal or super conservative. To be seen as part of a small extremist or fringe on one end of the broad spectrum is, of course, discrediting, so they exaggerate their own numbers as well as exaggerate the power of numbers on the other extreme side. This eliminates the image of spectrum and replaces it with two armies, a smaller number of really angry people attacking people on the other side, and in the middle.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And since moderates, I thought this was really interesting, are often people with stronger offline identities who have achieved more success and social status and may have a more substantial face to face community, they've got a lot to lose on the internet. We have this conversation on the team all the time, like, "Okay, I don't want to talk about this because, man, if I just get attacked left, right, and center, what can I do that's helpful?" And so I feel this tension, you probably feel this tension. While extremists can only gain status and belonging online, moderates rightly fear that if we blow things up online, it could jeopardize our actual life, because you have a life, I try to have a life. And so while extremists' fragile identities get a great deal of cover on the internet, moderates' identities are threatened by it. I thought that was a really perceptive insight. Thank you, Tim Keller.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And the other thing that really names the dynamic perfectly, that you and I are struggling with online, is that moderates are often attacked with enormous vitriol as moderates. Extremists have to do this in order to create their image of a political reality that supports their chosen identities. So moderates find their views attacked either with bad faith readings, in other words, "I'm going to look at your argument and get the worst charitable spin on it I possibly can," or, by being themselves assigned a social location or identity that they don't recognize as their own.

Carey Nieuwhof:

For example, somebody will say, and this has happened to me, it's probably happened to you, you're really just a "insert here whatever term you want", a Marxist, a supremacist, whatever, or, "As X, you have no right to speak about Y and Z," and then they name you. That's exactly what's happening online. It's really fascinating. So then it gets into what should be done, and Keller says in the last two chapters of Bail's book, he thinks that we can actually make some progress. He has a lot of ideas, but I want to share this one with you, because this is the unofficial mantra of my company, Carey Nieuwhof Communications, is we want this to be a place where the good people can live on the internet. And this is what Keller writes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He says, "I don't believe Christians can escape social media for the time being. Jesus says that when Christians are noted for their unusual love, then the world will come to know he came from the Father," but we are a long, long way from looking at all distinct with the rest of the world on account of our love with the medium of the internet. Could at least some Christians be known for their love on the internet?" I love that question. "And could they take part in the rebuilding of new spaces of public discourse in which we can present our faith confidently and listen to our critics carefully and humbly at the same time. Yes, we could, but will we?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

What a great piece, Tim Keller. Thank you, as always. And I have found that so helpful and this is what we're trying to do with this show, this is what we're trying to do on our website. We're trying to find a place, not where the extremists can gather, because they got their own forums, but where people like you, and I think to some extent people like me, can gather and have meaningful dialogue. We're not going to always agree. We're not going to vote the same way. We're not going to have the same view on everything, but if we can be respectful and kind and loving toward each other and loving toward outsiders, I think we can make a lot of progress.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, that is the last segment of What I'm Thinking About for a little while. Thank you so much. We're back with a fresh episode next time, of course, but I'm going to coach you. So, if you haven't done that yet, head on over to careynieuwhof.com/podcast. Click the little mic icon and leave me a voicemail about what you want me to coach you on when it comes to productivity.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you so, so much for listening, and I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change, and personal growth to help you lead like never before.