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BOOK REVIEW

The Coddling of the American Mind

by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

Reviewed by Mark Harbour, CPA, CFA®, CIMA®

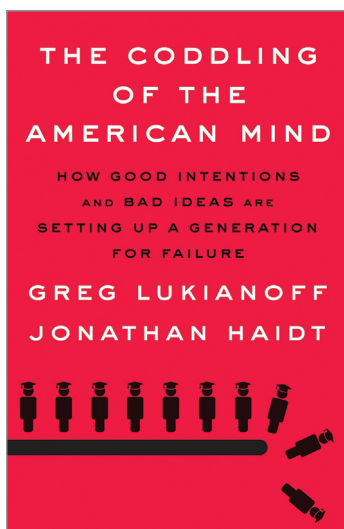


INVESTMENTS & WEALTH INSTITUTE
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The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure

By Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

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No one would talk much in society if they knew how often they misunderstood others.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

On many levels, our society and culture seem more polarized, opinionated, and increasingly oriented toward disruption and discredit than the constructive pursuit of consensus and common ground. Identifying actions that will promote tolerance and constructive dialogue, rather than continued character assassinations and polarized thinking, would seem to be a timely exertion.

In 2015, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt published their article, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” in *The Atlantic*.¹ They argued that many parents, K-12 teachers, and university

professors and administrators have been unknowingly teaching a generation of students to engage in the mental habits common to people who suffer from anxiety and depression. They call this “vindictive protectiveness” and argued that the resulting behaviors make it difficult to have open discussions in which participants can practice the essential skills of critical thinking and civil disagreement. Their definition of “coddling” for this purpose means “overprotecting.”

By 2016, Lukianoff and Haidt were noticing these practices and behaviors at universities in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, too. So they decided to take a deeper dive into the questions they had raised, do additional research, and incorporate the results into a book.

The book has four sections, and the first (chapters 1 through 3) describes three bad ideas, summarized in table 1.

Section two (chapters 4 and 5) describes situations that emerge when people apply the bad ideas. The authors cite several examples, a couple of which you may recall:

- The violent protest catalyzed by a speech by Milo Yiannopoulos at the University of California, Berkeley in February 2017, which protesters aimed to prevent from happening. Attacks on individuals and property resulted in damage estimated at more than \$500,000.

- Events at Evergreen State College, located south of Seattle, Washington, where Professor Bret Weinstein wrote a letter to the faculty opposing plans to extend the college’s traditional “Day of Absence,” during which minority staff, faculty, and students voluntarily avoid campus, to include white members of the community. Resulting protests led to Weinstein and Professor Heather Heying, his wife, resigning from Evergreen and receiving a \$500,000 settlement with the school.

Section three (chapters 6 through 11) describes specific research into aspects of current parenting and teaching that have led to the erosion of critical thinking skills. The authors cite six interacting “threads” that they suggest explain the perspective shifts that have occurred in the “internet generation” or “iGen,” also known as Generation Z:

1. Rising political polarization, cross-party animosity, and negative partisanship. The authors describe how, during the Great Depression and two world wars, there was relative internal unity toward external challenges. But since that time, the larger community has splintered over “tribal” issues, and evolution within the media has fostered this (e.g., no longer does everyone watch one of the “big three” network news programs). Lukianoff and Haidt point to two pieces of research to support their claim:

2. Chapter 13 provides specific suggestions that institutions of higher education can take to become “wiser universities.”
 - › Universities can endorse or adopt the Chicago Statement, which details a commitment to free expression as a vital aspect of academic purpose;⁹ and ban the “heckler’s veto” from campus.¹⁰ Both demonstrate a commitment to free expression.
 - › Enhance selection criteria to broaden the student-body age base and select students from schools more active in teaching intellectual virtues. Include “viewpoint” diversity in all policies to help ensure that a broad range of perspectives will be included in the dialogue.
 - › Orient and educate for productive disagreement—reject fragility due to emotions, reject emotional reasoning, and reject “us versus them” (i.e., everyone fits into either the good category or bad category).
3. The concluding chapter hints at suggestions that would encourage a “wiser society.” The authors mention possible improvements in social media and cite recent moves to hire social psychologists as a potential path to changes for the better. As well, they mention Utah’s adoption of a “free-range parenting” law,¹¹ and emerging research in identity politics aimed at countering tribalism as steps in the right direction.

The Coddling of the American Mind has assembled an informative and valuable batch of resources that explains how the younger generation got so vulnerable and provides practical steps for raising and educating the next generation in a more responsible and healthy way.

We should probably consider, however, reaching beyond parents and educational institutions to government, nonprofits, and perhaps business corporate structures as well. After all, shouldn’t our current leaders—our seasoned and recognized

authorities—demonstrate by their actions the patience and emotional tolerance we feel are lacking? ●

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Additional observations and contributions were made by Larry Brody, MD, one of the founders of the Applied Behavioral Finance Group of CFALA.

ENDNOTES

1. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic* (September 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.
2. “The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider,” Pew Research Center (October 5, 2017), <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/1-partisan-divides-over-political-values-widen/>.
3. “Political Polarization, 1994–2017,” Pew Research Center (October 20, 2017), <https://www.people-press.org/interactives/political-polarization-1994-2017/>.
4. Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What that Means for the Rest of Us* (Atria Books, 2017).
5. Resources cited include Lenore Skenazy, “Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry),” <http://www.freerangekids.com>; Julie Lythcott-Haims, *How to Raise*

an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2016); and Erika Christakis, *The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups* (Penguin Books, 2017).

6. Letter from Northern Michigan University (August 25, 2016), <https://www.thefire.org/fire-letter-to-northern-michigan-university-august-25-2016/>.
7. Jeannie Suk Gersen, “The Trouble with Teaching Rape Law,” *The New Yorker* (December 15, 2014), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trouble-teaching-rape-law>.
8. They cite Lenore Skenazy (see endnote 5); <https://letgrow.org>, a website organized by Skenazy and cofounded with Jonathan Haidt, Peter Gray, and Daniel Shuchman; Robert Leahy, *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* (Harmony, 2006); and Tamar Chansky, *Freeing Your Child From Anxiety: Powerful, Practical Solutions to Overcome Your Child’s Fears, Worries, and Phobias* (Harmony, 2004).
9. Details of the Chicago statement are available at <https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/page/report-committee-freedom-expression>.
10. A heckler’s veto is an impermissible content-based restriction on speech where the speech is prohibited due to an anticipated disorderly or violent reaction of the audience, www.duhaime.org.
11. Utah S.B. 65 redefines the state’s definition of “neglect” so that kids can participate in some unsupervised activities without their parents being charged. The bill was signed into law on March 15, 2019, <https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/static/SB0065.html>.

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by Greg Lukianoff and
Jonathan Haidt
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