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Teen Girls With Smartphones Flirt Most With Depression and Suicide

On Instagram, Snapchat, and via text, the messages wouldn't stop coming to 12-year-old Mallory Grossman's phone. She was a loser with no friends, they wrote. One message even said, "Why don't you kill yourself?"

Not long afterward, the 6th grader did just that, committing suicide on June 14, 2017.

Mallory's story is a tragic part of a larger trend shaping today's generation of teens and young adults, the post-Millennials born after 1995 whom I call iGen and describe in my book of the same name. Around 2012, more teens in large national surveys started to say they felt hopeless and useless—classic symptoms of depression. In a large, government-funded study designed to screen for mental health issues, the number of teens with clinical-level depression rose substantially between 2011 and 2015. Most troubling, the child and teen suicide rate increased sharply.

These trends appear among teens from every background—across the country, among all ethnic groups, and among disadvantaged teens as well as more privileged ones. But there was one major demographic difference: The sudden increase in mental health issues was much more pronounced among girls.

For example, feelings of hopelessness barely budged among boys, but soared upward among girls. Clinical-level depression jumped 67 percent among girls, compared to 20 percent among boys. The suicide rate for 10- to 14-year-old boys doubled in ten years—worrisome enough—but the rate for girls these ages tripled. The suicide rate for girls ages 15 to 19 is now at its highest level since 1975. iGen teen girls are suffering at unprecedented rates.

Why? There are many possible causes, but the largest change in the lives of teens between 2011 and 2015 was the sudden ubiquity of the smartphone. The percentage of

Americans who owned a smartphone crossed 50 percent in late 2012. Social media went from an occasional activity to a nearly constant one, and phones went from something used to make calls to a device always there in teens' hands.

Sure enough, in the large surveys, teens who spent the most time on screens were also more likely to be depressed or have significant risk factors for suicide, such as making a suicide plan or having already attempted suicide. Three other studies—two that followed people over time and one true experiment—found that social media use leads to unhappiness, but unhappiness does not lead to more social media use. Thus, the rise of the smartphone and social media may be at least two reasons why teen mental health has suffered so much, and so suddenly.

If so, it makes sense that girls would be more affected. Girls in every generation have fretted about their appearance and jockeyed for acceptance among their friends. That's probably why girls spend more time on social media and texting—technologies that bring those concerns into girls' lives around the clock. With their phones always there, girls find it difficult to escape constant worries about getting enough likes and followers. Social media in particular provides a moment-by-moment update of who's in and who's out—those indicators of popularity that are so important to girls at this age. Girls can now not only just hear about the party they didn't get invited to, but see the pictures of everyone else having fun without them.

Girls (and women) are also more likely to ruminate, their minds churning with worries. Rumination is a key risk factor for depression, and it is difficult to imagine a more perfect scenario for rumination than a teen girl waiting for a text back from her crush. In the old days when you made a fool out of yourself talking to your crush in person, you could see the look on his face right away. Now it's a waiting game that seems custom-designed to whip up anxiety ("OK, he read the text. Why hasn't he written back? There's the three dots meaning he's typing! Wait, they went away! What does that mean?") Or, worse, he doesn't write back at all. As one 16 year old put it in the social media exposé *American Girls* in reference to boys, "When they ignore your texts ... you're like, Well, why am I even alive?"

"If you wanted to create an environment to churn out really angsty people, we've done it," Cornell University researcher Janis Whitlock told *Time* magazine. "They're in a cauldron of stimulus they can't get away from." Twenty-year-old Faith Ann Bishop, who struggled

with depression and self-injury as a teen, agreed. “We’re the first generation that cannot escape our problems at all,” she said.

Bullying also plays out differently among boys and girls. Boys are more likely than girls to bully each other physically. iGen teens spend less time with each other in person than previous generations did, leaving fewer opportunities for more boy-typical fist fights and physical assaults (which, sure enough, iGen’ers are less likely to get involved in). But bullying among girls has always been more verbal and more social—the perfect fit for cyberbullying, which just happens to be the type most difficult to escape. With everything happening on phones, cyberbullies can reach their victims at home, on vacation, and even when they are trying to sleep.

Not surprisingly, the smartphone era has also seen a spike in the number of teens who don’t sleep enough—and, like the rise in mental health issues, that spike has also been more pronounced among girls. With girls worrying over the latest post on social media right before bed, and with the melatonin-suppressing blue light of the smartphone shining directly into their eyes, their sleep is suffering. This might be another reason why teen mental health has faltered, especially among girls: Lack of sleep is a significant risk factor for depression.

What can parents (and teens) do? As the mother of three girls, I am personally as well as professionally interested in finding solutions. First, put off getting your teen a smartphone as long as you can. The links between social media and unhappiness are stronger among 8th graders compared to older teens. The average child in the U.S. now gets her first smartphone at age 10, so there is plenty of room for change. Second, moderation is the key in smartphone use—use of up to a few hours a day is not linked to mental health issues. Get an app that limits social media, video, and/or texting to, say, 2 hours a day or less, and restricts use of the phone at all during the nighttime hours. Better yet, have a no-phones-in-the-bedroom rule for both teens and adults.

Is it possible that smartphones and social media are not the cause of the rise in teen mental health issues? Yes. However, there is little downside to waiting until kids are mature enough to get them a smartphone or to limiting smartphone use to a reasonable daily level. On the other hand, if we assume that smartphones and social media are having no negative effects, we risk a continued rise in more young people struggling with

depression and the even greater tragedy of more taking their own lives. Teens—especially girls—are telling us that they are suffering, and we need to listen.

Default Question Block

Which of the following rates do you think is HIGHER?

- ☐ The rate of suicide among teenage boys
- ☐ The rate of suicide among teenage girls

How sure are you of your previous answer?

- ☐ Extremely sure
- ☐ Mostly sure
- ☐ Somewhat sure
- ☐ A little sure
- ☐ Not very sure
- ☐ Not sure at all (No confidence in the answer)

If a choice had to be made, which of the following causes should receive MORE funding?

- ☐ Preventing suicide among teenage girls
- ☐ Preventing suicide among teenage boys

Before reading this article, which suicide rate did you think was HIGHER?

- ☐ Neither (rates same)
- ☐ The suicide rate of teenage girls
- ☐ No prior knowledge
- ☐ The suicide rate of teenage boys

Did reading the article change your mind about which suicide rate was higher?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

The article that you read at the beginning is from a major online publication known as the The Daily Beast (<http://thedailybeast.com>).

The suicide rate of teenage boys in the US is 3 to 4 times HIGHER than that of teenage girls according to the United States Centers for Disease Control (<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm6630a6.htm>).

Given this information, what is your opinion of the accuracy of journalism IN GENERAL?

- ☐ Extremely accurate
- ☐ Mostly accurate
- ☐ Somewhat accurate
- ☐ A little accurate
- ☐ Mostly inaccurate
- ☐ Extremely inaccurate

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

What U.S. political party do you identify with?

- ☐ Other

- ☐ Democratic Party
- ☐ None, Independent
- ☐ Green Party
- ☐ Republican Party
- ☐ Libertarian Party

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