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The Great Exchange: How Social Media Convinced a Generation of Girls To Trade Their Mental Health for Social Status

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The Great Exchange:
How Social Media Convinced a Generation of Girls To Trade Their Mental Health for Social
Status

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication

To the women who taught me how to write – and gave me the right and room in which to do it.
Most of all to my mother.

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Introduction

In the midst of the lockdowns of 2021, I noticed a trend: while the adults I knew felt dispirited, angry, and dejected about the lockdowns, racial violence, and political upheaval that erupted during that time, the adolescents around me handled things much more poorly; they were completely unraveling. The main difference between the adults and the adolescents in my life seemed to be that the adults had the ability to internally regulate their emotions, while the adolescents didn't. When I started asking around, I found out that almost every Gen Zer (born 1995 - 2012) I knew was taking either prescribed or illicit psychotropic drugs. During the lockdowns, two students from my small primary school took their own lives, and when I told other people my age about it, not a single one was surprised; they told me stories of their own friends' suicides. At my cousin's West Coast public high school, one student jumped to their death from the same spot on the roof every year (after a net was installed they changed locations, but the suicides continued).

I started asking my professors, family members, and friends what they were noticing in the Gen Zers they knew, and learned that they were all observing the same thing – not only were they seeing an unprecedented level of mental illness among members of Gen Z, but they were seeing other similarities in the Gen Zers they knew as well – lack of resilience, widespread social anxiety, and a decrease in academic performance. What everyone I knew was seeing was also backed up by the data: From 2007 to 2019, there was a 60% increase in adolescents who reported

having a major depressive episode,¹² and suicide rates for adolescents leapt almost 60% from 2007 to 2018.³ Between 2011 and 2015, youth psychiatric visits to hospital emergency rooms for depression, anxiety, and behavioral challenges increased by 28%.⁴ In 2021, the US Surgeon General published a report warning about the rising rates of mental illness among Gen Z.⁵ In that report, he also explained that while the pandemic and lockdowns drastically intensified the mental health crisis, the mental health crisis predated those measures.

During this time I also saw that the mental health crisis was hitting girls hard and that they were suffering in a different way than boys. Boys have historically attempted and successfully committed suicide at a much higher rate than girls,⁶ and while the suicide rate for both adolescent boys and girls has been on the rise since 1999,⁷ the rising suicide rates are “...more pronounced for girls...three times as many 12-to 14-year-old girls killed themselves in 2015 than in 2007, compared to twice as many boys.”⁸ And according to the CDC’s Youth Risk

¹ “Mental and Behavioral Health,” by Health Resources and Services Administration’s Maternal and Child Health Bureau, *NSCH Data Brief*, September 2020,

<https://mchb.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/mchb/data-research/nsch-data-brief-2019-mental-bh.pdf>.

² Abigail Geiger, “A Growing Number of American Teenagers – Particularly Girls – Are Facing Depression,” *Pew Research Center*, April 14, 2024,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/07/12/a-growing-number-of-american-teenagers-particularly-girls-are-facing-depression/#:~:text=In%202017%2C%2013%25%20of%20U.S.,on%20Drug%20Use%20and%20Health.>

³ Sally C. Curtin, “State Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2018,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, vol. 69–69, August 11, 2020,

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr69/nvsr-69-11-508.pdf>.

⁴ Vivek H. Murthy and U.S. Surgeon General, *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory*, 2021,

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

⁵ Murthy and U.S. Surgeon General, *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory*.

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6439147/>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8699163/>

⁸ 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*.

Behavior Survey, in 2021 American high school girls reported that their mental health was “most of the time or always not good” at a rate over double that of boys reporting the same distress.

They also seriously considered, made a plan for, and attempted suicide at twice the rate of boys.⁹

I wanted to understand what was causing this stark mental health decline in Gen Z girls, and I started looking for answers that would explain the symptom I had originally noticed: Gen Z girls’ lack of ability to regulate their internal state. Emotional dysregulation can be caused by experiencing a traumatic event,¹⁰ and while the pandemic was deeply traumatizing for many people, it didn’t account for the complete breakdown of such a large proportion of my generation – especially as older generations were affected as well but maintained a level of resilience that Gen Zers couldn’t achieve. I hypothesized that low levels of emotional resilience were preventing Gen Zers from being able to emotionally regulate themselves when faced with the fear, grief, and anger of living through a pandemic.

Wondering why my generation lacked the emotional resilience of older generations, and because the population I was particularly interested in was mentally ill upper-middle-class girls, I turned to the work of Suniya Luthar, a psychologist and researcher who had conducted a series of landmark studies in the 1990s on mental illness in upper-middle-class adolescents. Originally, Luthar had set out to study a different population: inner city students who were exhibiting depression, rule-breaking behavior, and drug and alcohol abuse. As a control group, Luthar tracked adolescents in nearby upper-middle-class suburban communities. At the end of her study,

⁹“Youth Online: High School YRBS - United States 2021 Results | DASH | CDC.”

¹⁰ Bessel A. Van Der Kolk et al., “Proposal to Include a Developmental Trauma Disorder Diagnosis For Children and Adolescents in DSM-V,” 2009, <https://www.complexttrauma.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Complex-Trauma-Resource-3-Joseph-Spina-zzola.pdf>.

Luthar found that her control group was scoring worse on almost every measure: the affluent suburban teenagers were turning to illicit substances more frequently, they were more likely to be clinically depressed, and they showed a greater number of symptoms of clinical anxiety.¹¹ After subsequent follow-up studies which validated her original findings, Luthar concluded that the aspect of child rearing in affluent households that was causing worse mental health outcomes in their teenagers was an unrelenting pressure on children to perform – in school, sports, clubs, and extracurriculars – and isolation from their parents, particularly from their mothers. Intrigued by Luthar’s findings, and having experienced the pressure of an upper-class private prep school firsthand, I wanted to find out if upper-middle-class Gen Zers had experienced more pressure than Luthar’s subjects, who had been high school students in the 1990s, and if that could account for the drop in resilience. One measurable aspect of pressure on upper-middle-class kids is the standards that parents and teachers demand of them, as well as the standards that the students hold themselves to. This particular type of pressure was measured in one of the first studies on generational differences in expectations of students.

Psychology researchers Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill looked at expectations of students from 1989-2016¹² and found a 33 percent increase in the level of “socially prescribed” expectations placed on students by society and by parents.¹³ Those socially prescribed expectations were then internalized by students and became their own unrealistic goals for themselves. Thomas Curran said of these results, “These findings suggest that recent generations

¹¹ Suniya S. Luthar and Bronwyn E. Becker, “Privileged but Pressured? A Study of Affluent Youth,” *Child Development* 73, no. 5 (January 1, 2002): 1593–1610, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00492>.

¹² “Perfectionism Among Young People Significantly Increased Since 1980s, Study Finds,”

<https://www.apa.org>, January 2, 2018,

<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/01/perfectionism-young-people>.

¹³ “Perfectionism Among Young People Significantly Increased Since 1980s, Study Finds.”

of college students have higher expectations of themselves and others than previous generations. Today's young people are competing with each other in order to meet societal pressures to succeed and they feel that perfectionism is necessary in order to feel safe, socially connected and of worth."¹⁴ Upper-middle-class Gen Z students are feeling increased pressure to perform academically; however, adolescents don't seem to be actually able to achieve at the levels that they are being pressured to reach. For example, while enrollment in undergraduate, graduate and professional programs has increased by almost 50 percent in the United States since 1995,¹⁵ the gap between high school seniors who *expect* to earn a college degree, and those who actually go on to earn it, doubled between 1976 and 2000 and is still growing.¹⁶

I wondered what could account for the steep increase in pressure from parents for their kids to do well in school, and why parents were pushing their kids to achieve, even as it became obvious that their kids were becoming more emotionally fragile. I found an answer in the book, *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids* by economists and researchers Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti. In *Love, Money, and Parenting*, the authors describe the historic connections that exist between economic conditions and parenting styles. They divide parenting styles into "permissive" and "intensive,"¹⁷ based off of Diana Baumrind's original four parenting styles: permissive, uninvolved, authoritative, and authoritarian. Doepke and Zilibotti grouped "permissive and uninvolved" into "permissive" and

¹⁴ "Perfectionism Among Young People Significantly Increased Since 1980s, Study Finds."

¹⁵ Paul F. Campos, "The Real Reason College Tuition Costs so Much," *The New York Times*, April 4, 2015, 1–4, https://oip.uprm.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Anejo-C_Articulo-NY-Times.pdf.

¹⁶ "Perfectionism Among Young People Significantly Increased Since 1980s, Study Finds."

¹⁷ Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, "Chapter One: The Economics of Parenting Style," in *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 21–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77fr1.5>.

“authoritative” and “authoritarian” into “intensive.” To dramatically oversimplify the styles: intensive parents interfere with their children’s choices, and permissive parents do not.

While under normal conditions, most parents use a combination of intensive and permissive styles, the authors found that, “the choice between permissive and intensive parenting hinges on [the parents’] socioeconomic environment,”¹⁸ and that there was a strong link between economic inequality and intensive parenting styles, “...both in terms of changes in parenting over time and variation in parenting across countries,”¹⁹ because parents in a climate of economic inequality fear that their child has more to lose from their poor choices. For example, “... in a society where school dropouts earn only slightly less than doctors and engineers, parents can afford a more relaxed attitude toward education, and thus, permissive parenting should be more prevalent. In fact, an intensive parenting style... in such a society may unnecessarily constrain the child’s sense of independence, preventing her from discovering her true talent (e.g., choosing a profession that best suits her). In contrast, in a society where education and effort are highly rewarded and where people with little education struggle, parents will be highly motivated to push their children hard, even at the cost of repressing their personal development.”²⁰ Simply put, “When rising inequality increases the stakes in education, parents respond by choosing intensive parenting styles that are conducive to their children’s success.”²¹

¹⁸ Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, “Chapter One: The Economics of Parenting Style,” in *Love, Money, and Parenting*

¹⁹ Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, “Chapter One: The Economics of Parenting Style,” in *Love, Money, and Parenting*

²⁰ Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, “Chapter One: The Economics of Parenting Style,” in *Love, Money, and Parenting*

²¹ Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, “Chapter Three: Parenting Styles Around the Contemporary World,” in *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 85–124, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77fr1.7>.

In the US in the years between the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1970s, substantial economic growth led to increased income across the board for lower, middle, and upper-class families. However, starting in the 1970s, income growth for lower and middle class families slowed dramatically, while income growth for upper-middle-class and upper-class households continued to grow, creating a large income gap between the lower and upper classes.

²² At the same time, the gap in wealth accumulation ballooned; according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “...the share of wealth held by the top 1 percent rose from 30 percent in 1989 to 39 percent in 2016, while the share held by the bottom 90 percent fell from 33 percent to 23 percent.”²³

As Doepke and Zilibotti predicted, as income inequality increased after the 1970s, so did intensive parenting styles in the US, with two caveats: first, intensive parenting increased most dramatically in middle- and upper-class families while staying relatively stable in lower-class families. Second, the increase in intensity of parenting was dictated primarily by an increase in time spent engaging with kids in academic activities.²⁴ Intensive parenting was the strongest among the most affluent and well-educated parents, who had the time and money to parent intensively, were having fewer children, and were the most afraid of a social decline in their children because the “...slope of potential social decline is steepest at the top.”²⁵ So, how did

²²Chad Stone et al., “A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality,” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/a-guide-to-statistics-on-historical-trends-in-income-inequality>.

²³Stone et al., “A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality.”

²⁴ Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti, “Chapter Two: The Rise of Helicopter Parents,” in *Love, Money, and Parenting: How Economics Explains the Way We Raise Our Kids* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 51–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77fr1.6>.

²⁵Jennifer Wallace, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic -- and What We Can Do About It* (Portfolio, 2023).

academically-intensive parenting, or “achievement parenting,”²⁶ lead to the reduced emotional resilience that I was seeing in my peers during the pandemic?

Jennifer Breheny Wallace, in her bestseller, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It* writes about the ways that achievement parenting teaches children that they matter if and when they achieve, signaling to them that status is the way to earn love. She writes about the effects of achievement culture on adolescents: “When you live in a culture of high achievers with strict definitions of success, when friends are competing for the same leadership positions, for the same teams, for the same acceptances to increasingly exclusive colleges, you grow up in an environment of outsized expectations.”²⁷ The end result, Breheny writes, is that Gen Z adolescents grew up believing that “...their worth is contingent on their performance – their GPA, the number of social media followers they have, their college brands – not for who they are deep in their core. They feel they only *matter* to the adults in their lives, their peers, the larger community, if they are successful.”²⁸ For a girl to believe that she only matters to her parents if she can succeed in a game of college admissions with shrinking odds²⁹ is very highly stressful. If positive parental attention is earned through academic success,

²⁶ Academically-intensive parenting, or achievement parenting, refers to a parenting style that is characterized neither by classically authoritative or authoritarian styles, instead combining aspects of both: low acceptance of kids' desires, high involvement in their lives, high control over their actions and low autonomy granted to them.

²⁷ Wallace, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic -- and What We Can Do About It*.

²⁸ Wallace, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic -- and What We Can Do About It*.

²⁹ Rachael Perrotta, “Record-low 5.6% of Applicants Admitted to Class of 2027, Admission Rates Continue to Decline - the Vanderbilt Hustler,” *The Vanderbilt Hustler - The Official Student Newspaper of Vanderbilt University* (blog), April 9, 2024, <https://vanderbilthustler.com/2023/04/20/record-low-5-6-of-applicants-admitted-to-class-of-2027-admission-rates-continue-to-decline>,

John Rosenberg, “Harvard College Admits Class of 2027 | Harvard Magazine,” Harvard Magazine, February 5, 2024, <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2023/03/harvard-college-admits-class-of-2027>.

Yezen Saadah, “NYU Acceptance Rate Drops to 8% for Class of 2027,” Washington Square News, March 29, 2023, <https://nyunews.com/news/2023/03/29/nyu-admission-rate-class-of-2027/>.

a child becomes extremely sensitive to her failings in school and beyond, and is never encouraged to develop the resilience to handle failure or feelings of failure. Instead, she is taught never to fail. Breheny writes, “Criticism feels like rejection, a loss of love. The [parent-child] relationship transforms from a safe place into a danger zone. The fear of not being loveable enough as they are can push a child to pursue or present an idealized, perfect version of themselves in order to win the security and affection they crave.”³⁰ In a meritocratic family and social environment, children learn that the social and economic status that comes as a result of success is the equivalent to worthiness or loveability. In this way, achievement parenting creates much less resilient children.

In addition to the changes in parenting which led to a focus on achievement, there was yet another change in parenting that took place at the same time, with equally important consequences for Gen Z’s emotional resilience. At the same time as parents were starting to spend more academic time with their children, parenting was becoming more intensive in another way: a stronger focus on physical and emotional safety. The start of “safety parenting” can be traced to 1981, when seven-year-old Adam Walsh was tragically murdered by a serial killer, leading to the creation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the start of exhibiting the pictures of missing kids on milk cartons, an increased awareness of child abduction, and the subsequent decline of kids spending unsupervised time outdoors.³¹ Even though abduction of children is one of the rarest crimes, and almost every type of violent crime has decreased dramatically since the early 1990s, perceptions of levels of crime and child

³⁰ Wallace, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic -- and What We Can Do About It*.

³¹Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin Press, 2018).

abduction have not changed,³² and kids haven't ever regained the freedoms that they had before the 1990s.

The potential upsides of unsupervised time were perceived as minimal by parents who felt that it would involve both the risk of physical harm to their children and the loss of educational time that kids could spend “getting ahead.” The decrease in free time has had three results for Gen Z's emotional resilience: first, Gen Z kids received messaging that unsupervised time outdoors was unsafe, whereas time spent indoors and online was safe, leading to kids adopting fearful ideas about the outside world that would encourage them to stay indoors, even as adults. For girls, this was more pronounced as warnings of sexual assault were issued in addition to the general threats of abduction and murder. This meant that Gen Z spent less time doing things alone, such as walking or biking alone to school, than any other previous generation.³³

In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt write, “Children today have far more restricted childhoods, on average, than those enjoyed by their parents, who grew up in far more dangerous times and yet had many more opportunities to develop [their resilience]. Compared with previous generations...[Gen Zers] have been deprived of unsupervised time for play and exploration. They have missed out on many of the challenges, negative experiences, and minor risks that help children develop into strong, competent, and independent adults.” Because as young children Gen Zers experienced fewer scary situations

³² Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin Press, 2018).

³³ The rise in intensive parenting is reflected in the percentage of kids walking or biking to school alone in the US, which decreased from 41 percent in 1969 to 13 percent in 2001. Among six- to- eight- year- old Americans, free playtime decreased by 25 percent between 1981 and 1997, whereas time spent on homework more than doubled.

alone and away from their parents, they never had the opportunity to develop the emotional resilience which would have allowed them to self-regulate in the face of fear and danger.

Additionally, more intensive parenting has meant less time for resilience-developing free play for Gen Z kids. Peter Gray, a psychology researcher and author of *Free to Learn*, writes that free play is an “...activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself.”³⁴ According to Gray, free play creates an avenue through which children learn resilience through emotional regulation. Gray writes that children in free play, “...[dose] themselves with moderate degrees of fear, as if deliberately learning how to deal with both the physical and emotional challenges of the moderately dangerous conditions they generate...All such activities are fun to the degree that they are moderately frightening. If too little fear is induced, the activity is boring; if too much is induced, then it becomes no longer play but terror. Nobody but the child herself knows the right dose.”³⁵

Play develops the emotional core of the child, which allows her to modulate her experiences and naturally build a higher tolerance for stress, as old games become less scary and therefore less fun, and new, scarier games are introduced as children grow older. Gray writes, “Individuals suffering from anxiety disorders describe losing emotional control as one of their greatest fears. They are afraid of their own fear, and therefore small degrees of fear generated by mildly threatening situations lead to high degrees of fear generated by the person’s fear of losing

³⁴ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin Press, 2018).

³⁵ Peter Gray, “The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents,” *American Journal of Play* 3–3, no. 4 (season-01 2011): 443–45, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ985541.pdf>.

control.” Free play allows a child to become acquainted with her own fear, to learn how to manage it, and to build an internal resilience to what, over time, becomes a familiar and manageable feeling.

Additionally, free play develops children’s social abilities because it is voluntary, and so there is always the risk that a playmate might leave the game. This requires children to pay attention to how others are feeling and what they are thinking if they want the game to continue. To engage in free play with other children, a child is required to emotionally regulate herself, read social cues and modulate her behavior based on them, and to decide for herself if she wants to leave or join a game. Spending time in free play also creates a narrative for the child around what things are worth doing: as free play is definitionally done for its own sake (conducted with clear goals, rules, and stakes, but not as a means to any other end), giving the child time for free play tells the child that intrinsic goals are valuable and should be pursued. The opposite is also true; when free play is interrupted and replaced with scheduled activities with the goal of worldly success, it tells the child that extrinsic and status-based³⁶ goals are what are valuable and worth pursuing.

As the time that Gen Z girls have spent with their parents and in scheduled sports, clubs, extracurriculars and on homework and technology has increased, free play has declined sharply, and girls are losing the opportunity to be exposed to the stress that would make them stronger, more socially competent, and more likely to pursue the activities that bring them fulfillment.³⁷

Gray apparently agrees with what so many professors have explained to me, as he writes,

³⁶ In upper middle class US households, these are specifically status-based goals, not survival goals.

³⁷ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin Press, 2018).

“Students are prepared academically [for college] but they’re not prepared to deal with day-to-day life, which comes from a lack of opportunity to deal with ordinary problems.”³⁸

It is not surprising, then, that the inability of adolescents to emotionally regulate themselves has only intensified in the generations since Luthar completed her studies, as economic inequality and intensive parenting have steadily increased since the 1990s. Using a framework consisting of an increase in achievement parenting (that taught Gen Z kids to equate success with love) and a decrease in time spent in resilience-building independent activities and free play, it was easier to understand how Gen Zers could be less resilient and less able to emotionally regulate themselves than other generations in the face of a global pandemic. However, this didn’t explain why girls were suffering more from a variety of mental and emotional symptoms, including emotional dysregulation.

The last explanatory thread that I explored was the role of social media in the adolescent mental health crisis. Although social media has been suggested as a main cause of the adolescent mental health crisis many times (most wholly explored by Jean Twenge, the psychologist and researcher who makes this claim in her 452-page book about Gen Z), this argument just wasn’t convincing to me, as it rested in the negative effects of self-comparison among women on social media (which has existed for women for much longer than the social internet has been around) and cyberbullying (which can be solved by shutting off the computer). However, it was through reading Naomi Wolf’s seminal feminist book, *The Beauty Myth*, that I realized that the researchers, physicians, psychologists, and sociologists who have written about Gen Z girls’

³⁸ Jane E. Brody the New York Times Worcester Telegram & Gazette, “Advice From ‘America’s Worst Mom,’” *Telegram & Gazette*, January 21, 2015, <https://www.telegram.com/story/news/local/north/2015/01/21/advice-from-america-s-worst/35483087007/>.

relationship with social media have, for the most part, misunderstood the relationship between social media, achievement culture, and patriarchal cultural norms, which, when taken together, make social media a seductive but ultimately harmful place for adolescent girls.

In the following chapters I explore the ways in which the relationship between achievement and safety parenting has primed girls to use social media in a way that specifically lends itself to creating emotional dysregulation.

Chapter 1: The Alienation of the Self As A Risk Factor For Emotional Dysregulation

“Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it’s all a male fantasy: that you’re strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren’t catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you’re unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.”

– Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*

“It’s a very difficult era in which to be a person, just a real, actual person, instead of a collection of personality traits selected from an endless Automat of characters.”

– Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

Social media encourages the fragmentation of the self and the creation of an “alienated self” that can be exhibited on social media. The alienated self seems to inhabit a life similar to the “true self” in some ways; but its lifestyle is ultimately idealized, framed and edited. The job of the alienated self is to produce the social capital that the real self can then use. However, that social capital is often mistaken for connection and meaning, with the assumption that more social capital means more worth. If more worth means more loveability, the alienated self is suddenly a much more viable, much more loveable self. Adolescents will then choose to try to adopt the alienated self as their own self in real life, in order to garner more social capital. By internalizing a personal brand that was built for social media with the goal of accumulating social capital, the adolescent girl internalizes the lesson of the social internet: that neither bravery nor vulnerability lead to status and connection, and the value of a person rests in her ability to produce social capital. The adoption of the alienated self inevitably leads to the reiteration of status as it has been adopted as identity.

Social Media and Social Scripts

Recently, on three separate occasions, men asked me for my Instagram. When I told them I didn't have an Instagram account, they looked lost. I offered to give them my phone number, which they proceeded to take and subsequently ignore. I don't always understand internet culture, and so after the third time I experienced this same strange interaction, I asked a social-media savvy friend about it. My friend explained to me that there's currently a very specific set of steps to flirting/asking someone out, and it utilizes social media, specifically Instagram:

- (1) **Following a crush on Instagram:** This does not betray vulnerability yet, just shows mild interest and the desire to be acquaintances/friends.
- (2) **Stalking a crush Instagram:** Looking through all of the crush's photos from their past, understanding what kind of person they are, their likes and dislikes, and their general persona. Being careful to not accidentally "like" any of them, or else they will know that you were looking. Although it is, in the least, reasonable, or at the most, expected, that you will stalk them, it is still mortifying to be caught doing it.
- (3) **"Liking" the crush's stories:** This is the first step, the equivalent to "making a move," because "liking" someone's stories is generally reserved for good friends and crushes. "Liking" a selfie or a revealing photo is, obviously, more suggestive and a stronger move. (Subjects of the crush may try to goad objects into liking their story by posting material relevant to that person, or by posting a revealing photo).
- (4) **Reacting to the crush's stories:** This is the next move, and it includes commenting and thereby starting a conversation about some topic that they've alluded to in their story.

Importantly, this takes place only after you are confident that you understand the person and that they might like you back, and guarantees that you don't enter any real life situation blind.

By providing a highly specific social script for asking someone out on a date, social media has removed doubt and vulnerability from the experience for both people. In a heteronormative setup, a man asking a woman out on a date, the man now has an escalating set of tasks that, when completed accurately, all but guarantee his success without embarrassment. It also removes the necessity of vulnerability for the woman being asked out. The woman has the option of creating a persona online that the man would have already looked at in order to understand *how she wanted to be seen*. Through social media, the responsibility of intelligibility is placed entirely on the woman, which gives her an unprecedented amount of autonomy in controlling how she is perceived.

The ability of a woman to control how she is seen in a world that awards her status based on her appearance used to be a fantasy reserved for those women who occupied powerful positions on the world stage and had to maintain status as public figures: Marchioness Isabella d'Este of Italy and the heirless and aging Queen Elizabeth I both had portraits distributed depicting their youth, even as they aged.³⁹ Social scripts and carefully curated social media profiles have now allowed any woman with a smartphone the opportunity to curate a stranger's experience of her. In this process she might gain control over a patriarchal paradigm wherein men do the

³⁹ Jonathan Jones, "Elizabeth I's Portrait Brings Us Face to Face With the Ravages of Age," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2013/feb/13/elizabeth-first-portrait-face-age-unhappiness>.

looking and women get looked at, but she loses the opportunity to be seen and appreciated for who she really is.

A social media profile is a performance of a girl's identity, and it creates a kind of self-imposed reification by allowing her to interact with others as the *idea* of herself – what I will refer to, to borrow a term from Marx, as her “alienated self.”⁴⁰ The alienated self that each girl creates is dictated by the identity that she thinks will create the most social currency for herself and that is most viable given the tools that she has at her disposal. For example, an exuberant and joyful girl cannot garner social capital from an “emo” aesthetic any more than a girl in poverty can garner social capital from a rich kid aesthetic. The reward for the creation of the alienated self, of course, is social inclusion and social currency, both of which are perceived to be of high importance in adolescence.

Just as an organization or corporation must choose a set of aesthetic values with which to identify in order to make themselves recognizable and distinct, adolescent girls on the social internet must choose a set of aesthetic values that they identify with in order to efficiently and effectively sell others on their personal brand. Because it is impossible to fully represent the self in a set of photos, captions, or aesthetic values, social media users must make choices as to how to effectively fragment the self so as to display the fragments that are the most socially viable on the social internet.

Course Contact, the digital marketing platform, explains it like this on their website:

“Personal branding is the conscious crafting of a person's public identity, which includes their

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” by Marx/Engels, trans. Martin Milligan, *Marx. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Progress Publishers, 1959), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>.

image, their story, and their position within particular communities. Branding is deliberate, but it doesn't have to be inauthentic. In fact, personal brands best succeed when they're perceived as genuine self-expressions... Everyone needs personal branding because everyone has a personal brand.”⁴¹ After the successful creation of a personal brand for a girl's alienated self, she takes herself online and enters the open market of social media where alienated selves can advertise, trade, and sell social and erotic capital. Each user can increase others' social capital by giving them “likes” and comments, attention and validation. Every idea and aesthetic must, therefore, be commercially viable on the social market in order to be posted. It is common practice, therefore, for a girl to take down a photo if it does not reach a threshold of “likes” in a designated amount of time (sometimes 100, 500, or 1,000 “likes,” depending on how many followers she has), similar to how a company might pull a poorly selling or defective product, so as to not ruin the image of their brand.

The performance of the alienated self determines its ability to produce social capital; therefore, the value of the self becomes equivalent to its ability to produce value. In the same way that Marx wrote about the value of the worker in a factory as defined by his ability to produce value for the owner of the factory, the value of the performative self is based on its ability to create social capital for the true self. Marx wrote that, “Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is [political economy's] principal thesis. The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre or to balls, or to the pub, and the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you will be able to save and the greater will become your treasure which neither moth nor rust will corrupt—your capital. The less you are, the less

⁴¹ Megan Smith, “Personal Branding: The What, Why, and How,” Constant Contact, November 14, 2023, <https://www.constantcontact.com/blog/personal-branding/>.

you express your life, the more you have, the greater is your alienated life and the greater is the saving of your alienated being.”⁴² If someone’s worth is directly tied to their social capital, then the way to be worth more is to accumulate more social capital. Thus, as you “express your life” less in an authentic way (through vulnerability, failure, bravery, et cetera), the status of your alienated self grows greater and your life looks better from the outside; as your social capital grows, your alienated life becomes greater. As a girl’s social media persona becomes more well-curated, and the ideals of the alienated self are better embodied, the strength and authenticity of the real self is weakened. As the true self becomes weaker, which is a necessary part of making the alienated self stronger, the ability to emotionally regulate decreases.

Many adults who use the social internet seem to balance this quite well, sharing some photos on social media, but relying on offline friends to fulfill their strongest emotional needs. However, the Gen Z adolescent who embodies the flawless and invulnerable alienated self brings social media into her real life and the line between online and offline becomes blurred. By constantly acting out the performance of a perfected self, a girl can never feel loved or seen for her true self; no matter how much adoration and validation she receives it will never satisfy her desire to be truly seen and loved. This will lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which are both stressors and precursors to emotional dysregulation.

Marx said that working in a factory, “...estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside of him, from his spiritual essence, his human existence.”⁴³ Indeed, the same thing happens as the alienated self works harder to achieve social capital; the work demands that value be placed outside of our own and others’ authentic selves or “spiritual essence.” Collecting

⁴²Marx, “Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.”

⁴³ Marx, “Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.”

capital to accrue status is similar to what Marx understood as “commodity fetishism”; through obsession with objects as physical representations of labor, instead of the labor itself, objects become more important than people as the nexus for social connection. We then exchange the universal commodity of money for the commodities that we want and need. In the context of social capital, instead of relying on authentic connection, we use social capital to “buy” the validation and acceptance, demonstrated by “likes” and comments on our posts from other people, who are also using their social capital.

Just as it would be impossible for the factory worker living under capitalism to exist without an alienated self that earns capital, it seems impossible for the Gen Z adolescent who lives in a status-based culture to exist without an alienated self that earns social capital. The “commodity fetishism” of capitalism exists as “status-fetishism” in status culture. In the same way that respect for labor is minimized and replaced with respect for the artificial product of labor (capital), in the Gen Z female adolescent’s mind, respect for authentic connection is minimized and replaced with respect for the artificial product of connection (status). However, neither capital nor status are inherently meaningful and both types of alienation lead to self-estrangement as we embody the alienated self more fully and leave behind the true self.

Even if someone claims to not believe in the value of accumulating social capital from the social internet, to participate in the transaction is to assert the value of the currency. Even girls who don’t start using social media with the goal of creating an alienated self are continually reiterating the importance of their alienated self to themselves when they use social media. Because the game is so high-stakes, and the only way for a girl to increase her capital in the game is by perfectly performing the role of her alienated self, the line between the performative,

alienated self and the true self blurs, and the alienated self becomes internalized. Internalizing the alienated self might in fact be a productive strategy in strengthening one's brand, because it helps to ensure that a girl won't be caught doing something "off-brand" (a common phrase for someone doing something at odds with their brand). If the value of a girl is measured by the amount of social capital that she generates, the salability of the "alienated" self becomes more valuable than the authenticity of the "true" self. When adolescents incorrectly believe that their worth comes from their social capital, they will be tempted to model the true self after the alienated self, and present themselves as their perfectly flawless alienated self. This modeling leads to two outcomes. First, it shuts girls off from the feelings of loving and being loved. If girls create a personality formed around a branded identity, one that doesn't allow for real love, they will not allow themselves to ever be deeply seen and known for their authentic selves. To only ever be loved and valued for an alienated self leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Second, as one of the defining characteristics of the alienated self is a total lack of what Marx called "spiritual essence", when a girl tries to model herself after her alienated self, she is required to externalize her locus of control,⁴⁴ and thus give up her drive, ambition and non-conformity. Judgment from others becomes her only measure of success in the world. Naomi Wolf writes that, "...young women today feel vulnerable to judgment; if a harsh sentence is passed (or even suspected or projected), it is not her reputation that suffers so much as the stability of her moral universe."⁴⁵ Reputation means (and is worth) more for adolescent girls than

⁴⁴ The locus of control, either internal or external, refers to someone's perceived agency over their own life. Someone with an internal locus of control believes that they can affect their life circumstances and they are much more likely to try than someone with an external locus of control, who believes that they do not have the power to change their life circumstances.

⁴⁵ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (Harper Collins, 2009).

for adult women, as adolescents are experiencing a heightened sense of self-consciousness and accompanying heightened feelings of shame, and a reliance on peers to determine self-worth,⁴⁶ as well as a conflation of social acceptance with morality. In Lisa Wade's description of life on college campuses, she writes, "Men's opinion of women's bodies symbolized more than just rejection; it was an *existential threat*."⁴⁷ One of her students, whom she had asked to journal about their experiences with sex and attraction on campus, wrote that feeling unattractive "...left me feeling like I was nothing."⁴⁸ Once the locus of control has been externalized, others hold the power to make the girl a non-entity, meaning that she must work harder for their approval. This is an incredibly tenuous and stressful position for the adolescent girl to exist in. For adolescents, but also for adults, believing in an internal locus of control is directly related to psychological well-being,⁴⁹ while an externalized locus of control is associated with a lack of emotional regulation⁵⁰ and can lead to suicide attempts.⁵¹

Additionally, if a man's romantic rejection feels like existential threat, the stakes are then very high to comply and compete for existence through beauty and thinness. Disordered eating, itself a symptom of emotional dysregulation, is also the cause of a lack of ability to emotionally regulate, as not consuming enough calories can cause emotional dysregulation.

⁴⁶David Elkind calls this "adolescent egocentrism", and it is characterized by the adolescents inability to differentiate between what they think others think about them and what others actually do think about them. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1127100>

⁴⁷ Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).

⁴⁸ Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).

⁴⁹ http://jpcp.uswr.ac.ir/browse.php?a_id=612&slc_lang=en&sid=1&ftxt=1&html=1

⁵⁰Nora Hope et al., "The Association Between Locus of Control, Emotion Regulation and Borderline Personality Disorder Features," *Personality and Mental Health* 12, no. 3 (April 2, 2018): 241–51, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pmh.1419>.

⁵¹Charles E. M. Pearce and Graham Martin, "Locus of Control as an Indicator of Risk for Suicidal Behaviour Among Adolescents," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 88, no. 6 (December 1, 1993): 409–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.1993.tb03482.x>.

Starvation

“One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.”

– Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Disordered eating in the form of cutting calories has direct effects on a person's ability to emotionally regulate herself, get along with others, and function cognitively. In the famous 1944 Minnesota Starvation experiment, healthy college-aged men were given, on average, 1570 calories per day for six months and as a result lost about 25% of their body weight. Researchers found that, “...participants who had been mostly extraverted in their social life, became isolated and described themselves as feeling socially inadequate.... during the semi-starvation and the rehabilitative phases, participants were recorded developing new anxiety and depressive symptoms not present at the beginning of the study...[researchers] recorded significant increases on the Hysteria, Hypochondriasis, and Depression scales indicating increased anxiety related to somatic concerns and depressive symptoms. Especially during the semi-starvation period, some participants endorsed becoming more sensitive and argumentative with others...”⁵² Reports of communities that have been chronically starved during wartime describe similar cognitive and emotional decline that occur when daily calorie intake rests below 1200 calories, a traditional American weight reduction plan.

Researchers S.C. Wooley and O.W. Wooley explain that concern with weight, even without dieting, leads to, “...a virtual collapse of self-esteem and sense of effectiveness”; *with* dieting and the accompanying “prolonged and periodic calorie restriction” the men in the study developed a distinctive personality characterized by “passivity, anxiety, and emotionality,” some

⁵²“The Starvation Experiment,” Duke Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, May 9, 2023, <https://psychiatry.duke.edu/blog/starvation-experiment>.

of the same symptoms as emotional dysregulation. Thus, identification with the alienated self creates emotional dysregulation in girls in three ways: first as a direct result of the loneliness that arises from never feeling truly seen as they really are; second, as a result of an externalized locus of control; and third, as a result of calorie restriction.

Chapter 2: Identification with Psychopathy As A Risk Factor For Emotional Dysregulation

“Apart from economic payoffs, social status seems to be the most important incentive and motivating force of social behavior.”

- John Harsanyi, Economist and Nobel Prize Laureate

While it is now all but defunct, the micro-blogging platform Tumblr was a highly trafficked site at its peak in 2013. Because of its semi-anonymity, easy “reblog” feature, and microblog format, Tumblr emerged as the social media of choice for adolescent outsiders of all types: nerds, mentally ill, activists, artists, queer, et cetera. The aesthetic that was born of the subculture on Tumblr involved many things, including a specific discourse that romantically aestheticized mental illness and coping mechanisms such as cutting, smoking, and suicide attempts.

In a popular *Atlantic* article, Laura, an anonymous 16-year-old Tumblr user, is quoted as saying “Tumblr was, at the start, a photography and art website, if you link that together with depression blogs, you end up with a glorification of these conditions. There’s definitely a growing community of people feeding off of each other’s strong emotions, and it’s definitely visible online.”⁵³ Scrolling through the front page of Tumblr circa 2013 involved seeing posts such as a collection of razor blades that, when arranged in a line spell out “welcome – back – did – you – miss me?”⁵⁴ a picture of a cut and bleeding arm arranged with flowers or a GIF of a

⁵³ Anne-Sophie Bine, “Social Media Is Redefining ‘Depression’” *The Atlantic*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/social-media-is-redefining-depression/280818/>.

⁵⁴ Justine Sharrock, “Meet the Girl Behind One of Tumblr’s Biggest Self-Harm Blogs,” *BuzzFeed News*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/justinesharrock/meet-the-girl-behind-one-of-tumblrs-biggest-cutting-suicide>.

pretty, thin girl saying, “Maybe if I skip my dinner, make myself pretty and thinner, maybe then he’ll love me.”⁵⁵

In her 2013 piece for *Everyday Feminism*, Erin Tatum writes that Tumblr, “[promotes] isolation or negative feelings...[it] basically transforms taboo emotions like self-doubt into an aesthetic. Feelings of worthlessness or disillusionment become synonymous with and indicative of true tortured beauty, as well as intelligence and particularly psychological depth.”⁵⁶

Traditionally “feminine” values, such as “beauty” and “psychological depth” on Tumblr were effectively paired with the aesthetic of emotional and physical pain during a pivotal time of the creation of aesthetic and moral values of Gen Z. Tumblr hit its peak in 2013 – when many Gen Zers who are now college-aged were young teenagers (the oldest Gen Zers were 18, and the youngest were just being born). Studies have pinpointed the development of aesthetic judgment in human development to ages 10-14, when children are starting to navigate taste and visual judgment.⁵⁷ Tumblr introduced a highly visually and emotionally exciting stimulus to Gen Z at a time when its members were defining their aesthetic judgment. By glorifying mental illness and equating it with feminine beauty and therefore female status, Tumblr made mental illness a desirable trait for Gen Z girls.

While younger members of Gen Z may have never used Tumblr, the aesthetic that Tumblr popularized has made its mark on social media, and has influenced several later

⁵⁵ Smilethroughtears, “Smile Through Tears,” Tumblr, n.d., <https://www.tumblr.com/smilethroughtears96/95572899245/maybe-if-i-skip-my-dinner-make-myself-pretty-and>.

⁵⁶ Erin Tatum, “Soft Grunge: Mental Illness Is Not a Style,” *Everyday Feminism*, December 27, 2013, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/12/soft-grunge/#:~:text=Soft%20grunge%20basically%20transforms%20taboo.Here%20you%20go>.

⁵⁷ João Pedro Fróis and H. J. Eysenck, “The Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test Applied to Portuguese Children and Fine Arts Students,” *Creativity Research Journal* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 1995): 277–84, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326934crj0803_6.

iterations of other social media sites. A popular 2021 tweet says, “you know how whales die and drift down to the bottom of the ocean and all the shit that lives in the benthic zone feeds on the carcass? a creature they have never seen Alive before but nevertheless depend on for sustenance? in the wider internet ecosystem, tumblr is that whale”⁵⁸ Even adolescents who have never used Tumblr are inextricably affected by it through its cultural impact, and by its lasting impact on the relatively new social media platform of TikTok, which is the modern materialization of what Tumblr used to be in the world of mental illness.

While Tumblr was a semi-anonymous micro blogging site, and TikTok uses short-form videos with non-anonymous creators, both use minimal creator/consumer engagement, and neither are primarily used for friends to watch each other's videos; instead both are similar to an entertainment platform like YouTube, a site where creators make content for strangers. TikTok also seems to be having the same effect on adolescents as Tumblr did, with extremely high rates of engagement,⁵⁹ glorification of mental illness, plus a new, fun element: a culture of self-diagnosing one’s own mental illness.

A 2022 New York Times article states, “A number of mental health providers say that they are seeing an uptick in teenagers and young adults who are diagnosing themselves with mental illnesses — including rare disorders — after learning more about the conditions online.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸@Overfireisland, “you know how whales die and drift down to the bottom of the ocean and all the shit that lives in the benthic zone feeds on the carcass? a creature they have never seen Alive before but nevertheless depend on for sustenance? in the wider internet ecosystem, tumblr is that whale,” X, April 28, 2021, accessed April 28, 2024, <https://twitter.com/overfireisland/status/1387533862964633604>.

⁵⁹ The average TikTok video in 2023 ranged between 34-50 seconds and the average TikTok user spent 55.8 minutes on the app in 2023, across several viewing sessions. Because there is almost no way to engage with the app other than watching videos, it is a conservative estimate that the average TikTok user is watching about 67 TikToks per day.

⁶⁰Christina Caron, “Teens Turn to TikTok in Search of a Mental Health Diagnosis,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2022, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/29/well/mind/tiktok-mental-illness-diagnosis.html>.

A common #mentalhealth TikTok will show a woman making a face with a bullet list of symptoms overlaid onto her face. A 2023 TikTok video entitled “Hidden Signs of Depression”⁶¹ shows a young woman acting out little skits of the following phrases, with the caption, “if you can relate, i love you and i’m here for you”

Slow movements

Mood changes

Fatigue/low energy

Loss of interest in hobbies

These *are* symptoms of depression, but they’re also symptoms of a healthy adolescent having a bad day. When adolescents use the internet to gain more information on a diagnosis, they are often using adult markers to diagnose themselves. “It’s incredibly easy to misdiagnose,” said Mitch Prinstein, the chief science officer of the American Psychological Association. “You might have symptoms that look like what an adult’s depression would look like, but as a child or adolescent it very well could mean something completely different.”⁶² However, many adolescents take their self diagnosis as seriously or more seriously than an official diagnosis, pointing to the tyranny of the medical industrial complex as the reason for their distrust of psychiatrists. A fellow classmate of mine has a self-diagnosed mental illness that she “would never get professionally diagnosed” because of the risk of the potential discrimination of living with the label of mentally ill.

⁶¹ “if you can relate, i love you & i’m here for you,” August 8, 2023, accessed April 28, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@evolvinialison/video/7264912258701020421>.

⁶² Christina Caron, “Teens Turn to TikTok in Search of a Mental Health Diagnosis,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2022, accessed April 28, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/29/well/mind/tiktok-mental-illness-diagnosis.html>.

Even when girls do go into therapy after self-diagnosing, clinicians report difficulty in changing their minds from whatever diagnosis they have decided on. Annie Barsch, a therapist in Chicago, explained with apparent incredulity, “It’s almost as though me, as a professional — with a master’s degree, a clinical license and years of experience — is competing with these TikTokers.”⁶³ However, what Barsch is really competing against is a diagnosis that has become a key part of an adolescent’s identity, and she is experiencing the difficulty of dismantling that identity. By using social media during key identity-building periods of adolescence, a girl’s identity is formed in part out of the aesthetic representations she sees online. The aestheticization and romanticization of mental illness encourages identity-making out of mental illness and its outward symptoms. Once an adolescent forms an identity around a set of emotional experiences that have been coupled with aesthetic value and diagnosis (either by a professional or by the adolescent), it becomes much harder to let go of; suddenly, letting go of a mental illness means letting go of an integral part of the self. Identification with a mental disorder makes it very difficult or impossible to recover from that disorder.⁶⁴

One reason that the identity of mental illness is difficult for Gen Z girls to give up is because of the useful role that it plays for girls stuck in achievement culture. Mental illness provides a solution for girls caught up in the high pressure of achievement culture by giving girls who are experiencing feelings of chronic unworthiness a way to gain status. Mental illness gives upper-middle-class girls a way to matter in a culture that has told them that they only matter if they are special. Mental breakdown provides a way for adolescents to continue to matter – or

⁶³ Christina Caron, “Teens Turn to TikTok in Search of a Mental Health Diagnosis,” *New York Times*

⁶⁴ Jennifer Wisdom et al., ““Stealing Me From Myself”: Identity and Recovery in Personal Accounts of Mental Illness,” *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, January 22, 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3551288/>.

matter more than ever – without the pressure to perform well. It even allows the adolescent to express the real anguish that they feel, thereby fulfilling two needs. It is not surprising, then, at a moment when upper-middle-class girls are under more pressure than they ever have been, given unfettered access to an online space that celebrates and romanticizes the mentally ill, that girls would consciously or subconsciously turn to mental illness as a solution. This is not to say that there is no such thing as legitimate mental illness, but rather to underline its attraction as an escape route for a trapped individual.

Chapter 3: Body Shame As A Risk Factor For Emotional Dysregulation

“We make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls”

– Quote from a slide of an internal presentation at Facebook, 2019

Girls are at risk for prohibited emotional regulation because of the shame that girls feel about their bodies when scrolling through social media. A highly popularized 2014 study found a direct correlation between Facebook use and disordered eating,⁶⁵ but the real controversy was sparked when Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen exposed Facebook’s own findings about Gen Z teens’ mental health, body image, and social media use. In 2021, Haugen gave tens of thousands of internal documents to Congress and the SEC outlining the various types of harm that Facebook was knowingly causing. According to Facebook’s own internal studies, which were revealed by Haugen, Facebook had found that 13.5% of teen girls said that Instagram makes thoughts of suicide worse, and 17% of teen girls said that Instagram makes eating disorders worse.⁶⁶ In a 60 Minute interview, Hagen described the loop that adolescent girls go through with body image on Facebook and Instagram (which Facebook owns). She said, “...Facebook's own research says as these young women begin to consume this eating disorder content, they get more and more depressed. It actually makes them use the app more...they end up in this feedback cycle where they hate their bodies more and more.”⁶⁷ Hagen’s findings line

⁶⁵Annalise G. Mabe, K. Jean Forney, and Pamela K. Keel, “Do You ‘Like’ My Photo? Facebook Use Maintains Eating Disorder Risk,” *the International Journal of Eating Disorders/International Journal of Eating Disorders* 47, no. 5 (January 24, 2014): 516–23, <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22254>.

⁶⁶“Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,” *The Wall Street Journal*, n.d., <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>.

⁶⁷Chad De Guzman, “The Facebook Whistleblower Revealed Herself on *60 Minutes*. Here’s What You Need to Know,” *TIME*, October 4, 2021, <https://time.com/6103645/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen/>.

up with a number of outside studies that measure girls' and women's satisfaction with their own bodies after scrolling through Instagram.⁶⁸

Adolescent girls feeling bad about their bodies is not a new phenomenon. In *The New York Times*, Lindsay Crouse notes that, "For girls in America, taking in content that seems intended to make you hate your body is an adolescent rite of passage... Before American girls' confidence was commodified by Instagram, it was at the whim of magazines filled with impossibly slender, airbrushed models and ads from industries relying on girls and women for revenue. At the core of this marketing, the message endures: You are riddled with flaws and imperfections. We will tell you what to buy, and what to do to fix yourself."⁶⁹

However, the social internet has exacerbated the problem because social media exists differently from magazines in two important ways. First, social media algorithms encourage obsession with body issues for women by showing them content based on their previous viewing habits. Second, interpersonal social media gives adolescents not just perfectly edited photos of models, but also of their own peers, friends, and families.

In an article for *Forbes*, author Anna Haines explained the role that Snapchat, Instagram, and Zoom filters have in creating and exacerbating body image issues, particularly for women. She quotes Dr. Helen Egger, child psychiatrist, as saying, "What is taking it to the next level with these filters is it's not just seeing an image of a celebrity who is unrealistic and measuring yourself against that person, it's measuring your real self against a pretend image of

⁶⁸"Time Spent on Instagram and Body Image, Self-esteem, and Physical Comparison Among Young Adults in Spain: Observational Study," *National Library of Medicine*, n.d., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10131713/>.

⁶⁹ "For Teen Girls, Instagram Is a Cesspool," *The New York Times*, n.d., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/08/opinion/instagram-teen-girls-mental-health.html>.

yourself...Now, we compare ourselves, not only to an airbrushed elite, but to our airbrushed peers, and our airbrushed selves.”⁷⁰ If even adults are being severely affected by constantly seeing idealized versions of themselves⁷¹ and their peers on social media, it is no wonder that adolescents, who are actively *forming* their aesthetic identity, would be even more affected by this phenomenon. The effects of constant self-comparison as a result of social media use include lower self-confidence, higher levels of shame, and self-consciousness.⁷² While there is a somewhat cyclical relationship between shame and emotional dysregulation, as one feeds into the other, it is indisputable that there is a close link between emotional dysregulation and the body shame that girls experience when using social media.

Maybe this is not surprising considering that Facebook started as a site to compare women’s appearance. The first iteration of Facebook was famously called “Facemash”, which Zuckerberg created for fellow Harvard students to rank and compare women’s headshots based on how hot they were. Zuckerberg wrote at the time about Facemash, “I almost want to put some of these faces next to pictures of farm animals and have people vote on which is more

⁷⁰Haines, “From ‘Instagram Face’ to ‘Snapchat Dysmorphia’: How Beauty Filters Are Changing the Way We See Ourselves.”

⁷¹ Adults are undoubtedly affected by this phenomenon – In 2017, American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery found a huge increase in the number of surgical procedures performed from 2013 to 2019 (47%) and that 55% of facial cosmetic surgeons saw patients who wanted to look better in selfies, up 13% from 2016.

⁷²Sarah E. McComb and Jennifer S. Mills, “Young Women’s Body Image Following Upwards Comparison to Instagram Models: The Role of Physical Appearance Perfectionism and Cognitive Emotion Regulation,” *Body Image* 38 (September 1, 2021): 49–62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2021.03.012>.

attractive.”⁷³ However, Facebook, and even social media, is not solely to blame here. We have to look at the sources that influence online behavior to get a fuller picture, including the way that achievement culture affects girls specifically, and the impact of both pornography and “beauty porn”, the pervasive images of sexualized women in advertising and daily life.

Achievement Culture, Porn, and Girls

The combination of achievement culture with the proliferation of pornographic social media content has created a difficult task for high-achieving adolescent Gen Z girls: to perform both high achieving masculinity and obedient femininity. Here, emotional dysregulation is the natural product of circumstances but it also is a solution to the problem of achieving both the masculine and the feminine roles required of women.

Achievement culture, like most things, works differently for girls and boys in America. Between 1999 and 2002, when today’s Gen Zers were just being born, sociologist Emily Kane interviewed parents about their children’s gender performance and parents’ subsequent reactions.⁷⁴ What she found about boy children was predictable and historical; boys were encouraged to display masculine traits and discouraged from displaying feminine traits, which were often associated with weakness. However, Kane found that parents of girl children were also interested in fostering their child’s masculinity, and this trend expanded past parenting. In school, students learn to celebrate the women in history who broke out of their gendered roles –

⁷³Alex Horton, “Channeling ‘The Social Network,’ Lawmaker Grills Zuckerberg on His Notorious Beginnings,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/04/11/channeling-the-social-network-lawmaker-grills-zuckerberg-on-his-notorious-beginnings/>.

⁷⁴“No Way My Boys Are Going to Be Like That!’ Parents’ Responses to Children’s Gender Nonconformity on JSTOR,” *Www.Jstor.Org*, n.d., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640879>.

warriors and adventurers like Joan of Arc and Amelia Earhart. In sports, girls were praised for not “throwing like a girl.” Girls raised by feminists might grow up hearing the saying, “well-behaved women rarely make history”, but young girls were learning that *feminine* women rarely make history.

In her book, *American Hookup*, sociologist Lisa Wade writes, “Most girls in America today grow up being told that they can do anything, and they know when this is emphasized that what it really means is that they can do anything *boys* do. So, today’s young women are quick to incorporate masculinity into their personalities and lifestyles. They do this in a myriad of ways, picking and choosing the mix that works best for them. Some girls major in computer science, some aim to ascend the hierarchy at a Fortune 500 company, some brag about their taste for hard liquor, some have sex for fun... Women came to embrace the self-concept that men had once claimed for themselves because American society has continued to value the masculine over the feminine. It’s why women flock to male-dominated occupations, break into male-identified sports, and adopt masculine fashions, but men generally aren’t doing the inverse. Because of this asymmetry, when women adopt masculine ways of life, they’re doing more than just breaking out of their gender role; they’re breaking into a better one.”⁷⁵

However, while Gen Z girls have been encouraged to break through gender roles by embracing their masculinity in school, sports, careers, and fashion, their gender roles in relation to sex and beauty have become more boundaried through the proliferation of porn and beauty porn. At the same time as Emily Kline was conducting her seminal research on parents’ attitudes toward masculinity and femininity, and the first baby members of Generation Z were being born,

⁷⁵ Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).

the world of pornography was expanding to the internet and becoming accessible to anyone with a computer.

Pornhub offers a helpful statistical “Year In Review” each year, and according to Pornhub’s 2023 Year in Review, Gen Z accounted for at least 27% of the viewing population, the largest portion.⁷⁶ To protect themselves legally, Pornhub failed to account for any Gen Z visitors under the age of 18, but a 2023 study found that most children had seen porn for the first time before they were 13, and a significant number of under-13-year-olds were watching it on a regular basis.⁷⁷

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf writes that, “For the first time in history, children are growing up whose earliest sexual imprinting derives not from a living human being, or fantasies of their own; since the 1960s pornographic upsurge, the sexuality of children has begun to be shaped in response to cues that are no longer human. Nothing comparable has ever happened in the history of our species...today's children and young men and women have sexual identities that spiral around paper and celluloid phantoms...”⁷⁸ Wolf imagined (with a doomsday attitude) the impact that these new displays of sexuality would have on developing psyches, but I doubt that even she could have predicted how dehumanizing and inhuman the pornographic viewing habits of Gen Z would be by 2023; the most-searched for terms of Gen Zers include “cosplay,” “interactive,” “cartoon,” and “virtual reality.”⁷⁹ Gen Z was raised on a mental diet of increasingly

⁷⁶Mike, “2023 Year in Review,” Pornhub Insights, February 26, 2024, <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2023-year-in-review>.

⁷⁷ Michael B. Robb PhD and Supreet Mann PhD, “Teens and Pornography,” report, ed. Jennifer Robb (Common Sense, 2022), <https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2022-teens-and-pornography-final-web.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (Harper Collins, 2009).

⁷⁹Mike, “2023 Year in Review.”

violent pornography alongside “beauty pornography”, common depictions of sexualized women in advertisements and the media. As Wolf writes, “If the women depicted in mass culture are beautiful and abused, abuse is a mark of desirability.”⁸⁰ As the Pornhub statistics show, for Gen Zers who have never known an alternative, “abused” and “dehumanized” are synonymous with “desirable.”

This understanding creates repercussions for both women and men: women intuit that healthy and strong, antonyms to abused, are not beautiful. And it isn’t just the girls who labor under these mistaken ideas; boys have internalized this message and are acting it out as well. A sociology professor recently related to me that in the last few years a new pattern has emerged in the stories that her female students tell her: they will increasingly recount stories about first-time hookups that include boys choking them, hitting them, and directing degrading language toward them without any prior discussion – presumably because they believe these behaviors are normal. With only one model of sex available for young men, it’s not surprising that they’re taking cues from it.

So, where does this leave high achieving Gen Z girls who have been socialized to gain status as both masculine achievers and feminine victims of abuse and degradation? Upper-middle-class Gen Z girls have grown up seeing two possible forms of status available to them as women, while simultaneously being taught by their parents that they must achieve status in order to matter and be loveable. Through seeing beauty porn and regular porn, girls are taught that in order to be attractive, a woman must be abused, obedient, and starved. In a male social order that demands that women not nourish themselves, obedience in the form of

⁸⁰ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (Harper Collins, 2009).

malnourishment is performed through the resulting thinness and mental fragility. These attributes then are equated to beauty, which is then rewarded with status. This status, which girls receive through obedience, is *femininity* status.

At the same time that they are achieving femininity status, girls are expected to play and achieve like boys in academics, sports, and the arts by displaying ambition, drive, a strong will, and strength – traditionally masculine forms of gaining status. Girls who achieve by acting like boys are rewarded with *achievement* status. Trying to achieve both femininity status and achievement status at the same time creates stress for girls, which can manifest as mental anguish, anxiety and depression. However, mental illness as a title or role can also provide a way for women to be both of what they are asked to be: successful *within* male achievement culture, *and* femininely obedient *to* a male social order.

Within the confines of disordered eating, a woman is able to be masculine, independent, strong-willed, self-controlled, and brave, while maintaining her beauty in her obedience and acceptance of abuse. To abuse oneself in the form of disordered eating or self-mutilation is to be both the abuser – the masculine – and the abused – the feminine, within a contemporary framework of beauty and gender.

Chapter 4: Physiological Effects of Social Media As Risk Factors For Emotional Dysregulation

Social media has several physiological effects on the user (especially if that user is a developing adolescent) that can contribute to their likelihood of experiencing emotional dysregulation. First, using social media reduces the quantity and quality of adolescents' sleep. In her book *iGen*, Jean Twenge iterates two changes that have happened at the same time: the introduction of personal screens and the decrease in the number of hours that adolescents are sleeping on average.⁸¹ The CDC conducts a Youth Risk Behavior Survey every other year to measure rates of risky behavior in high school students, including drug and alcohol use, as well as other more benign behaviors: how much milk they're drinking, and how much sleep they're getting. According to Twenge, the percentage of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders who get fewer than eight hours of sleep on most school nights (the number generally agreed to be the minimum needed for adolescents to function well), rose in conjunction with the proliferation of the smartphone.⁸² Twenge argues and provides evidence that the decrease in sleep is not due to more time spent engaging in extracurricular activities, homework, working for pay, socializing in person or exercising. All of these activities have remained stable across time. (And socializing in person and exercising are actually correlated with adolescents getting more sleep).⁸³ In fact,

⁸¹ Jean M. 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* (Simon and Schuster, 2017).

⁸²"Data & Statistics | DASH | CDC," n.d., <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/index.htm>.

⁸³Twenge, *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*.

smartphone use is the only activity that increased between 2012-2015, and therefore Twenge concludes that it “[appears] to be the primary cause of the recent increase in sleep deprivation.”⁸⁴

Additionally, a meta-analysis of children and sleep found that “children who used a media device before bed were more likely to sleep less than they should, more likely to sleep poorly, and more than twice as likely to be sleepy during the day.”⁸⁵ Social media is particularly to blame. According to Twenge’s research, adolescents who spend three or more hours a day on electronic devices are 28% more likely to get fewer than seven hours of sleep, and those who visit social media sites every day are 19% more likely to not get enough sleep.⁸⁶ However, screen use doesn’t seem to affect sleep until screens are used for about two hours per day.⁸⁷

Sleep is strongly connected to emotional regulation for both adults and adolescents.⁸⁸ The effects of minor sleep deprivation on the ability of adults to emotionally regulate is well-known, even when other aspects of their lives, such as stress, are controlled for. A 2013 study published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* tested teens ages 14-17 in two groups: the healthy sleep duration group received 10 hours of sleep per night for 5 nights, 2.5 more hours of sleep more than the second, sleep-restricted group who slept for 6.5 hours for 5 nights. According to the self-rating of the students involved in the study, “adolescents rated themselves as significantly more tense/anxious, angry/hostile, confused, and fatigued, and as less vigorous

⁸⁴ 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*.

⁸⁵ 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*.

⁸⁶ 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*.

⁸⁷ 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*.

⁸⁸ Iris B. Mauss, Allison S. Troy, and Monique K. LeBourgeois, “Poorer Sleep Quality Is Associated With Lower Emotion-regulation Ability in a Laboratory Paradigm,” *Cognition and Emotion* 27, no. 3 (April 1, 2013): 567–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2012.727783>.

during [sleep restriction].” The authors concluded that “after only a few days of shortened sleep, at a level of severity that is experienced regularly by millions of adolescents on school nights, adolescents have worsened mood and decreased ability to regulate negative emotions.”⁸⁹

Interestingly, sleep also has a reciprocal relationship with emotional regulation. A 2014 study found that, “Nighttime sleep affects daytime mood, emotional reactivity and the capacity to regulate positive and negative emotions; conversely, daytime experiences affect sleep.”⁹⁰ And a 2017 study in *AIMS Neuroscience* explains that, “...when daily stress is insufficiently regulated, it may result in mental health problems and sleep disturbances too... Emotional events during waking hours affect sleep, and the quality and amount of sleep influences the way we react to these events impacting our general well-being...” A decrease in sleep, as a result of an increase in general screen usage and more specifically social media use, could be leading to a decrease in the ability of adolescents to emotionally regulate themselves.

Blue Light

A less-discussed phenomenon is the role that the blue light from screens could be playing on the dopamine structures of the brain, and how this might be affecting emotional regulation in adolescents. In an article published in *Neuroscience Review*, the authors wrote that “...recent findings have shown that prolonged exposure of rodents and birds to fluorescent artificial light results in ...a loss of dopaminergic neurons. The observed detrimental effect seems to be

⁸⁹Katherine T. Baum et al., “Sleep Restriction Worsens Mood and Emotion Regulation in Adolescents,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 55, no. 2 (July 30, 2013): 180–90, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12125>.

⁹⁰Reut Gruber and Jamie Cassoff, “The Interplay Between Sleep and Emotion Regulation: Conceptual Framework Empirical Evidence and Future Directions,” *Current Psychiatry Reports/Current Psychiatry Reports* 16, no. 11 (September 10, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-014-0500-x>.

dependent on a direct effect of light on the substantia nigra rather than a secondary effect of the alterations of circadian rhythms.”⁹¹ The use of social media during time that would otherwise have been spent asleep or outside has increased the amount of time that adolescents spend in artificial light instead of in darkness or natural light. Because dopamine has such a strong relationship with emotional regulation,⁹² the potential for artificial light to cause a loss of dopaminergic neurons could have serious effects on emotional regulation, completely divorced from the way that artificial light could be affecting sleep quality and length. However, more research on human subjects is required in order to fully understand the effects of fluorescent light on human dopamine structures.

⁹¹Irene Fasciani et al., “A New Threat to Dopamine Neurons: The Downside of Artificial Light,” *Neuroscience* 432 (April 1, 2020): 216–28, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroscience.2020.02.047>.

⁹²Pilar Salgado-Pineda et al., “Dopaminergic Contribution to the Regulation of Emotional Perception,” *Clinical Neuropharmacology* 28, no. 5 (September 1, 2005): 228–37, <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.wnf.0000185824.57690.f0>.

Conclusion

While the ability of Gen Zers to emotionally regulate themselves has been severely adversely affected by their social media use, I believe that speedy intervention on the level of the adolescent or the parent can challenge and reverse the trend that we've been seeing.

Advice for parents:

(1) Make a conscious choice about how much social media you want your daughter to

be using. While screen time doesn't seem to start having a negative effect until it is used for over two hours a day, it starts priming girls for status-based comparisons within minutes of starting use. While the newest technology is perpetually being advertised to your daughter, the people making and marketing it aren't allowing their own children near that same technology. Silicon Valley executives are famous for preventing their kids from using any form of screens in childhood.⁹³ Bill Gates didn't allow his children to get cell phones until they were fourteen,⁹⁴ and Steve Jobs was so clear that he didn't want his kids interacting with an iPad that he didn't allow one in the house, because, "...we think it's too dangerous for them in effect."⁹⁵

⁹³Nellie Bowles, "Silicon Valley Nannies Are Phone Police for Kids: Child care contracts now demand that nannies hide phones, tablets, computers and TVs from their charges.," *New York Times*, October 26, 2018, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/style/silicon-valley-nannies.html>.

⁹⁴Sarah Berger, "Tech-free Dinners and No Smartphones Past 10 Pm — How Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Cuban Limited Their Kids' Screen Time," *CNBC*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/05/how-bill-gates-mark-cuban-and-others-limit-their-kids-tech-use.html>.

⁹⁵Berger, "Tech-Free Dinners and No Smartphones Past 10 Pm — How Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Cuban Limited Their Kids' Screen Time."

- (2) **If you don't want your daughter to grow up using the social internet, don't model using it for them:** either don't use social media, or don't show it to them or post photos of them to your social media account.
- (3) **Talk openly with your daughter about feelings and values.** Discourage identity-building around mental illness. Teach your daughter an empowering narrative about mental health and emphasize that healthy is desirable. Do not medicalize their emotional ups and downs.
- (4) **Make time for your daughter to play and explore without adult supervision or interference as a way to build resilience and independence.** Let your daughter learn to “dose herself” with risk.
- (5) **Protect your daughter's sleep.** Until she can and will prioritize their own sleep, do not allow her to sleep with a tablet or phone in their bedroom, and if possible, insist that they turn off all their screens at least two hours before bed.⁹⁶
- (6) **Help your daughter set boundaries around school, sports, and extracurriculars.** Jennifer Wallace explains, “As parents, we sometimes think our role is to help fuel and support our kids' ambition. But in a hypercompetitive culture, kids sometimes need the opposite. They need the adults in their life to occasionally hold them back – to prevent them from sacrificing their minds and bodies on the altar of achievement...mattering, from a child's perspective, means your physical and psychological limits are worth honoring.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶Anna M. Adachi-Mejia et al., “TXT Me I'm Only Sleeping,” *Family & Community Health* 37, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 252–57, <https://doi.org/10.1097/fch.0000000000000044>.

⁹⁷Jennifer Wallace, *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic -- and What We Can Do About It* (Portfolio, 2023).

(7) If your family is embedded in achievement culture, **talk to your daughter openly about what success means to you, ask her what it means to her, and honor her choices.**

(8) **Make rest that is non-productive and without screen time a priority for your daughter.** Constant screen usage leads to mental fatigue, a precursor to emotional dysregulation.

For those girls who are old enough to take responsibility for their own mental health, and who are suffering from mental illness, I would suggest two things: first, evaluating their own relationship with pleasure. Anna Lembke, MD, medical director of Stanford Addiction Medicine, recommends a “dopamine fast” for anyone who has become emotionally dysregulated. Lembke explains, “Because we’ve transformed the world from a place of scarcity to a place of overwhelming abundance: Drugs, food, news, gambling, shopping, gaming, texting, sexting, Facebooking, Instagramming, YouTubing, tweeting . . . the increased numbers, variety, and potency of highly rewarding stimuli today is staggering. The smartphone is the modern-day hypodermic needle, delivering digital dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation.”⁹⁸

She argues that, “The relentless pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, leads to pain. Recovery begins with abstinence. Abstinence resets the brain's reward pathway and with it our capacity to take joy in simpler pleasures.”⁹⁹ Her advice is to quit dopamine-stimulating activities for one month to facilitate a return to stasis, with the caveat that she “...never [suggests] a dopamine fast to individuals who might be at risk to suffer life-threatening withdrawal if they

⁹⁸ Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (Penguin, 2021).

⁹⁹ Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*.

were to quit all of a sudden, as in cases of severe alcohol, benzodiazepine (Xanax, Valium, or Klonopin), or opioid dependence or withdrawal.”¹⁰⁰

Second, I would posit that any girl who uses social media must consciously and thoughtfully pursue meaning through an identity that rests neither on perfectionism nor mental illness. In his commencement address at Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace offered some advice about finding meaning. He said, “... here's something else that's weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.”¹⁰¹

All worship is productive, in that it produces an outcome and moves one toward a goal, and a helpful way to think about social media use is as a form of worship. As we've seen, social

¹⁰⁰ Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*.

¹⁰¹ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown, 2009).

media use that is fueled by achievement culture worships status and leads girls to alienate their true selves in pursuit of that status. Girls are overwhelmingly turning to social media to worship edited versions of celebrities and each other in a process that is misery-inducing and creates emotional dysregulation. However, if social media can be used to worship what is deeply compelling and meaningful, it could be a powerful tool to, as Wallace put it, “[keep] the truth up front in daily consciousness.”

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