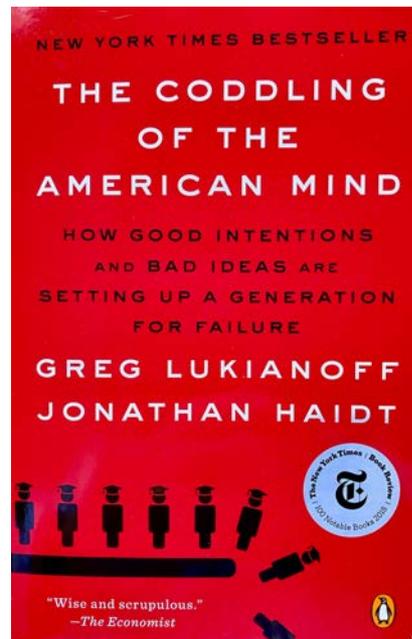

BOOK SUMMARY

"The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure" by Greg Lukianoff & Jonathan Haidt

Penguin Books: 2019
ISBN 13: 9780735224919
(Paperback)

[Hard Cover for around US\$13.69
on www.amazon.com for a new copy;
Kindle US\$10.34]

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What is happening on our planet that there seems to be an increase in aggression and violence while at the same time people (especially students on university campuses) are calling for "safe places" and dis-inviting visiting speakers with whom they do not agree. Where has free speech gone? Where has debate gone? Universities of all places used to be settings where debate and discussion were welcomed. Not anymore. Why too has there been an escalation in teen depression and mental health issues? Why has "identity politics" come to the fore where opposing parties or teams now seem to hate each other? How come?

The book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, has some answers to these questions. The authors argue that well-intentioned adults are unwittingly harming young people by doing far more now to protect children by raising them in ways that implicitly convey three main untruths. The result is a spike in mental health issues for young people as we are currently witnessing particularly in Western cultures as well as evidence of tumult on campuses along with protests and marches mainly orchestrated by young people.

Accordingly, the authors state that in their opinion, whatever the identity, background, or political ideology, individuals can expect to be happier, healthier, stronger and more likely to succeed in pursuing their goals if they do the opposite to the Untruths being promulgated. It's not hard to agree with the authors. They present their findings in a practical, common sense way that lines up with what can be presently seen and heard in our society.

So what are those untruths being taught?

1. The Untruth of Fragility; *What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.*

Instead, the authors argue that what makes people more resilient is seeking out challenges rather than eliminating or avoiding everything that feels unsafe.

Human beings need physical **and** mental challenges and stressors in order to grow or we deteriorate. In the same way that muscles and joints need stressors to develop properly before atrophy sets in with joints losing motion and heart and lungs declining, we need to deal with failures and negative experiences in order to cope.

The authors point to Nassim Nicholas Taleb's book *Antifragile* where Taleb explains how people can grow stronger. Taleb defines three things. Some people are like china tea-cups; they are **fragile**. These cups break easily and cannot heal themselves and so they need to be handled gently and kept away from small children for instance. Others are **resilient**. They can withstand shocks. In this way, parents usually give their small children plastic cups which survive drops to the floor (although the cups don't seem to benefit from such falls). Finally, there is **antifragile**. Many systems in our life are like our immune systems; they require stressors and challenges in order to learn, adapt and grow, otherwise, they become weak, rigid and inefficient. Taleb notes that muscles, bones and children are antifragile.

The modern obsession with protecting young people from "feeling unsafe" is one of the reasons for the rapid rise in rates of adolescent depression, anxiety and suicide.

Hence, a culture of "safetyism" has now pervaded the entire community to such an extent that emotional discomfort is now equated with physical danger and this means of course, that we now need to protect one another from the

very experiences embedded in daily life that people actually need in order to grow and become strong and healthy.

Play this out to its inevitable conclusion and when children are raised in a culture of safetyism (eg., helicopter parenting), it sets up a feedback loop where children become more fragile and less resilient which signals to adults that they need more protection which then leads the children to being even more fragile and less resilient.

2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: *Always trust your feelings.*

Instead, it is asserted that using cognitive behaviour therapy and correcting faulty or negative thinking helps people to gain perspective and therefore eliminate or reduce their cognitive distortions rather than always trusting their initial feelings.

The authors put the hypothesis that what people choose to do in their heads will determine how real problems affect them. As the management consultant and author Dr Stephen Covey was quoted as saying, "It isn't what happens to us that affects our behaviour, it's our interpretation of what happens to us that affects our behaviour" or indeed, as Epictetus, the Greek Philosopher said in the 1st Century A.D., "Man is disturbed not by events, but by the view he takes of them".

Hence, teaching people to perceive more aggression in an innocent faux pas for example, or perceiving aggression in an ambiguous interaction means that they therefore take offense easily, feel more negative emotion and avoid questioning their initial assumptions; this is considered highly inappropriate practice and most unwise. A faux pas for instance, does not make someone an evil person or an aggressor. Yet, many activists teach that bigotry is only about impact and that intent is irrelevant such that if you **feel** offended or oppressed by another person then that other person must be guilty of an act of bigotry.

Another way that emotional reasoning is manifesting itself is on university campuses through the "disinvitation" of guest speakers. The logic (if we can call it that) is that if a speaker makes some students feel uncomfortable, upset or angry, that is sufficient to justify banning that speaker from campus because of the so-called "danger" that the speaker poses to those students. But discomfort is **not** danger. If the University Vice-Chancellor or hierarchy does not comply with such a ban, students invoke loud, disruptive protests to stop the speaker from attending including blocking entrances, shouting

expletives and banging on doors and windows from outside the room and filling the auditorium with protesters. The edict that education should not be intended to make people comfortable, but instead, it is meant to make people think, is long gone.

3. The Untruth of Us Versus Them: *Life is a battle between good people and evil people.*

Instead, the authors argue that we need to take a generous view of people and give them the benefit of the doubt rather than assume the worst about people with a simplistic us-versus-them morality.

As a way of maintaining ourselves and our identity, it is argued that while we are tribal in nature (just go to a football match and see how people bond with each other against the opposition), there is a switch happening where now we bind together tightly such that we embrace and defend the groups moral matrix and we stop thinking for ourselves. In this tribal mode, we go blind to the arguments and information that challenge our team. In this way, "identity politics" is born where we fight against a common enemy and this also serves to surround us with similar others and motivates the whole tribe.

This kind of thinking also promotes a "call-out culture" in which students gain prestige for identifying small offenses committed by others and by using social media, others can also pile on the shame and "punish" alleged offenders. Not surprisingly, this political correctness gone wrong means that students and staff both on and off campuses are walking on egg-shells afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing or perhaps giving a contrary point of view which would make others feel "unsafe".

How did it all get this way? What were the precursors to this kind of culture and community?

The book suggests that there are **six interacting threads** that are bringing about the current demise in the community. First, there is **the rising political polarisation and cross-party animosity**. Bi-partisanship is diluted to the point where instead, there is now increased hostility between parties (especially between the left-wing and right-wing of politics) which is often fuelled by the media (including social media).

Second, there is the **rising levels of teen anxiety and depression**. Dr Jean Twenge, a social psychologist at San Diego State University has provided a detailed picture of the mental state and behaviour of today's

teenagers and young adults. She calls the generation after the Millennials iGen (like iPhone) which stands for "internet generation" because they are the first generation to grow up with the internet in their pocket; 1995 is the first birth year for iGen. Twenge writes that the rapid spread of smartphones and social media into the lives of teenagers beginning around 2007 is the main cause of the mental health crisis that began around 2001. Research conducted by Twenge shows that the use of screen time on social media (including You-tube and the like) is an indicator of mental disturbance; above two hours a day, there is an elevated risk of depression.

Third, there has been a **change in parenting practices** where "paranoid parenting" has meant that helicopter parenting has taken over where children are now over-protected. Children today have far more restricted childhoods than did say, their parents.

Fourth, there is **the decline of free play for children**. For example, they have been deprived of unsupervised time for play and exploration which helps build resilience as they are forced to deal with minor risks and negative experiences.

Fifth, there is the **growth of university and college bureaucracy** where administrators are now consumed with preventing any lawsuits and therefore very determined to regulate what students do and say. Interestingly enough, this means that many teaching staff are also "walking on egg-shells" for fear of saying anything in a class or lecture which might be construed as provocative. The culture of safetyism promoted by administrators has also led to a "victimhood culture" where individuals show a high sensitivity to be being slighted somehow and respond by complaints to third parties because they are "victims" who deserve assistance.

Finally, there is a **rising passion for justice** in response to major national events combined with changing ideas about what justice requires. National and political events are now more emotionally charged than previously. Social justice activism is a central concept on many school and university campuses today.

The authors however, do not leave us at a point of hopelessness and instead, provide a number of options that need to be pursued. You'll need to read the book to discover what they suggest, but the headlines are as follows.

In relation to Children:

1. Prepare the Child for the Road, Not the Road for the Child

2. Your Worst Enemy Cannot Harm You as Much as Your Own Thoughts, Unguarded

3. The Line Dividing Good and Evil Cuts Through the Heart of Every Human Being

4. Help Schools to Oppose the Great Untruths

5. Limit and Refine Device Time

6. Support a New National Norm: Service or Work Before College

In relation to Universities:

1. Entwine Your Identity with Freedom of Inquiry (ie., free speech is important and needs to be upheld)

2. Pick the Best Mix of People for the Mission (ie., admit older students to university and those from schools that teach the "intellectual virtues")

3. Orient and Educate for Productive Disagreement

4. Draw a Larger Circle Around the Community (ie., emphasise common goals and interests, shared fate, and common humanity)

So who are these authors?

Greg Lukianoff is the president and CEO of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). Lukianoff is a graduate of American University and Stanford Law School. He specializes in free speech and First Amendment issues in higher education. He is the author of *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate* and *Freedom From Speech*.

Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business. He obtained his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992, and then taught at the University of Virginia for 16 years. He is the author of *The Righteous Mind* and *The Happiness Hypothesis*.



The book is well-researched and well referenced. But that is what you'd expect from two highly credentialed university professors. It is also a kind of self-help manual in places too especially in relation to the tools for effective thinking that cognitive behaviour therapy provides.

I liked the book, which has its origins in a 2015 cover story in *The Atlantic* magazine. The updated thesis, when fleshed out across detailed chapters, was clearly stated, logically argued, and plausibly true. It certainly provided answers to the world's current ills and torment in a way that resonated with what I've witnessed both at home and abroad. The proposed remedies and possibilities for change also seemed realistic and highly unlikely to do any harm. The authors say that this is a book about education and wisdom. I'd agree.

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