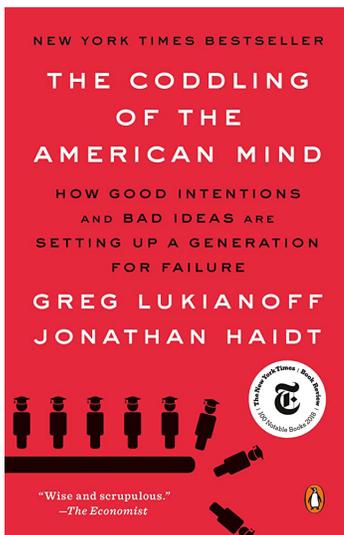


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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The Coddling of the American Mind THE NUTSHELL

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INTRODUCTION: THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM

Something is going badly wrong for American teenagers, as we can see in the statistics on depression, anxiety, and suicide. Something is going very wrong on many college campuses, as we can see in the growth of the call-out culture, in the rise of efforts to disinvite or shout down visiting speakers, and in changing norms about speech, including a recent tendency to evaluate speech in terms of safety and danger. This new culture of safetyism and vindictive protectiveness is bad for students and bad for universities. We will show how well-intentioned overprotection—from peanut bans in elementary schools through speech codes on college campuses—may end up doing more harm than good.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The Polarization Cycle. The United States has experienced a steady increase in affective (or emotional) polarization since the 1980s: people who identify with either of the two main political parties increasingly hate and fear the other party and the people in it.

Anxiety and Depression. The generation born between 1995 and 2012 has far higher rates of anxiety and depression. The increases for girls and young women are generally much larger than for boys and young men. The increases do not just reflect changing definitions or standards as they show up in rising hospital

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admission rates of self-harm and in rising suicide rates. The suicide rate of adolescent boys is still higher than that of girls, but the suicide rate of adolescent girls has doubled since 2007.

Paranoid Parenting. When we overprotect children, we harm them. Children are naturally anti-fragile, so overprotection makes them weaker and less resilient later on. 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 opportunities to develop their intricate anti-fragility. They have missed out on many of the challenges, negative experiences, and minor risks that help children develop into strong, competent, and independent adults.

The Decline of Play. Children need free play in order to finish the intricate wiring process of neural development. Children deprived of free play are likely to be less competent—physically and socially—as adults. They are likely to be less tolerant of risk, and more prone to anxiety disorders. Free play also helps children develop the skills of cooperation and dispute resolution that are closely related to the “art of association” upon which democracies depend.

The Bureaucracy of Safetyism. Administrators generally have good intentions in that they are trying to protect the university and its students. But efforts to protect students by creating bureaucratic means of resolving problems and conflicts can have the unintended consequence of fostering moral dependence. This may reduce students’ ability to resolve conflicts independently both during and after college.

The Quest for Justice. Social justice is a central concept in campus life today. In many discussions in universities these days, the correlation of a demographic trait or identity group membership with an outcome gap is taken as evidence that discrimination *caused* the outcome gap. If people can’t raise alternative possible causal explanations without eliciting negative consequences, then the community is unlikely to arrive at an accurate understanding of the problem. Without understanding the true nature of a problem, there is little chance of solving it.

WISING UP

By the standards of our great-grandparents, nearly all of us are coddled. This is due to three Great Untruths that have spread widely in recent years. Anyone who cares about young people, education, or democracy should be concerned about these trends.

Great Untruth: What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.

Principle: Young people are anti-fragile.

Wisdom: Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.

Great Untruth: Always trust your feelings.

Principle: We are all prone to emotional reasoning and the confirmation bias.

Wisdom: Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded. Once mastered, no one can help you as much, not even your father or your mother.

Great Untruth: Life is a battle between good people and evil people.

Principle: We are all prone to dichotomous thinking and tribalism.

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Wisdom: The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

As far as we can tell, most university presidents reject the culture of safetyism. They know it is bad for students and bad for free inquiry. We believe most high school and college students despise call-out culture and would prefer to be at a school that had little of it. Most students are not fragile, they are not “snowflakes,” and they are not afraid of ideas. If we can educate the next generation more wisely, they will be stronger, richer, more virtuous, and even safer.