TACKLING MENTAL HEALTH: EXPANDING SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH

Announcer 00:00

Please welcome the panel on Expanding Solutions to Improve Mental Health, moderated by Anchor and Correspondent at NBC News, Savannah Sellers.

Savannah Sellers 00:21

Hi everyone, and thanks very much for being here. Don't know that this is gonna be quite as much fun as we just had, but I promise it'll be informative. So please stick around and stay with us through this. I am so lucky today to be joined by Rebecca Bagley, who's the president and CEO of the Kennedy Forum. We have Jonathan Haidt, who is the author of The Anxious Generation, as well as a professor at New York University. And we have Bill Ready, CEO of Pinterest, and we have Marketa Wills, who is the CEO and Medical Director of the American Psychiatric Association. Thanks to you all for being here. So the point today, what we want to get into is to sort of head on, address some issues when it comes to mental health; identify them, name them, and then talk about some scalable solutions. And I hope today that everybody sort of walks away with something tangible that may help you. I have a feeling if you're in this room, it may be personal to you. It may be personal to somebody that you love, if you're here and you're seeking out a conversation like this, and so we hope that this is a real tool for you, and that you walk away feeling that way. And, that being—with that being said, we will also be taking audience questions. So as long as I can figure out how to work this iPad, I will be working those in or leaving some time at the end. So please go ahead and send those in. I want to start, Jon, we discussed this prior with some data here, some real information. Let's address the problem. Your book, The Anxious Generation. Probably many people in this room have read it, but it names a particular issue when it comes to social media and young people growing up. We'll talk about what else it could be, but first, just walk us through what you know to be true.

Jonathan Haidt 01:58

Sure, so we are about 12 or 13 years into a gigantic surge of mental illness and suffering which has engulfed people born after 1995 and seems to be going straight through to kids who are young now. If you look at—we have very good mental health stats in the US—longitudinal studies—rates of anxiety, depression, self harm were fairly stable from the late 90s all the way through 2010–2011, there's no sign of a problem. I mean high rates, yes, but no sign of an increase. And then all of a sudden, around 2012–2013, you get hockey stick increases for the girls, they suddenly—it's like someone turned on a switch in 2012, and girls start cutting themselves. The biggest increases proportionally are 10 to 14 year old girls. So you can think about all kinds of things that happened in the US, around 2012 that might have caused it, but the exact same thing happened in the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Happened in Scandinavia, we now know that it's happening all over the Western world. Other studies have shown that elderly people have always been the happiest age group, followed by people in their 20s, and then middle aged people are the least happy. That was true until years ago. Now all over our planet, the least happy people are young people. So this is a mental health crisis beyond anything we've ever even imagined. And my argument in the book is that there is only one explanation that can work both with the timing and the international, which is those are exactly the years when teens all over the world traded in their flip phones—which are used to communicate with friends—for smartphones, which are used by companies and men to get to children. They have some other uses too, but that's one of the main uses, it seems. And so that's my argument, that we can actually see what the cause of this surge was. We can reverse it for about $0. It doesn't cost anything to raise age limits. And I think we need to start doing that, norms for not owning smartphones when you're young, and laws for raising the age to 16 around the world. [Applause]

Savannah Sellers 04:00

We're going to get into exactly that when we talk about solutions. Marketa, if you wouldn't mind helping us run the gamut a little bit here when we talk about issues, and tell us what you're seeing as people age in this country.

Marketa Wills 04:10

Absolutely. So from the time children are young, all the way to adult age, we see first break psychosis generally happening around 20–21, both for men and for women. In elderly, we also see a second surge of mental health issues such as Alzheimer's, dementia, or what we also call "pseudo depression," that's largely driven by—loneliness is probably the biggest social factor. What we see in all across all age groups is that if someone has social determinants of health—such as housing insecurity, food insecurity—their rates of mental illness will be higher. We also see across all ages that for folks who have mental illness, there's a socioeconomic—what we call downward drift. And so many times, folks who have serious mental health issues and challenges are in the public mental health system, and that's across all age categories.

Savannah Sellers 05:17

And Rebecca, I know this is something that you also have seen firsthand with your work with the Kennedy Forum. Tell us about that.

Rebecca O. Bagley 05:24

Well, I think we think about, you know, across the life course, like you guys were highlighting from, you know, really prenatal through aging populations, and we've been doing some analysis based on the claims data and sort of how you're seeing. And, you know, Marketa, like you're saying, the aging population is actually—you know, we're seeing a lot of mental health challenges in the aging population in ways that were not as prevalent before. And so I think we think about policy and kind of one of the interventions across that life course. And again, just focused on prenatal and maternal mental health as well, because that's become, you know, luckily, much more talked about, much more in the public sphere, and can help—you know, not only the mother, of course—but the child through that process.

Savannah Sellers 06:15

When I was first asked to do this panel, I thought it was very interesting that I was going to be on stage with Jon and with what he just laid out with his research and with his book, along with Bill, who is the CEO of a social media company. But you're not seen, at least on this stage, as the bad guy in the room or anything like that, because of the work that you've done at Pinterest. Tell us what you've done that's different.

Bill Ready 06:38

So there's a few things we've done like we've really had a focus around youth online safety and emotional well being on the platform. And I came in as CEO of Pinterest almost three years ago, and one of the things that I thought was core to the opportunity was to prove a more positive business model for social media: one that wasn't built on engagement via enragement, one that wasn't built on trying to keep you glued to a screen for as long as possible, but rather one that could be additive instead of addictive. And, you know, just before AI had become a household term—you know, in my past work, we had done a lot with AI, and one of the things that I believed in that I wrote about publicly shortly after becoming CEO of Pinterest, was that—you know, a lot of the comparisons of social media to big tobacco, I thought really stemmed from the use of AI—earlier versions of AI—to maximize your view time, and the AI sort of figured out that people will look longer at the things that trigger them, whatever their triggers are. And while that was initially a negative externality, I think it, over time, became deeply ingrained in the business model of social media. And what I was hoping that we could prove is that, well, if the AI, in an unwitting way, could be used to maximize your view time, but at the expense of your emotional well being, why couldn't we tune the AI for something else? Why couldn't we tune the AI to help you feel better? Why couldn't we tune the AI for positivity? Why couldn't we tune for things that would help you take actions off of that screen. Take action in your real life. Help you actually be more connected to the people around you by doing things in the real world versus just being glued to a screen. And, you know, as much as they're—and I'm sure we'll talk about this, Jon's done some amazing research and bringing this together—just how significant the harms have been to especially young people, but I think it's broader than that. But to offer a little bit of hope, can you tune AI for positivity? Emphatically yes. In fact, we started something called the Inspired Internet Pledge a few years ago where we committed to not only measuring our impact on emotional health—publishing that, committing to make that better, committing to publishing the ways that we're doing it, in hopes that others would follow suit. So the world that I hope we can get to where—you know, right now, it's a crisis, but these things can change. You know, it's not that long ago that—you know, if you go back a few decades, auto manufacturers were saying that seat belts

were against the business model. And now they all compete on their safety records, and you needed a little bit of baseline regulation, crash test ratings, things like that. But you also found companies figured out that they could compete on their safety records. I'd love to wake up in a world where we go from the crisis that we're in now to one where social media companies start to compete on their safety records. But if it's going to be like that, we need to start it's got to start somewhere. We're working to do that. But again, we don't want to be the only ones. We're publishing what we do. We're sharing it. Because I think this is deeply important, both as a CEO of a tech company and as a parent. I've got an 11-year-old daughter, and I hope we can make a difference in the world that she and everybody's young people gets to grow up in.

Jonathan Haidt 10:04

But I'd just like to testify for Bill for a moment, because Bill's example, I think, is really important for us as we think about what kind of world is possible. Bill reached out to me about a month after the book came out. He read it, he reached out to me, said, "Can we talk? I'd like to help." And we had a call, and I learned that he did things like—so like, you know, the two really bad things about social media, the main two of the 15 reasons why it's harming kids are, it's putting children in contact with anonymous strangers, and terrible things happen. And Bill said, "Wait, why are we doing this?" And he just raised—he just said, if you're under 16, the social features are turned off, turned off. No one else had done that. People thought they were going to lose customers. But as Bill said, it turns out, people actually want to be on a platform that's safe. So Bill showed it's possible—it's possible, to be a leader on this, and he's been calling for phone-free schools. Now, I was hoping—there are one or two other CEOs that reached out from other companies, but nothing's really happened. Is there anyone else, or is it just you so far?

Bill Ready 11:03

Well, you know, this is why I said we wanted to prove there was a more positive business model in this. Because, you know, while this may be a place that thoughtful regulation can help, I don't want to sit around and wait for that. This is too big a crisis for that. And I think every day that we prove that there's a real business in this, I think, hopefully, you know, we want to attract others to that. And I think others are taking notice that, like you have seen, some of the policies get better, we're still the only ones that do private only for under 16. Because we did, we looked at it and we thought it just wasn't safe for children to be, you know, reachable by strangers online. So, you know, we turned off those social features. And initially, when we did that our—you know, people thought that would destroy our business with young people, interestingly. And at that time, when I came into Pinterest, Pinterest was sort of aging up and aging out. Pinterest had sort of missed the next generation. When we did private only for under 16, people thought that like, okay, well, that's the death knell. You're never going to win with young people. Gen Z is now more than 40% of our platform. It's our largest, fastest-growing demographic. And if you ask them why, two things they'll reliably say: the first is, they see Pinterest as an oasis away from the toxicity they experience elsewhere. Because they'll talk about how they've, you know, been harassed in other places, how, you know, they've all had somebody reaching out with commenting on—either direct harassment or just the fact that it's comparative and performative, and they feel like they're always sort of chasing what other people are telling them what to be, and they see it as an oasis away from that toxicity. And then the others will say, "Pinterest just gets me," because we're using AI for a lot of good things, and help them figure out the things that are, you know, meaningful for them; where they're finding meaning; what they're passionate about; how they're connecting with friends; what do they want to do to make their lives better? And that's really resonating, too, and

so—but these are both part of the work of like, protect from the harms, but also, you know, again, if it could be tuned to keep you glued to a screen, why can't it be tuned to help you do things, or to help you have real impact in your real life that make you feel better, and then that's actually working.

Rebecca O. Bagley 13:05

I thought it was interesting earlier when—[Applause]. I thought it was interesting earlier when you talked about seat belts, because that's one of the things we say, things can change quickly for the positive to you know, you think about tobacco sensation, seat belts like relatively short cycles. And that's why, two years ago, we launched the 90-90-90 by 2033. So setting out a set of goals for the full mental health movement, not just the Kennedy Forum's role, but saying 90% of people screen, 90% getting the evidence-based treatments they need, and then 90% moving towards recovery by 2033. So thinking about that, that it can't just be an individual actor, that it really has to be—and one of the things we're doing this year is a tactical plan for companies around how do you contribute to get to the 90s? So that idea of, let's be in this together, so that you don't have to be that isolated, you know?

Savannah Sellers 13:59

And I do believe that Bill, you're walking the walk at Pinterest. I was part of a team at NBC News that did a fairly tough report on Pinterest and some predatory behavior that we had seen on the app, and I was honestly nervous to tell Bill when I met him in the speaker room earlier, like "I was part of that team," and he actually thanked me. He said we found something that we didn't know was going on the platform, and pretty immediately we changed it. Do you think when you look at the purpose and the functionality of other social media platforms that maybe are causing some more of the mental health issues that we think of when we have this discussion—are there changes that can be made with what those business models are that are simply not being made for profitability or for whatever reason?

Bill Ready 14:42

You know, absolutely, I think we're proving that it's possible, right? It doesn't mean that it's easy, right? I said, you know, our business took a hit. People thought it was going to destroy us with young people, but then we end up winning with young people for this reason. But it's really short term versus long term. But things that I would point to, you know, private only for under 16, where, again, we sort of turned off the social features. You know, I think those are things that you've seen other platforms do some things moving in that direction. None have gone to private only. Some have done, you know, more private, or defaulting it on, but then giving you lots of turn it off, or, you know, those kinds of things, but I think it's possible. I think the other one, if you step all the way back, this issue of, you know, tuning AI to maximize your view time, which is what has happened across social media—I think that has just led to a race to the bottom. And I think that one of the most consequential things that's sort of happening right now is there's all this discussion of a discussion of AI, but I think you have, broadly speaking, a couple different camps within this discussion on AI. And there's one camp that is saying, yes, it's really important to win in AI, but in doing so, you need to be intentional and have guard rails and think about the consequences and safety. In fact, even if you can't foresee all of them, are you doing the best you can to look at that? And by the way,

I don't think we're the only ones in that. I would say Anthropic is unconstitutional AI. Google DeepMind has done some good things on principles, but I think there's that camp, and we're trying to be part of that. We've done inclusive AI and those kinds of things that say—oh, let's make sure that we're showing people not just what the average fashion model looks like, but show people like, what a real—what's the population look like? And by the way, back to showing is good for business. When we did inclusive AI diversity by default, body type ranges, so that people could see, you know, oh, people come in all shapes and sizes. It's okay. I can see more people like me than you know, whatever that is for you. That's actually one of our highest engagement features. It doesn't have to be bad for business like that was—we wanted proof that you can do well by doing good. But back to this debate that's happening. So I think there's some people that are—you know, and we're in this camp of saying, like, it's important to win at AI, but you can do so with guard rules. You can do so with intentionality and do so with safety in mind. And there's another camp that's saying, well, the only way to win at AI is to throw caution to the wind, let it all rip. And I think that's a really, really important debate that's happening right now. And I think if you then take it a step further—in the earlier dialog, the other discussion was there's much like, "oh, back when we only had 13 channels,"—I grew up in a little town in Kentucky and we only had four channels. [Laughter] But the crazy thing is that, you know, while the creation of media has fragmented tremendously—anybody being a content creator now, right—the distribution of media is more concentrated than perhaps it's ever been. When you think about where you consume that media, it's only a few platforms, and those few platforms—as they tune their algorithms, as they put AI in charge of what you see—they're making a form of editorial choice. Now we're saying what our editorial choice is that we want to tune to show you more things that are inspiring and uplifting and help you do things in the real world. So you're not just glued to a screen all day, and not just sort of, you know, thinking of your mental health as a consequence to how to get more dollars. But to say, hey, we actually want to be additive for people. Well, you know, others are making editorial choices too. How do we look for more intentionality? And answer to your question about are the things that others can do? I think that I'd put at the very top of the list is one: how are they thinking about the use of AI? What are their guard rails? Are they choosing to throw caution to the wind, or are they being intentional about guardrails? And the second is, any place you look for media is making some form of editorial choice, not in the same way that you know a publication can review every piece of content, but in the way they tune the platform. What are their editorial choices? Are they looking for the most salacious? Are they looking for the most polarizing? Are they looking for what gets you the most sort of fired up and triggered, or are they making a different choice? And I think that's a really important conversation, and everybody can be part of that.

Savannah Sellers 18:55

Marketa, do you see a way for big professional organizations in this space, like the APA to intervene in a way that could help or provide guidelines, provide guardrails?

Marketa Wills 19:07

I do. I do. We are a 501(c)(6) and so we're there to truly advocate and advance policy and shape policy. The American Psychiatric Association, along with our sister organization, the American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, as early as 2018 was publishing position statements on the risks involved in social media, particularly as it pertains to adolescents and also other vulnerable populations. Where I think the strongest work has been done in the professional society space has been the American Academy of Pediatrics. The American

Academy of Pediatrics has what they call a center of excellence for mental health and social media. It is funded by SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration by a grant. It is a technical assistance center, it has resource documents for parents, for children, for school districts, to begin to think about policy. It provides resource documents to be able to figure out what—how to have conversations with your child about it in school. So we believe that there's always more that can be done. We're grateful for folks like Jonathan who have shown a light to the lay public on these critical issues, and look forward to partnering going forward in transforming.

Jonathan Haidt 20:29

I just want to say on—so I appreciate that the American Psychiatric Association has made statements about this, but I think Marketa and I have a different view about the American Academy of Pediatrics—which we talked about in about in a slightly heated but still friendly pre-discussion—that I think it's now clear that social media is just dangerous for kids. It's wildly inappropriate for children. And I think it's time that medical associations started saying "children should not be on these things." [Applause] Instead, you know, what we're mostly getting from American medical is—some Europeans are acting on this—we're mostly getting is, "Well, you know, each child is different, and talk to your children and try to understand it, what they're—what are they watching? And I think that, you know, this is—we should—we need to treat this like gambling or smoking or any other deliberately addictive activity that has been shown to harm literally millions of children. Snapchat—there was—in various lawsuits it's come out—Snapchat, in 2022 was getting 10,000 reports of sextortion from its users, not a year—a month. And I brought this up with their leadership. They didn't refute it, they didn't say they fixed it. So I don't know what's going on there, but it is just insanely inappropriate to have children talking with strangers on for-profit platforms that are using algorithms to addict them. And I wish that the AAP and every other medical association would give us clear guidance not "talk to your children and try to understand," but children should not be on these. We need an age limit, I believe it should be 16, really it should be 18. But my goal is, let's have a norm that we could actually all do, because if some kids are on it, they all have to be on it. So I don't know, would you agree what I said about AAP?

Marketa Wills 22:12

I appreciate your views on that. What I would say is that parents often times don't even know all that's going on in social media. And so what the American Academy of Pediatrics is doing is really educating parents about the various risks so that they can have informed conversations with their children. The 5C Model is the model that's being proselytized now by the AAP, which really is child centric, focusing on your child's profession—development. Understanding, are they on there for friendship, or are they on there because they have an emerging artistic talent that they're cultivating, and so being able to tease that through—not every child becomes addicted. Look, I have people in my practice who are addicted to social media. I don't treat children, but I do know that that is something that's happening. But we also think that parents need to take an important role in ensuring that their children are safe, that parents need to be educated about the tool as well. So, you know, I don't think there's much disagreement on the fact that there is a problem. I think we all agree that there's a problem, and I think we all do agree that there are policy solutions that can be put in place to help that as well.

Bill Ready 23:27

I think to that point, I think one of the things that's really encouraging, you know, I've talked about things that we've done as a platform, but, you know, we've also been an outspoken advocate for things like the Kids Online Safety Act, for things like phone-free schools. And for a little while, I had my sort of embarrassing thing that I didn't want to talk about, which was, like, as much as I was publicly advocating for phone-free schools, my daughter's school hadn't gone to phone free yet. And so I was, like, advocating within the school of like, "hey, we've got to do this." And, you know, Jon, you've talked about this a bunch, and it's completely accurate. This is the definition of a collective action problem. So the more people—whether it's regulators, policy makers, sort of, you know, other authoritative sources—that come out and talk about this, the better it is. Because, you know, if you look at the phone-free school movement,—and we experience this in our own school—you know, a lot of the things that you know, the principals and the teachers are worried about—as much as they will say, "yes, it's definitely a problem in the classroom"—what, you know, what the parents are worried about is like—well, every day is a fight with their kids about screen time already, and they don't want it to be one more fight. And if only one family does it, or a few families do it, you know, the parents are up against sort of an impossible task, which is—and by the way, you know, there's some studies on this too, Jon, you've done fantastic work, sort of bringing these together; I'm sure you can talk more about this—but that, you know, if you're the only one in your friend group that's out, or the only one in the class that's out, or the only one of a few that's out, you know, that's also bad for your mental health, too, because there's the fear of missing out; you become ostracized, all these things. So it is a collective action problem that you need everybody out of it. Back to personal experience, when my daughter's school went phone free, I was like, "oh my gosh." You know, just, sitting at the bus stop where, like, all the kids are looking at their phone waiting to get on the bus. There's no sound,where you go on campus for events, and you see the kids walking around campus and they're just looking at their phone as they're walking around. And when they switched, the thing that—you could feel it—but that you'd hear the teachers saying, parents saying, like, "Oh my gosh, it sounds like a school again," because the kids are talking to each other, right? You can see it, and the kids are happier. And you hear this time and time again. We've advocated with governors on both sides of the aisle around the country that are considering these policies. But as you look at the schools that have done this, it's similar feedback almost every time. There's lots of angst going into it. "Oh my gosh. I can't let it go." By the way, if you're addicted to this thing, like, okay, that's why. But then once you're on the other side of it, like, oh my gosh, it's so much better. They all say it, yeah. And you know, one last thing I'd share is, like, back to—because one of the questions like, is, like, "Well, yeah, but Bill, like, is that putting it on to others of policy makers?" I was like, well, we as tech platforms have things we can do too. So not only did we advocate for phone-free schools, we're launching a prompt that if we see someone open the app that's of school age during school hours, we're giving them a prompt that says, "Come back and see us after school." And by the way, here's a link you could click on to turn off all the notifications on the device, all of them, so you can just focus. [Applause]

Jonathan Haidt 26:35

That's leadership.

Savannah Sellers 26:37

Rebecca, one of the things that I was honored that you were willing to share when we had this prep conversation was that you wanted to come to this conversation as a mom as well, of several kids who've been through their teen years and the difficulties that you had at that time.

Rebecca O. Bagley 26:50

Yeah, I think maybe just one comment on this; I will definitely get to that. But, you know, I think it's so important what we're talking about, right, cell phones and social media. And I just wanted to bring up that there's such a larger prevention—you know, pieces too, that need to be thought of in the public health context. And sort of like, you know, understanding those life skills with children, and also prevention, you know, as people are in grief or other episodic, you know, situations in their life. And then, of course, there's also that this is a brain illness. So, you know, thinking about the brain as a part of the body and just ensuring that we're not—you know, as a full community and it takes advocates in different areas—you know, not just thinking about one slice of it, but really thinking about the idea that, you know, we wait until stage four, so to speak, in mental illness before we think about, you know, you have to take somebody to the emergency room. You know, there's not this, this ramp up from prevention and things like dealing with phone use—through therapy, through a system, through, you know, this, this process—where hopefully you don't get to that stage four. So I just wanted to bring up that larger context and to put it then back in the personal, like we have our youngest daughter is diagnosed bipolar and BPD. She's 18 now and—12, you know, sort of the hell started, right, where it was behavioral issues and other things coming to light, and so we were on a journey as a family around, you know, how do we get the right care? You know, I am not a psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist, and as a mother, I had to figure out, like, what care at what time? Of course, with my husband—don't mean to leave him out of it. But also, you know, how you pay for it? And so I come to this work a lot with that lens, and now we're raising four kids, two of our own and two that we brought into the home, and two of them have, you know, diagnosed mental health issues. And I was saying to Jon before this that my kids were born 2006 and 2008 and they didn't get cell phones till they were 13, which was a big deal. And so I feel like, you know, we did well there, you know, from the standpoint of what you guys are talking about, but I think it is like just really difficult situation for parents to figure out kind of what—how to manage all of that. And then, of course, when you're in a mental health crisis, like how to manage that system?

Marketa Wills 29:24

The thing that I'm most energized about is how the national conversation has really opened up around mental health. I think that there was one silver lining from my perspective of COVID; it was that we all understood how critically important our own mental health was, and it allowed us to have these public health oriented conversations about, how do we improve mental health? As Rebecca said, integration of physical health and behavioral health is so important. One thing that we know is people who live with schizophrenia die 10 to 15 years earlier than those who don't have schizophrenia, and they die not because of their mental health condition, but because of their physical health conditions that people don't treat—so cardiac disease, diabetes, etc. And so now we're being able to have these open, honest conversations about public health interventions from—that impact homelessness, that impact criminalization of mental illness, that impact safety in our communities. And so I would love to have conversations with—continue having that national conversation about what we can do from a mental health perspective. Oh, and we didn't even talk about substance abuse. Really grateful about the opioid fight that has been launched under T1 and has continued under the Biden administration. We—for the first time, have seen a

decrease in deaths due to opioid overdose because of naloxone being put out into the streets that reverse it—chemical. So just really happy that the public conversation has changed, that we're thinking in a public health way about suicide prevention, 988 crisis lines, and people are able to have these conversations.

Bill Ready 30:57

One of the things I'd add to that, that's, I think, really, you know, is really encouraging is that, as there's been a sort of, you know—it's been destigmatized to talk about these things. You know, one of the things we see, especially with young people, it's a place we focus a lot in all and what we can do as a platform—but it's, how do we contribute to this, you know, to helping with this problem more broadly. And you know, as this conversation has become destigmatized, we're also seeing that as it becomes more okay to talk about it, there's other interesting ways to help. So one of the things that we did in partnership with AmeriCorps and the Schultz Family Foundation, is we launched a Youth Mental Health Corps. So it's like, okay, yes, you know, if you can get to a mental health professional, like, that's fantastic. But maybe before that, even if there's someone that's your age, or maybe just a few years older than you, that's actually been trained in how to help you get to the right mental health care, what kind of impact could that have? So we've actually been working to roll that out in states across the country, and to get more young people sort of equipped to actually help other young people that are coping with mental health issues, to help them navigate it, to help them have a conversation, to help them get connected with better resources. But all that, you know, sort of rides on the back of destigmatizing the ability to even have that conversation. And so we're quite excited about that as well. Again, it's a huge problem. We need multi-faceted solutions, and I think that actually lays some foundation for more of those kinds of solutions

Rebecca O. Bagley 32:22

I love—I was gonna say I love that too. Because, you know, thinking about—it is pretty amazing, like when any of us—and Jason was talking about it earlier, like that thing that you say that you don't know how much impact it has. And so having these people equipped, you know, like my son texted me a week and a half ago and said, "I am not doing well." Of course, it was at nine o'clock at night, because that's when all 18 and 20 year olds text their mothers to say they're not doing well. But you know, he was going into finals, and there was like that, that hour and a half that I spent on the phone with him, I really do feel like it was the difference between—he doesn't finish the semester and he, you know, and he starts to take steps towards, like, moving towards that. And so just a conversation with a trusted adult, with somebody who's trained to have that conversation, like, can be such a big difference. So I love when you guys announced that that was an amazing partnership.

Jonathan Haidt 33:17

So I'd like to add on. As Marketa said, the conversation is being broadened. We're looking at more. You know, this is a gigantic tidal wave, and there's multiple causes. In the spirit of "yes, and," what I'd like to add on here is the role of free play, which has been decimated in American children, and not just American children. It turns out, all the English-speaking countries other than New Zealand, stopped letting kids out. Stopped letting them climb trees. They might get hurt. And, you know, the way that, the way that I think we need to think about this is not just like, what are the platforms doing? How can we make those platforms better? Don't focus on the platforms. Focus on

childhood. What is a healthy childhood—and a healthy childhood—we're mammals: we play, it needs to be running around, putting your arms around your friend, wrestling, sometimes, laughing, a lot, eye contact, flirting when you're older. The kids need all these things. And as soon as they get mesmerized by the devices, those things largely stop. At least they get cut by 50–90%. Hobbies, reading books, all this stuff goes away. What we need to really be looking at is, how do we get over our own fears of letting our children out? Almost all of us in this room were out by the age of eight, riding around on bicycles, visiting friends, beginning to develop some capacities. And sometime in the 90s, as the crime rate was plummeting in this country, we freaked out about child abduction. We began thinking, if you let your kid go two aisles over in the supermarket, someone's going to kidnap him, and what bring him out screaming through the door—like I don't know what we were thinking, but we clamped down on childhood play in the 1990s. So this is what we need to do, is not just take away the bad stuff. We need to give our kids back some fun, some adventure, some independence. So I urge you to go to letgrow.org. This is Lenore Skenazy, wrote the book Free Range Kids. She and I created this group to really help parents and schools give kids back the independence. That's a big piece of this, I believe.

Savannah Sellers 33:49

I think two of the things that we've heard a real response in this room today on is the idea of phone-free schools and the idea of no social media before the age of 16. For people who are in this room who think, "Gosh, I wish that was the reality for my kid, but it's not right now, it's not a phone free school" and Bill to your point, you don't want to be the only one that's left out—that has its own set of issues. What are steps that should start to be taken now for parents? Jon, I'll start with you.

Jonathan Haidt 35:36

Sure. Well, the main thing is, parents need support. It's very hard to do it if you're the only one, as we've been saying, and so that support could come from you just talking to the parents of your kids friends. If you have a few other families doing it, your kid won't feel left out. The best place to work is the school, because you have a community that really is investing a lot, you have a lot of social capital. So if your kid can text you during the day, I guarantee you, your kid is not learning as much as they would. Because if any kid is texting, every kid has to check. So phone-free schools, this is happening at lightning speed. There is really no argument against it. That has to be done very, very quickly. And then the biggest thing of all would be raising the age. If you give me raising the age to 16 and enforcing it, versus all the other fine tuning to make it safer for eight year olds. I'll take this. So those are the biggest things. For parents whose kids are older, just more specific advice. It's very hard to take your kid off and then they'll be cut off entirely from their existing social networks, but you can do a lot to limit it so that it doesn't take up every waking moment of their day. And so things like, just no screens in the bedroom after 10 o'clock. You might have a policy in the house of "No, you can't use your phone during the day when you're at home. The phone is only when you're out traveling." What I do with my students at NYU, the most powerful things they do is just get social media off your phone. Yes, you can still—you need to check it sometimes, you can do it on your computer. But when it's when it's on the phone that it will take every moment when you could be talking with other kids or just daydreaming. So there's a lot that parents can do, even if their kids are already deep into it.

Rebecca O. Bagley 36:47

We did that with cars. They couldn't use their phones in the car. Because that was like, the only time that we were, like, interacting, you know, driving them around, and, of course, at dinner as well. But yeah.

Savannah Sellers 37:22

I have a tactical audience question on this here. It says, "Is there a safety concern for parents with phone-free schools? And what exactly does it mean, no phone at all, or certain controls during school hours?"

Jonathan Haidt 37:31

No phone at all! You have to lock the phone up as soon as the kid arrives, and you have to keep it locked up until the end of the day. And if I could just address the security concern, because there is one argument made against it. But if you think about it for a moment, it's the opposite. The argument is, what if there's a school shooter? I want to be able to talk to my child, and unfortunately, we do have to think about that. But here's what the safety experts say: If there was a school shooter, yes, you would want to talk to your child, but we have to do what's best for the child, not what's best for you. And what's best for the child is: in an emergency, you don't want everyone pulling out their phone and calling their parents. You want everyone doing what they drilled to do, being quiet, paying attention to their surroundings, following directions. That's what you do in a school shooting, and if the kids have phones, they're all going to be on their phones. So as I said, there is actually no argument against phone-free schools that I've ever heard that is valid.

Marketa Wills 38:24

And if you're interested in thinking about that for your own school, you can go on to the American Associate Academy of Psychiatry. They—Pediatrics, I'm sorry—their center of excellence has resource documents on how to implement safe, no school—no phone that's in the school policies for your jurisdiction.

Savannah Sellers 38:43

When we talk, Marketa, about scalable solutions like this, potentially being one when it comes to young people, what else are you excited about? What else would you like to see happen and soon?

Marketa Wills 38:47

So soon for me, one of the things that I think about is the public health around homelessness, one of the things about schizophrenia is that people oftentimes don't know that they have the disorder, and so you have people that bump around in and out of hospitals for 24 hour stays. Families know they need help, but they can't get the person the help that they need. So if we had compassionate treatment over objection orders for people who didn't know that they had mental illness, I think that would be a long way for us to go as a society. One of the things that

oftentimes happens is that in the 1960s when civil rights came in and we de-institutionalized, we put people into—in our communities, but we didn't have the infrastructure in place to help with that, and so we see homelessness as well. Supportive housing is another policy intervention, but I think there's a lot of excitement about—on both sides of the aisle—to think about, how do we support housing for people who are undomiciled and living in the streets of our communities? I think that would help with safety. I think that would help on a lot of other issues, and those are two that I'm most passionate and excited about.

Savannah Sellers 39:34

And Rebecca, in terms, again, in solutions, when you talk about your 90-90-90 initiative, how are you doing on that road?

Rebecca O. Bagley 40:11

So we have a dashboard on our website that KPMG helped us develop pro bono that measures it. But I would say, like, some of the driving factors from a systems level is reimbursement rates for mental health services. So psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and what they're getting reimbursed is a huge issue, huge disparities. Who we interact with, like you were talking about AmeriCorps, Bill, you know the idea of like, having peers, having others. So it's a workforce issue across the board, both in payment and engagement. So that is one thing that can change actually, really quickly. And it's driven a lot by, you know, Medicaid, Medicare and commercial insurance. So changes in that, you know, can shift quickly those issues.

Savannah Sellers 40:59

Bill, I would love to know from you what is one thing that you would charge other social media CEOs with doing and doing soon?

Bill Ready 41:07

I would love to see us—I would love to see us start to have a standard for measuring impact on well-being by platforms. Because I think if we could create a standard and measure that, I think that could become a baseline in the same way that—you know what were sort of the precursors to auto manufacturers competing on safety records? You needed crash test ratings, then you could have informed consumers say, "Oh, now I understand, you know what, which automobile is safer for me to put my kids in?" And you can make an informed choice. I'd love to see us get to standards around these things, and so, you know that may require, just as it did with auto manufacturers, some baseline of thoughtful regulation, things like that. But you again, you don't have to wait for that. We, you know, we started publishing and committed to doing that on an ongoing basis. We're going to measure our own impact on well-being. We're going to publish those results. We're going to publish the, you know, not only the results of that, but how we commit to making it better each year, the things that we find that actually have positive impact. We're not just sort of hoarding those to compete on them. We're sharing them

because we want others to do them too. So, you know, those were the sort of the foundations of the Inspired Internet Pledge I mentioned. But it was a call on the industry to, I think, from those actions, if we can measure it, we can report it, commit to being better—not perfect, but better—and then commit to sharing what actually works. Hopefully that can start to create, you know, some positive progress across the industry. And there is some of that, right? You do see some policies changing for, you know, privacy and safety, for youth, things like that. I don't think it's nearly what it needs to be, but there is some progress there, but we just need a lot more. And I'd say for every couple steps forward, there's some backward where, you know, at some point, I used to think that some of these were unintended consequences. I think at some point you have to look at the actions of some companies, and I never named specific companies, but you have to look at some companies that make choices to launch features that clearly are going to have these impacts. And those may be when I was in business school, I remember a professor saying that, you know, bad management gets the unions they deserve. And I think there's a related point of like, bad management will get the regulations they deserve. And when you see some of these where, you know, companies are launching things that are clearly monetizing youth anxiety, "where do you rank in your friend group? "Oh, I could tell you where you rank in your friend group for $5 a month." You know, okay, like, that's pretty directly, you know. That's not an unintended consequence, you know. Or if you're saying, "oh, like, I have to let you know, have to have no guard rails on my AI chat bots so that I can win on AI." Okay, that may be inviting those kinds of things, but I'd hope that as an industry, we can be more proactive than that, because I do think this industry needs accountability, and my hope is that we can start to take more accountability on our own. But if we don't, I think it'll be foisted upon the industry, hopefully first and foremost, just by the powers of the market, which is why I first go with like, let's propose a good, positive business model, and that people will will make a more informed choice towards something that is better for them. You know, I hope others follow suit in that, and that can create competition. But you know, if that alone doesn't work, and I think it may be inviting some of these things, where you have to have more thoughtful regulation to address some of that.

Savannah Sellers 41:34

You mentioned earlier, the Kids Online Safety Act, which I think is a good example, though, right, of the industry not getting on board when there is an opportunity to do so. We have seen most—

Bill Ready 44:43

We came out in support of it.

Savannah Sellers 44:45

You did. I believe Twitter did, but most social media CEOs have not done so.

Jonathan Haidt 44:50

And they worked against it very actively.

Savannah Sellers 44:52

That's exactly right. Lots of lobbying going on behind the scenes to try to even keep it from from coming to the floor on the Hill.

Jonathan Haidt 44:59

Yeah, I just wanted to say, so the United—the US Congress, in a sense, created this problem the 1990s when the internet was new and they were trying to let it grow, and they passed some laws that basically said, as long as a kid is old enough to lie and say that she's 13, companies can do whatever the hell they want to them, and we can't sue them. And that's the way it's been. And then we're surprised that predatory business practices and a mental health crisis erupted. So the one piece of legislation that ever came close to passing was the Kids Online Safety Act, which would have done a number of good things. It would not have raised an age limit. It would not have done big things, but it would have started the ball rolling. It would have required them at least—you know, people can still post videos about how to kill yourself, but the algorithms can't favor those to your child, like things like that. It passed the Senate, 91 to three. It went to the house. It passed out of committee. So much support for it, but the speaker wouldn't move it out, and we know there was just so much lobbying by Meta, in particular, behind the scenes, they spent an enormous amount of money, even in the districts of those leaders. And they fund so many groups that look like look like citizen groups, but are funded by them. So this is why I'm so excited that Australia has done it, and the EU and France and many of the countries are interested. We have real problems in our country, doing difficult things. This is the only bipartisan issue these days, or at least it's one of the very few truly bipartisan issues. Republicans and Democrats all have kids, and so I'm just so disappointed that it didn't pass. There's a chance it'll be brought up again. But if you have—room of influential people, if you know people in Congress or in the Republican Party in particular, and some people in Trump's inner circle have actually been supportive. So this is really not a partisan issue, but if you have any influence, please urge them to promote and pass COSA. That would be the biggest thing that our Congress could do.

Rebecca O. Bagley 46:59

We talk about that a lot, that mental health is a bipartisan issue. I mean, it really, you know, we're all one degree of separation from somebody who's been impacted or we're impacted ourselves. And know how hard it is to navigate all of those things. But you know, you brought it up, it's, you know, and if Patrick was here, he would talk about it fervently, which is, you know, mental health community has not understood how to do the politics as well, and certainly not in and you said, money in districts, you know, having the repercussions, basically, of how you vote, like those things are so important to get things done at the federal level, in particular—well, state level too—local level. And so—and we have not been organized. So it's great if you know people to influence, but there is a system in which the system is influenced, and it includes advocacy, people, nonprofits, for-profits and money. You know, behind that.

Savannah Sellers 47:52

We just have a few minutes, and I do have a couple audience questions. The first one—a warning on the content, and thank you for whoever shared this—it says my 12-year-old daughter attempted suicide last summer. She's been in a therapeutic boarding school since, and comes home next month. They attribute her action to the normalization of negative mental health behaviors like self harm online. Would you suggest I keep her off the internet entirely or allow it in small doses?

Rebecca O. Bagley 47:53

Can I just say whoever that is, before we answer the question, like, if you want to talk to me afterwards, I have lots of advice about bringing a child home from that situation. So, happy to talk to you, whoever you are, so go ahead.

Jonathan Haidt 48:29

Yeah. Well, actually, we defer to the psychiatrist. [Inaudible]

Marketa Wills 48:33

In this situation, I would not allow small doses until you've assessed the situation and have her come home without it. That would be my recommendation, from a clinical perspective, to not allow online if it and when you do begin to do online, to do it in a supervised setting when that's time is appropriate. So my answer would be no.

Rebecca O. Bagley 48:57

And we did that, by the way, so I'll reinforce that if you talk to me afterwards.

Savannah Sellers 49:01

And John, to make that a little bit broader, when we think about—you mentioned what we've seen happen specifically with girls, the types of content that's available about self harm, about body image for parents, more broadly. Do you have advice on that?

Jonathan Haidt 49:13

Yes, well first, content matters, and we're horrified when our kids are shown suicide promoting content or these chat bots that Meta is introducing, where they took off the guard rails, your kids can have sex talk with the chat bots on all the products. So that stuff is insane. But I'm sorry, what's the question again? Sorry.

Savannah Sellers 49:35

Advice for the fact that especially girls are going to be encountering content like that, and how parents can handle it.

Jonathan Haidt 49:41

That's right. So well, actually, I'm sorry I thought you were asking about the boys. So we should say something about the boys situation. So what I've discovered—I focused originally on social media making girls anxious and depressed. That's where the evidence is the best. But what I've discovered since the book came out, especially, is that for boys, the story is more complicated, and it's not specifically social media. It's not specifically video games, although 10% do have problematic behavior that's really, really bad. It's the combination of everything. It's open season on boys dopamine systems. It's the video games, it's the porn, it's the vaping, it's the sports gambling, it's the crypto investing. Boys and young men are so easily lured onto screen-based activities that are exciting and a little bit risky in that online world. And when they spend so much time on it, it down-regulates their dopamine system, so that when they're not on a screen, everything is boring and painful and hard to attend to, like school, like a class. So if we check into the kids at 14, it looks like the girls are doing worse because they're more depressed and anxious. But if we check in on the kids in their mid 20s, turns out the girls went on with their education. They got a job, and the boys are more likely to still just be hooked on screen-based activities living at home. So I think we're devastating our boys and in the long run—and it's hard to compare—but in the long run, I think the damage might even be greater on the boys. It just wasn't so clearly diagnosable.

Savannah Sellers 51:02

One other audience question, and I think we're just about out of time. This is something that was just referenced in the conversation prior given the powerful role of family dynamics in early childhood development: how should we think about co-viewing when caregivers and kids engage with media together as part of scalable mental health solutions and preventative care? I'll start with you again, Marketa.

Marketa Wills 51:21

So co-viewing, I think is, is an important time bonding, that social bonding and connection; Rebecca talked about earlier about prevention and lifestyle medicine, lifestyle psychiatry is an important part of that. One aspect of that is positive social connections and doing things in community, not only co-viewing TV, but also doing sports together, going to movies together, etc. So it's definitely a part of the prevention to have that strong social fabric and social network that wraps around our children.

Jonathan Haidt 51:54

If I could just add on, stories are good things. Humans are storytelling animals. We humans have always raised their children in stories. So if you're sitting watching a movie with your kids—not when they're two or three, that's too young—but you know, when they're five or six, if you're—or siblings are watching a movie about characters moving through a moral world, and they have to attend to this movie for 90 minutes, that's great. There's no problem with that. And yes, co-viewing, for the reasons that Marketa said, the social aspect. We grew up on television, you fight with your siblings over who gets to watch what, but you watch it together. The bad thing that I think you should not do to your kids until they're 14 is iPad time. "Here, kid, here's a digital pacifier. It can do 1000 things, but you're going to end up watching short videos. Here you go. Have at it." That's what we are doing to our two-year-olds. 40% of American two-year-olds have their own iPad. If you add on those with their own iPhone, you're over 50%. This is insane. So co-viewing stories is good. Watching short videos is really, really bad for brain development. Don't let your kids do it, no TikTok at all.

Savannah Sellers 52:55

Rebecca, Jon, Bill, Marketa, thank you all so much. Fascinating conversation. Really good take home advice. Appreciate it. [Applause]

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