

THE CODDLING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

HOW GOOD INTENTIONS
AND BAD IDEAS ARE
SETTING UP A GENERATION
FOR FAILURE

GREG LUKIANOFF
JONATHAN HAIDT



“This book synthesizes the teachings of many disciplines to illuminate the causes of major problems besetting college students and campuses, including declines in mental health, academic freedom, and collegiality. More important, the authors present evidence-based strategies for overcoming these challenges. An engrossing, thought-provoking, and ultimately inspiring read.”

—**Nadine Strossen**, past president, ACLU; professor, New York Law School; and author of *HATE: Why We Should Resist It with Free Speech, Not Censorship*

“We can talk ourselves into believing that some kinds of speech will shatter us, or we can talk ourselves out of that belief. The authors know the science. We are not as fragile as our self-appointed protectors suppose. Read this deeply informed book to become a more resilient soul in a more resilient democracy.”

—**Philip E. Tetlock**, professor, University of Pennsylvania, and author of *Superforecasting*

“This book is a much-needed guide for how to thrive in a pluralistic society. Lukianoff and Haidt demonstrate how ancient wisdom and modern psychology can encourage more dialogue across lines of difference, build stronger institutions, and make us happier. They provide an antidote to our seemingly intractable divisions, and not a moment too soon.”

—**Kirsten Powers**, CNN political analyst, *USA Today* columnist, and author of *The Silencing*

“A compelling and timely argument against attitudes and practices that, however well-intended, are damaging our universities, harming our children, and leaving an entire generation intellectually and emotionally ill-prepared for an ever more fraught and complex world. A brave and necessary work.”

—**Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**, Emeritus Chief Rabbi of UK & Commonwealth; professor, New York University; and author of *Not in God's Name*

“Objectionable words and ideas, as defined by self-appointed guardians on university campuses, are often treated like violence from sticks and stones. Many students cringe at robust debate; maintaining their ideas of good and evil requires no less than the silencing of disagreeable speakers. Lukianoff and Haidt brilliantly explain how this drift to fragility occurred, how the distinction between words and actions was lost, and what needs to be done. Critical reading to understand the current campus conflicts.”

—**Mark Yudof**, president emeritus, University of California; and professor emeritus, UC Berkeley School of Law

“I lament the title of this book, as it may alienate the very people who need to engage with its arguments and obscures its message of inclusion. Equal parts mental health manual, parenting guide, sociological study, and political manifesto, it points to a positive way forward of hope, health, and humanism. I only wish I had read it when I was still a professor and a much younger mother.”

—**Anne-Marie Slaughter**, president and CEO, New America; and author of *Unfinished Business*

BY GREG LUKIANOFF

*Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of
American Debate*

Freedom from Speech

*FIRE's Guide to Free Speech on Campus (With Harvey
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BY JONATHAN HAIDT

*The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient
Wisdom*

*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics
and Religion*

*All Minus One: John Stuart Mill's Ideas on Free Speech
Illustrated (With Richard Reeves and Dave Cicirelli)*

The Coddling of the American Mind

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ARE SETTING UP A GENERATION FOR FAILURE**

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

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Excerpt from “Professors like me can’t stay silent about this extremist moment on campuses” by Lucía Martínez Valdivia.
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Version_1

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

FOLK WISDOM, origin unknown

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

BUDDHA, *Dhammapada*¹

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

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN, *The Gulag Archipelago*²

For our mothers, who did their best to prepare us for the road.

JOANNA DALTON LUKIANOFF

ELAINE HAIDT (1931–2017)

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The Search for Wisdom

This is a book about wisdom and its opposite. The book grows out of a trip that we (Greg and Jon) took to Greece in August of 2016. We had been writing about some ideas spreading through universities that we thought were harming students and damaging their prospects for creating fulfilling lives. These ideas were, in essence, making students less wise. So we decided to write a book to warn people about these terrible ideas, and we thought we'd start by going on a quest for wisdom ourselves. We both work on college campuses; in recent years, we had heard repeated references to the wisdom of Misoponos, a modern-day oracle who lives in a cave on the north slope of Mount Olympus, where he continues the ancient rites of the cult of Koalemos.

We flew to Athens and took a five-hour train ride to Litochoro, a town at the foot of the mountain. At sunrise the next day, we set off on a trail that Greeks have used for thousands of years to seek communion with their gods. We hiked for six hours up a steep and winding path. At noon we came to a fork in the path where a sign said MISOPONOS, with an arrow pointing to the right. The main path, off to the left, looked forbidding: it went straight up a narrow ravine, with an ever-present danger of rockslides.

The path to Misoponos, in contrast, was smooth, level, and easy—a welcome change. It took us through a pleasant grove of pine and fir trees, across a strong wooden pedestrian bridge over a deep ravine, and right to the mouth of a large cave.

Inside the cave we saw a strange scene. Misoponos and his assistants had installed one of those take-a-number systems that you sometimes find in sandwich shops, and there was a line of other seekers ahead of us. We took a number, paid the 100 euro fee to have a private audience with

the great man, performed the mandatory rituals of purification, and waited.

When our turn came, we were ushered into a dimly lit chamber at the back of the cave, where a small spring of water bubbled out from a rock wall and splashed down into a large white marble bowl somewhat reminiscent of a birdbath. Next to the bowl, Misoponos sat in a comfortable chair that appeared to be a Barcalounger recliner from the 1970s. We had heard that he spoke English, but we were taken aback when he greeted us in perfect American English with a hint of Long Island: “Come on in, guys. Tell me what you seek.”

Jon spoke first: “O Wise Oracle, we have come seeking wisdom. What are the deepest and greatest of truths?”

Greg thought we should be more specific, so he added, “Actually, we’re writing a book about wisdom for teenagers, young adults, parents, and educators, and we were kind of hoping that you could boil down your insights into some pithy axioms, ideally three of them, which, if followed, would lead young people to develop wisdom over the course of their lives.”

Misoponos sat silently with his eyes closed for about two minutes. Finally, he opened his eyes and spoke.

“This fountain is the Spring of Koalemos. Koalemos was a Greek god of wisdom who is not as well-known today as Athena, who gets far too much press, in my opinion. But Koalemos has some really good stuff, too, if you ask me. Which you just did. So let me tell you. I will give you three cups of wisdom.”

He filled a small alabaster cup from the water bowl and handed it to us. We both drank from it and handed it back.

“This is the first truth,” he said: “*What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker*. So avoid pain, avoid discomfort, avoid all potentially bad experiences.”

Jon was surprised. He had written a book called *The Happiness Hypothesis*, which examined ancient wisdom in light of modern psychology. The book devoted an entire chapter to testing the opposite of the oracle’s claim, which was most famously stated by Friedrich Nietzsche: “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.”¹ Jon thought there must be some mistake. “Excuse me, Your Holiness,” he said, “but did you really mean to say ‘weaker’? Because I’ve got quotes from many wisdom

traditions saying that pain, setbacks, and even traumatic experiences can make people *stronger*.”

“Did I say ‘weaker?’” asked Misoponos. “Wait a minute . . . is it weaker or stronger?” He squeezed his eyes shut as he thought about it, and then opened his eyes and said, “Yes, I’m right, weaker is what I meant. Bad experiences are terrible, who would want one? Did you travel all this way to have a bad experience? Of course not. And pain? So many oracles in these mountains sit on the ground twelve hours a day, and what does it get them? Circulation problems and lower-back pain. How much wisdom can you dispense when you’re thinking about your aches and pains all the time? That’s why I got this chair twenty years ago. Why shouldn’t I be comfortable?” With clear irritation in his voice, he added, “Can I finish?”

“I’m sorry,” said Jon meekly.

Misoponos filled the cup again. We drank it. “Second,” he continued: “*Always trust your feelings*. Never question them.”

Now it was Greg’s turn to recoil. He had spent years practicing cognitive behavioral therapy, which is based on exactly the opposite advice: feelings so often mislead us that you can’t achieve mental health *until* you learn to question them and free yourself from some common distortions of reality. But having learned to control his immediate negative reactions, he bit his tongue and said nothing.

Misoponos refilled the cup, and we drank again. “Third: *Life is a battle between good people and evil people*.”

We looked at each other in disbelief. Greg could no longer keep quiet: “O Great Oracle of Koalemos,” he began, haltingly, “can you explain that one to us?”

“Some people are good,” Misoponos said slowly and loudly, as if he thought we hadn’t heard him, “and some people are bad.” He looked at us pointedly and took a breath. “There is so much evil in the world. Where does it come from?” He paused as if expecting us to answer. We were speechless. “From evil people!” he said, clearly exasperated. “It is up to you and the rest of the good people in the world to fight them. You must be warriors for virtue and goodness. You can see how bad and wrong some people are. You must call them out! Assemble a coalition of the righteous, and shame the evil ones until they change their ways.”

Jon asked, “But don’t they think the same about us? How can we know that it is *we* who are right and *they* who are wrong?”

Misoponos responded tartly, “Have you learned nothing from me today? Trust your feelings. Do you *feel* that you are right? Or do you *feel* that you are wrong? *I feel* that this interview is over. Get out.”

• • • • •

There is no Misoponos,² and we didn’t really travel to Greece to discover these three terrible ideas. We didn’t have to. You can find them on college campuses, in high schools, and in many homes. These untruths are rarely taught explicitly; rather, they are conveyed to young people by the rules, practices, and norms that are imposed on them, often with the best of intentions.

This is a book about three Great Untruths that seem to have spread widely in recent years:

1. The Untruth of Fragility: *What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.*
2. The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: *Always trust your feelings.*
3. The Untruth of Us Versus Them: *Life is a battle between good people and evil people.*

While many propositions are untrue, in order to be classified as a Great Untruth, an idea must meet three criteria:

1. It contradicts ancient wisdom (ideas found widely in the wisdom literatures of many cultures).
2. It contradicts modern psychological research on well-being.
3. It harms the individuals and communities who embrace it.

We will show how these three Great Untruths—and the policies and political movements that draw on them—are causing problems for young people, universities, and, more generally, liberal democracies. To name just a few of these problems: Teen anxiety, depression, and suicide rates have risen sharply in the last few years. The culture on many college campuses has become more ideologically uniform, compromising the ability of scholars to seek truth, and of students to learn from a broad range of thinkers. Extremists have proliferated on the far right and the far

left, provoking one another to ever deeper levels of hatred. Social media has channeled partisan passions into the creation of a “callout culture”; anyone can be publicly shamed for saying something well-intentioned that someone else interprets uncharitably. New-media platforms and outlets allow citizens to retreat into self-confirmatory bubbles, where their worst fears about the evils of the other side can be confirmed and amplified by extremists and cyber trolls intent on sowing discord and division.

The three Great Untruths have flowered on many college campuses, but they have their roots in earlier education and childhood experiences, and they now extend from the campus into the corporate world and the public square, including national politics. They are also spreading outward from American universities to universities throughout the English-speaking world.³ These Great Untruths are bad for everyone. Anyone who cares about young people, education, or democracy should be concerned about these trends.

The Real Origins of This Book

In May of 2014, we (Greg and Jon) sat down for lunch together in New York City’s Greenwich Village. We were there to talk about a puzzle that Greg had been trying to solve for the past year or two. Greg is a First Amendment lawyer. Since 2001, he has been fighting for academic freedom and freedom of speech on campus as the head of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE).⁴ A nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, FIRE is dedicated to defending liberty, freedom of speech, due process, and academic freedom on the country’s college campuses.

Throughout Greg’s career, the calls for campus censorship had generally come from administrators. Students, on the other hand, had always been the one group that consistently supported free speech—in fact, demanded it. But now something was changing; on some campuses, words were increasingly seen as sources of danger. In the fall of 2013, Greg began hearing about students asking for “triggering” material to be removed from courses. By the spring of 2014, *The New Republic*⁵ and *The New York Times*⁶ were reporting on this trend. Greg also noticed an

intensified push from students for school administrators to disinvite speakers whose ideas the students found offensive. When those speakers were not disinvited, students were increasingly using the “heckler’s veto”—protesting in ways that prevented their fellow students from attending the talk or from hearing the speaker. Most concerning to Greg, however, and the reason he wanted to talk to Jon, was the shift in the *justifications* for these new reactions to course materials and speakers.

In years past, administrators were motivated to create campus speech codes in order to curtail what they deemed to be racist or sexist speech. Increasingly, however, the rationale for speech codes and speaker disinvitations was becoming medicalized: Students claimed that certain kinds of speech—and even the content of some books and courses—interfered with their *ability to function*. They wanted protection from material that they believed could jeopardize their mental health by “triggering” them, or making them “feel unsafe.”

To give one example: Columbia University’s “Core Curriculum” (part of the general education requirement for all undergraduates at Columbia College) features a course called Masterpieces of Western Literature and Philosophy.⁷ At one point, this included works by Ovid, Homer, Dante, Augustine, Montaigne, and Woolf. According to the university, the course is supposed to tackle “the most difficult questions about human experience.” However, in 2015, four Columbia undergraduates wrote an essay in the school newspaper arguing that students “need to feel safe in the classroom” but “many texts in the Western canon” are “wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression” and contain “triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom.” Some students said that these texts are so emotionally challenging to read and discuss that professors should issue “trigger warnings” and provide support for triggered students.⁸ (Trigger warnings are verbal or written notifications provided by a professor to alert students that they are about to encounter potentially distressing material.) The essay was nuanced and made some important points about diversifying the literary canon, but is safety versus danger a helpful framework for discussing reactions to literature? Or might that framework itself alter a student’s reactions to ancient texts, creating a feeling of threat and a stress response to what otherwise would have been experienced merely as discomfort or dislike?

Of course, student activism is nothing new; students have been actively trying to shape their learning environment for decades, such as when they joined professors during the “canon wars” of the 1990s (the effort to add more women and writers of color to the lists of “dead white males” that dominated reading lists).⁹ Students in the 1960s and 1970s often tried to keep speakers off campus or prevent speakers from being heard. For example, students at several universities protested lectures by Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson because of his writings about how evolution shaped human behavior—which some students thought could be used to justify existing gender roles and inequalities. (A sign advertising one protest urged fellow students to “bring noisemakers.”¹⁰) But those efforts were not driven by health concerns. Students wanted to block people they thought were espousing evil ideas (as they do today), but back then, they were not saying that members of the school community would be *harmed* by the speaker’s visit or by exposure to ideas. And they were certainly not asking that professors and administrators take a more protective attitude toward them by shielding them from the presence of certain people.

What is new today is the premise that students are fragile. Even those who are not fragile themselves often believe that *others* are in danger and therefore need protection. There is no expectation that students will grow stronger from their encounters with speech or texts they label “triggering.” (This is the Untruth of Fragility: *What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.*)

To Greg, who had suffered from bouts of depression throughout his life, this seemed like a terrible approach. In seeking treatment for his depression, he—along with millions of others around the world—had found that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) was the most effective solution. CBT teaches you to notice when you are engaging in various “cognitive distortions,” such as “catastrophizing” (*If I fail this quiz, I’ll fail the class and be kicked out of school, and then I’ll never get a job . . .*) and “negative filtering” (only paying attention to negative feedback instead of noticing praise as well). These distorted and irrational thought patterns are hallmarks of depression and anxiety disorders. We are not saying that students are never in real physical danger, or that their claims about injustice are usually cognitive distortions. We are saying that even when students are reacting to real problems, they are more likely than

previous generations to engage in thought patterns that make those problems seem more threatening, which makes them harder to solve. An important discovery by early CBT researchers was that if people learn to stop thinking this way, their depression and anxiety usually subside. For this reason, Greg was troubled when he noticed that some students' reactions to speech on college campuses exhibited *exactly the same distortions* that he had learned to rebut in his own therapy. Where had students learned these bad mental habits? Wouldn't these cognitive distortions make students *more* anxious and depressed?

Of course, many things have changed on campus since the 1970s. College students today are far more diverse. They arrive on campus having faced varying degrees of bigotry, poverty, trauma, and mental illness. Educators must account for those differences, reevaluate old assumptions, and strive to create an inclusive community. But what is the best way to do that? If we are especially concerned about the students who have faced the most serious obstacles, should our priority be protecting them from speakers, books, and ideas that might offend them? Or might such protective measures—however well-intentioned—backfire and harm those very students?

All students must be prepared for the world they will face after college, and those who are making the largest jump—the ones most in danger of feeling like strangers in a strange land—are the ones who must learn fastest and prepare hardest. The playing field is not level; life is not fair. But college is quite possibly the best environment on earth in which to come face-to-face with people and ideas that are potentially offensive or even downright hostile. It is the ultimate mental gymnasium, full of advanced equipment, skilled trainers, and therapists standing by, just in case.

Greg worried that if students came to see themselves as fragile, they would stay away from that gym. If students didn't build skills and accept friendly invitations to spar in the practice ring, and if they avoided these opportunities because well-meaning people convinced them that they'd be harmed by such training, well, it would be a tragedy for all concerned. Their beliefs about their own and others' fragility in the face of ideas they dislike would become self-fulfilling prophecies. Not only would students come to *believe* that they can't handle such things, but if they acted on that belief and avoided exposure, eventually they would *become* less able

to do so. If students succeeded in creating bubbles of intellectual “safety” in college, they would set themselves up for even greater anxiety and conflict after graduation, when they will certainly encounter many more people with more extreme views.

Based on Greg’s personal and professional experience, his theory was this: Students were beginning to demand protection from speech because they had unwittingly learned to employ the very cognitive distortions that CBT tries to correct. Stated simply: *Many university students are learning to think in distorted ways, and this increases their likelihood of becoming fragile, anxious, and easily hurt.*

Greg wanted to discuss this theory with Jon because Jon is a social psychologist who has written extensively¹¹ about the power of CBT and its close fit with ancient wisdom. Jon immediately saw the potential in Greg’s idea. As a professor at New York University’s Stern School of Business, he had just begun to see the first signs of this new “fragile student model.” His main research area is moral psychology, and his second book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, was an effort to help people understand different moral cultures, or moral “matrices,” particularly the moral cultures of the political left and right.

The term “matrix,” as Jon used it, comes from the 1984 science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, by William Gibson (which was the inspiration for the later movie *The Matrix*). Gibson imagined a futuristic, internet-like network linking everyone together. He called it “the matrix” and referred to it as “a consensual hallucination.” Jon thought it was a great way to think about moral cultures. A group creates a consensual moral matrix as individuals interact with one another, and then they act in ways that may be unintelligible to outsiders. At the time, it seemed to both of us that a new moral matrix was forming in some pockets of universities and was destined to grow. (Social media, of course, is perfectly designed to help “consensual hallucinations” spread within connected communities at warp speed—on campus and off, on the left and on the right.)

Jon eagerly agreed to join Greg in his attempt to solve this mystery. We wrote an article together exploring Greg’s idea and using it to explain a number of events and trends that had arisen on campus in the previous year or two. We submitted the article to *The Atlantic* with the title “Arguing Towards Misery: How Campuses Teach Cognitive Distortions.”

The editor, Don Peck, liked the article, helped us strengthen the argument, and then gave it a more succinct and provocative title: “The Coddling of the American Mind.”

In that article, we argued that many parents, K-12 teachers, professors, and university administrators have been unknowingly teaching a generation of students to engage in the mental habits commonly seen in people who suffer from anxiety and depression. We suggested that students were beginning to react to words, books, and visiting speakers with fear and anger because they had been taught to exaggerate danger, use dichotomous (or binary) thinking, amplify their first emotional responses, and engage in a number of other cognitive distortions (which we will discuss further throughout this book). Such thought patterns directly harmed students’ mental health and interfered with their intellectual development—and sometimes the development of those around them. At some schools, a culture of defensive self-censorship seemed to be emerging, partly in response to students who were quick to “call out” or shame others for small things that they deemed to be insensitive—either to the student doing the calling out or to members of a group that the student was standing up for. We called this pattern *vindictive protectiveness* and argued that such behavior made it more difficult for all students to have open discussions in which they could practice the essential skills of critical thinking and civil disagreement.

Our article was published on *The Atlantic’s* website on August 11, 2015, and the magazine issue that featured it hit newsstands about a week later. We were expecting a wave of criticism, but many people both on and off campus and from across the political spectrum had noticed the trends we described, and the initial reception of the essay was overwhelmingly positive. Our piece became one of the five most-viewed articles of all time on *The Atlantic’s* website, and President Obama even referred to it in a speech a few weeks later, when he praised the value of viewpoint diversity and said that students should not be “coddled and protected from different points of view.”¹²

By October, we had finished our media appearances related to the article, and both of us were happy to return to our other work. Little did we know that the coming months and years were about to turn not only the academic world but the entire country upside down. Also, in 2016, it

became clear that the Great Untruths and their associated practices were spreading to universities in the United Kingdom,¹³ Canada, and Australia.¹⁴ So in the fall of 2016, we decided to take another, harder look at the questions we had raised in the article, and write this book.

Tumultuous Years: 2015–2017

Looking back from early 2018, it's amazing how much has changed since we published that article in August of 2015. A powerful movement for racial justice had already been launched and was gaining strength with each horrific cell phone video of police killing unarmed black men.¹⁵ That fall, protests over issues of racial justice erupted at dozens of campuses around the country, beginning at the University of Missouri and Yale. It was a level of activism not seen on campus in decades.

Meanwhile, during this period, mass killings filled the news. Terrorists carried out large-scale attacks across Europe and the Middle East.¹⁶ In the United States, fourteen people were killed and more than twenty others injured in an ISIS-inspired shooting in San Bernardino, California;¹⁷ another ISIS-inspired attack, on a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, became the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, with forty-nine people killed,¹⁸ and that number was surpassed just sixteen months later in Las Vegas when a man with what was essentially a machine gun shot and killed fifty-eight people and wounded 851 others at an outdoor concert.¹⁹

And 2016 became one of the strangest years ever in U.S. presidential politics when Donald Trump—a candidate with no prior political experience who had been widely regarded as unelectable because of the many groups of people he had offended—not only won the Republican primary but won the election. Millions turned out across the country to protest his inauguration, cross-partisan hatred surged, and the news cycle came to revolve around the president's latest tweet or latest comment about nuclear war.

Attention returned to campus protests in the spring of 2017 as violence broke out at Middlebury College and—on a scale not seen in decades—at the University of California, Berkeley, where self-described

“anti-fascists” caused hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage to the campus and the town, injuring students and others. Six months later, neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klansmen marched with torches across the grounds of the University of Virginia one day before a white nationalist drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing one of them and injuring others. The year ended with the #MeToo movement, as many women began to publicly share their stories of sexual misconduct and assault, stories that turned out to be common in professions dominated by powerful men.

In this environment, practically anyone of any age and at any point on the political spectrum could make the case for being anxious, depressed, or outraged. Isn't this a sufficient explanation for the unrest and new demands for “safety” on campus? Why return to the issues we raised in our original *Atlantic* article?

“Coddling” Means “Overprotecting”

We have always been ambivalent about the word “coddling.” We didn't like the implication that children today are pampered, spoiled, and lazy, because that is not accurate. Young people today—at a minimum, those who are competing for places at selective colleges—are under enormous pressure to perform academically and to build up a long list of extracurricular accomplishments. Meanwhile, all teens face new forms of harassment, insult, and social competition from social media. Their economic prospects are uncertain in an economy being reshaped by globalization, automation, and artificial intelligence, and characterized by wage stagnation for most workers. So most kids don't have easy, pampered childhoods. But as we'll show in this book, *adults* are doing far more these days to protect children, and their overreach might be having some negative effects. Dictionary definitions of “coddle” emphasize this overprotection; for example, “to treat with extreme or excessive care or kindness.”²⁰ The fault lies with adults and with institutional practices, hence our subtitle: “How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure.” That is exactly what this book is about. 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.

But overprotection is just one part of a larger trend that we call *problems of progress*. This term refers to bad consequences produced by otherwise good social changes. It's great that our economic system produces an abundance of food at low prices, but the flip side is an epidemic of obesity. It's great that we can connect and communicate with people instantly and for free, but this hyperconnection may be damaging the mental health of young people. It's great that we have refrigerators, antidepressants, air conditioning, hot and cold running water, and the ability to escape from most of the physical hardships that were woven into the daily lives of our ancestors back to the dawn of our species. Comfort and physical safety are boons to humanity, but they bring some costs, too. We adapt to our new and improved circumstances and then lower the bar for what we count as intolerable levels of discomfort and risk. By the standards of our great-grandparents, nearly all of us are coddled. Each generation tends to see the one after it as weak, whiny, and lacking in resilience. Those older generations may have a point, even though these generational changes reflect real and positive progress.

To repeat, we are *not* saying that the problems facing students, and young people more generally, are minor or “all in their heads.” We are saying that what people choose to *do* in their heads will determine how those real problems affect them. Our argument is ultimately pragmatic, not moralistic: Whatever your identity, background, or political ideology, you will be happier, healthier, stronger, and more likely to succeed in pursuing your own goals if you do the *opposite* of what Misoponos advised. That means *seeking out challenges* (rather than eliminating or avoiding everything that “feels unsafe”), *freeing yourself from cognitive distortions* (rather than always trusting your initial feelings), and *taking a generous view of other people, and looking for nuance* (rather than assuming the worst about people within a simplistic us-versus-them morality).

What We Will Do in This Book

The story we tell is not simple, and while there are some heroes, there are no clear villains. Our tale is, rather, a social science detective story in which the “crime” was committed by a confluence of social trends and forces. Surprising events began happening on college campuses around 2013 and 2014, and they became stranger and more frequent between 2015 and 2017. In Part I of the book, we set the stage. We give you the intellectual tools you’ll need to make sense of the new culture of “safety” that has swept across many college campuses since 2013. Those tools include learning to recognize the three Great Untruths. Along the way, we’ll explain some of the key concepts of cognitive behavioral therapy, and we’ll show how CBT improves critical thinking skills while counteracting the effects of the Great Untruths.

In Part II, we show the Great Untruths in action. We examine the “shout-downs,” intimidation, and occasional violence that are making it more difficult for universities to fulfill their core missions of education and research. We explore the newly popular idea that speech is violence, and we show why thinking this way is bad for students’ mental health. We explore the sociology of witch hunts and moral panics, including the conditions that can cause a college to descend into chaos.

In Part III, we try to solve the mystery. Why did things change so rapidly on many campuses between 2013 and 2017? We identify six explanatory threads: the rising political polarization and cross-party animosity of U.S. politics, which has led to rising hate crimes and harassment on campus; rising levels of teen anxiety and depression, which have made many students more desirous of protection and more receptive to the Great Untruths; changes in parenting practices, which have amplified children’s fears even as childhood becomes increasingly safe; the loss of free play and unsupervised risk-taking, both of which kids need to become self-governing adults; the growth of campus bureaucracy and expansion of its protective mission; and an increasing passion for justice, combined with changing ideas about what justice requires. These six trends did not influence everyone equally, but they have all begun to intersect and interact on college campuses in the United States in the last few years.

Finally, in Part IV, we offer advice. We suggest specific actions that will help parents and teachers to raise wiser, stronger, more independent children, and we suggest ways in which professors, administrators, and

college students can improve their universities and adapt them for life in our age of technology-enhanced outrage.

In 2014, we set out to understand what was happening on U.S. college campuses, but the story we tell in this book is about far more than that. It's the story of our strange and unsettling time, when many institutions are malfunctioning, trust is declining, and a new generation—the one after the Millennials—is just beginning to graduate from college and enter the workforce. Our story ends on a hopeful note. The problems we describe may be temporary. We believe they are fixable. The arc of history bends toward progress on most measures of health, prosperity, and freedom,²¹ but if we can understand the six explanatory threads and free ourselves from the three Great Untruths, it may bend a little faster.

PART I

Three Bad Ideas

The Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Weaker

When heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent.

MENG TZU (MENCIUS), *fourth century BCE*¹

In August 2009, Max Haidt, age three, had his first day of preschool in Charlottesville, Virginia. But before he was allowed to take the first step on his eighteen-year journey to a college degree, his parents, Jon and Jayne, had to attend a mandatory orientation session where the rules and procedures were explained by Max's teacher. The most important rule, judging by the time spent discussing it, was: no nuts. Because of the risk to children with peanut allergies, there was an absolute prohibition on bringing anything containing nuts into the building. Of course, peanuts are legumes, not nuts, but some kids have allergies to tree nuts, too, so along with peanuts and peanut butter, all nuts and nut products were banned. And to be extra safe, the school also banned anything produced in a factory that processes nuts, so many kinds of dried fruits and other snacks were prohibited, too.

As the list of prohibited substances grew, and as the clock ticked on, Jon asked the assembled group of parents what he thought was a helpful question: "Does anyone here have a child with any kind of nut allergy? If we know about the kids' actual allergies, I'm sure we'll all do everything

we can to avoid risk. But if there's no kid in the class with such an allergy, then maybe we can lighten up a bit and instead of banning all those things, just ban peanuts?"

The teacher was visibly annoyed by Jon's question, and she moved rapidly to stop any parent from responding. *Don't put anyone on the spot*, she said. *Don't make any parent feel uncomfortable. Regardless of whether anyone in the class is affected, these are the school's rules.*

You can't blame the school for being so cautious. Peanut allergies were rare among American children up until the mid-1990s, when one study found that only four out of a thousand children under the age of eight had such an allergy (meaning probably nobody in Max's entire preschool of about one hundred kids).² But by 2008, according to the same survey, using the same measures, the rate had more than tripled, to fourteen out of a thousand (meaning probably one or two kids in Max's school). Nobody knew why American children were suddenly becoming more allergic to peanuts, but the logical and compassionate response was obvious: Kids are vulnerable. Protect them from peanuts, peanut products, and anything that has been in contact with nuts of any kind. Why not? What's the harm, other than some inconvenience to parents preparing lunches?

But it turns out that the harm was severe.³ It was later discovered that peanut allergies were surging precisely *because* parents and teachers had started protecting children from exposure to peanuts back in the 1990s.⁴ In February 2015, an authoritative study⁵ was published. The LEAP (Learning Early About Peanut Allergy) study was based on the hypothesis that "regular eating of peanut-containing products, when started during infancy, will elicit a protective immune response instead of an allergic immune reaction."⁶ The researchers recruited the parents of 640 infants (four to eleven months old) who were at high risk of developing a peanut allergy because they had severe eczema or had tested positive for another allergy. The researchers told half the parents to follow the standard advice for high-risk kids, which was to avoid all exposure to peanuts and peanut products. The other half were given a supply of a snack made from peanut butter and puffed corn and were told to give some to their child at least three times a week. The researchers followed all the families carefully, and when the children turned five years old, they were tested for an allergic reaction to peanuts.

The results were stunning. Among the children who had been “protected” from peanuts, 17% had developed a peanut allergy. In the group that had been deliberately exposed to peanut products, only 3% had developed an allergy. As one of the researchers said in an interview, “For decades allergists have been recommending that young infants avoid consuming allergenic foods such as peanut to prevent food allergies. Our findings suggest that this advice was incorrect and may have contributed to the rise in the peanut and other food allergies.”⁷

It makes perfect sense. The immune system is a miracle of evolutionary engineering. It can’t possibly anticipate all the pathogens and parasites a child will encounter—especially in a mobile and omnivorous species such as ours—so it is “designed” (by natural selection) to learn rapidly from early experience. The immune system is a complex adaptive system, which can be defined as a dynamic system that is able to adapt in and evolve with a changing environment.⁸ It *requires* exposure to a range of foods, bacteria, and even parasitic worms in order to develop its ability to mount an immune response to real threats (such as the bacterium that causes strep throat) while ignoring nonthreats (such as peanut proteins). Vaccination uses the same logic. Childhood vaccines make us healthier not by reducing threats in the world (“Ban germs in schools!”) but by exposing children to those threats in small doses, thereby giving children’s immune systems the opportunity to learn how to fend off similar threats in the future.

This is the underlying rationale for what is called the *hygiene hypothesis*,⁹ the leading explanation for why allergy rates generally go up as countries get wealthier and cleaner—another example of a problem of progress. Developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik explains the hypothesis succinctly and does us the favor of linking it to our mission in this book:

Thanks to hygiene, antibiotics and too little outdoor play, children don’t get exposed to microbes as they once did. This may lead them to develop immune systems that overreact to substances that aren’t actually threatening—causing allergies. In the same way, *by shielding children from every possible risk, we may lead them to react with exaggerated fear to situations that aren’t risky at all and isolate them from the adult skills that they will one day have to master* [emphasis added].¹⁰

This brings us to the oracle's first Great Untruth, the Untruth of Fragility: *What doesn't kill you makes you weaker*. Of course, Nietzsche's original aphorism—"What doesn't kill me makes me stronger"—is not entirely correct if taken literally; some things that don't kill you can still leave you permanently damaged and diminished. But teaching kids that failures, insults, and painful experiences will do lasting damage is harmful in and of itself. Human beings *need* physical and mental challenges and stressors or we deteriorate. For example, muscles and joints need stressors to develop properly. Too much rest causes muscles to atrophy, joints to lose range of motion, heart and lung function to decline, and blood clots to form. Without the challenges imposed by gravity, astronauts develop muscle weakness and joint degeneration.

Antifragility

No one has done a better job of explaining the harm of avoiding stressors, risks, and small doses of pain than Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the Lebanese-born statistician, stock trader, and polymath who is now a professor of risk engineering at New York University. In his 2007 best seller, *The Black Swan*, Taleb argued that most of us think about risk in the wrong way. In complex systems, it is virtually inevitable that unforeseen problems will arise, yet we persist in trying to calculate risk based on past experiences. Life has a way of creating completely unexpected events—events Taleb likens to the appearance of a black swan when, based on your past experience, you assumed that all swans were white. (Taleb was one of the few who predicted the global financial crisis of 2008, based on the financial system's vulnerability to "black swan" events.)

In his later book *Antifragile*, Taleb explains how systems and people can survive the inevitable black swans of life and, like the immune system, grow *stronger* in response. Taleb asks us to distinguish three kinds of things. Some, like china teacups, are *fragile*: they break easily and cannot heal themselves, so you must handle them gently and keep them away from toddlers. Other things are *resilient*: they can withstand shocks. Parents usually give their toddlers plastic cups precisely because plastic can survive repeated falls to the floor, although the cups do not