

On the phone, alone

Many measures of adolescent mental health began to deteriorate sometime around 2009. It is true of the number of U.S. high-school students who say they feel persistently sad or hopeless. It's also true of reported loneliness. And it is true of emergency room visits for self-harm among Americans ages 10 to 19.

This timing is suspicious because internet use among adolescents was also starting to soar during the same period. Apple began selling the iPhone in 2007. Facebook opened itself for general use in late 2006, and one-third of Americans were using it by 2009.

Last month, The Times began publishing a series on adolescent mental health, and the latest piece — focusing on pediatricians who are struggling to help — has just published.

The author of the series is Matt Richtel, who has spent more than a year interviewing adolescents, their relatives and their friends. In my recent conversations with Matt about his reporting, he has gone out of his way to emphasize the uncertainty about the specific causes of the crisis, including how much of a role social media plays.

“When you look at specific research on the role of social media impacting young people, it's quite conflicted,” he said. Some studies find that adolescents who use social media heavily are more likely to feel sad or depressed, while others find little or no effect. There is no proof that, say, TikTok or social media's “like” button is causing the mental-health crisis.

But Matt also thinks that some of these narrow questions of cause and effect are secondary. What seems undeniable, he points out, is that surging use of digital technology has changed life's daily rhythms.

It has led adolescents to spend less time on in-person activities, like dating, hanging out with friends and attending church. Technology use has also contributed to declines in exercise and sleep. The share of high-school students who slept at least eight hours a night fell 30 percent from 2007 to 2019, Derek Thompson of The Atlantic has noted.

Technology use is not the sole cause of these trends. Modern parenting strategies, among other factors, play a role as well. But digital technology — be it social media, video games, text messaging or other online activity — plays a strong role, many experts say.

“If you're not getting some outdoor relief time and enough sleep — and you can almost stop at not enough sleep — any human being is challenged,” Matt said. “When you get the pubescent brain involved in that equation, you are talking about somebody being really, really challenged to feel contented and peaceful and happy with the world around them.”

The role of any specific social-media platform or behavior may remain unknown, but the larger story about American adolescents and their emotional struggles is less mysterious.

“They have too much screen time, they're not sleeping, on phones all the time,” Dr. Melissa Dennison, a pediatrician in central Kentucky who sees many unhappy adolescents, told Matt. Dennison regularly encourages her patients to take walks outdoors or attend church.

It's true that the decline of in-person interactions has had a few silver linings. Today's adolescents are less likely to use tobacco, drink alcohol or get pregnant. But the net effect of less socializing is negative. Most human beings struggle when they are not spending time in the company of others.

The Covid-19 pandemic, of course, has exacerbated isolation, loneliness and depression. In December, the U.S. surgeon general warned of a "devastating" mental health crisis among America's youth.

I find Covid to be a particularly relevant comparison. Over the past two-plus years, millions of American parents have demonstrated intense concern for their children by trying to protect them from Covid. Fortunately, Covid happens to be mild for the vast majority of children, causing neither severe illness nor long-term symptoms. One sign of that: Young children, not yet eligible for vaccination, are at considerably less risk on average than vaccinated people over 65.

Still, I understand why so many parents remain anxious. Covid is new and scary. It taps into parents' fierce protective instincts.

What makes less sense to me is why our society has done so little to protect children from the apparent damages of ubiquitous digital media. They are almost certainly larger for most children than the threat from Covid.