

The Illusion of a Frictionless Existence

Eliminating everyday annoyances may be creating the most
risk-averse generation in history.

Kat Rosenfield

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Twenty years after the D.A.R.E. program failed to scare straight the middle schoolers of the 1990s, it seems that Gen Z has accomplished of its own accord what decades of earnest government messaging could not. A 25-year study has found that risky behaviors, including underage drinking, smoking, and drug use, have sharply declined among teenagers today.

Some have positioned this as an encouraging development, another sign of the emergence of a new, improved “generation sensible” to correct for the destructive excesses of the twerking, White Claw-swilling millennials who came before them. But scratch the surface of this new Zoomer temperance movement, and one notices that it’s not just substances from which they’re abstaining. Today’s teens are less sexually active than any generation before them. They also drive less—just 25 percent of 16-year-olds in 2020 had a license, as compared with 50 percent in 1983—and work less, with the share of teens participating in the labor force having declined 17 percentage points since 2000.

To be sure, it is not a new thing for a certain subset of people within a generation to linger in a state of arrested development. There were the boomers with Peter Pan syndrome, the jaded slackers of Generation X, the millennials who made “adulting” into a verb but have yet to achieve most adult milestones even in early middle age.

But until recently, this phenomenon has always been an expression of dissatisfaction not with adulthood itself but with the social expectations that pile up alongside it: the bills, the mortgage, the marriage, the dutiful carpooling of children to soccer practice. An entire genre of late 1990s movie, including Best Picture winner “American Beauty,” was centered on the fantasy of dodging these various and sundry drudgeries of adult life while still enjoying all of its freedoms, recapturing the magic of young adulthood in which autonomy was yours but responsibility had not yet kicked in.

This is where today’s teenagers and young adults differ. Gen Z is not just remaining ensconced for longer in the protective cocoon of adolescence, reliant on their parents for everything from health insurance to transportation to conflict mediation; they also appear to be far less interested in ever leaving the cocoon at all, having persuaded themselves that independence is too fraught with danger to be worth it.

This self-reinforcing sense of fragility among young people has been an emergent trend since at least 2015, when researchers Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt wrote their seminal essay for *The Atlantic* about the rise of safety-ism on college campuses. This movement, they wrote, “elevates the goal of protecting students from psychological harm” in the form of, for instance, demands for trigger warnings on books like “The Great Gatsby” or “Things Fall Apart,” as well as protection from perceived or accidental slights (now deemed “microaggressions”).

Lukianoff and Haidt speculated that the growing conviction that young adults require constant protection from emotional or intellectual discomfort “may be teaching students to think pathologically,” noting that their self-reported rates of mental illness were rising sharply.

Indeed, it's almost certainly not a coincidence that Gen Z has lost its ability to tolerate risk at the same time as it's been gripped by skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression. Neither is the fact that both these phenomena correspond with the removal, via technology, of so much of what used to be the ordinary friction of existing as a person in the world. One of my favorite examples of the law of unintended consequences is the sudden and overwhelming terror among younger people of having to make or receive phone calls—a development that happened exactly in tandem with the advent of services like Seamless, Grubhub, and Eat24 that let you order takeout online. Smartphone technology has so utterly transformed our lives, turning countless points of human contact into computerized transactions, that the old way of doing things can seem not just needlessly complex but actually insane. In the age of swiping and tapping your way to a bespoke pizza order in seconds, you want me to call a phone number and tell some complete stranger who I am, where I live, and what I want to eat?

If we were already moving in this direction with the advent of the Domino's pizza tracker, the quest for a frictionless existence kicked into high gear and gained both moral and scientific authority when the pandemic came along. The word "contactless" became so ubiquitous, so fast, that few people paused to consider what it actually means to systematically strip our daily lives of every possible moment of human interaction, let alone whether the results might be anything but fabulous. The sheer novelty of it—a few taps on your handheld device, and anything from groceries to booze to a memory foam mattress will appear on your doorstep within 24 hours, as if left by ninjas—was so exciting that the existence of a downside was all but impossible to imagine, and the few who could imagine it were widely dismissed as reactionaries or dinosaurs, or reactionary dinosaurs.

And yet, we did lose something when we started replacing cashiers with contactless payment, indoor dining with curbside pickup, and group hangouts at the local bar with the so-called "Zoom happy hour" (which sounds great until you realize that it's actually code for "drinking alone in front of your computer.") One need not be anti-tech to see how our social skills, like any other, atrophy for lack of use in a world where human interaction is on the wane. As it turns out, there's hidden value in those moments when you mistakenly pull on the door marked "PUSH" and share an awkward laugh with the one stranger who happened to witness it. Or when you struggle to make yourself understood by a customer service rep whose first language isn't English. Or that thing when the waiter says, "Enjoy your meal," and you say, loudly, "You too!" Embarrassing? Yes. A humbling and poignant reminder of your own fallible humanity? Also yes, and a good one to keep in mind the next time you find yourself cornered at a party by someone who stands too close, talks too loud, and has a big wad of spinach stuck at his upper gumline. We are all of us bumbling awkwardly through the world, and there but for the grace of god go I.

Eliminating friction means also eliminating our tolerance for these types of social discomforts—something that is important enough for the average person, but even

more important for a generation, the first in history, that has neither memory nor experience of a world where relationships could not be conducted through the sanitizing intermediary of a screen.

Of course, it is also important to realize that this is not their fault: Whatever Gen Z is doing, it is born of what we did to them first, by bringing them into a world where quotidian annoyances were being increasingly eliminated for the comfort and convenience of people who had already had plenty of practice in dealing with them. Indeed, it is only because older generations had gotten used to dealing with friction that we could ever decide to dispense with it. Experiencing minor hardship will make you resilient, but first, it will make you uncomfortable—which is a problem in a society that has decided to prioritize comfort and safety, having convinced itself that resilience is overrated. If the old mode of thinking was that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, the new one is something like: What makes you feel bad must be eradicated.

It is almost certainly this, and not a sudden epidemic of extraordinary wisdom among teenagers, that is fueling the current generation's extreme aversion to risk, whether it's the physical hazards of drinking too much or the emotional ones of a broken heart. Today's teens and young adults have spent their whole lives being overscheduled, micromanaged, and encouraged to report even the most minor disagreement to the nearest authority, rather than attempting to resolve it themselves—and have been taught to see genuine danger in any situation that causes emotional upset. Witness the rise of the word “unsafe” to describe things like a PowerPoint presentation or a *New York Times* opinion piece that contains arguments someone finds disagreeable; witness how the discourse surrounding sex and dating has become dominated by discussions of consent, until one gets the sense that relationships are not so much an exciting chance at romantic connection as a terrifying midnight sprint through a minefield full of rapists. Of course today's young people are having less sex; if all you ever heard about dating was how dangerous it was, how rife with the potential for lifelong trauma, would you risk it?

All of this has been well-intentioned. Nobody wants their child to experience trauma—or heartbreak, or failure, or any other kind of hurt. But in seeking to provide kids with a frictionless path through the world, and by teaching them to expect one, we are also sending a powerful message: You can't handle this. Inadvertently instilled in many of this generation's kids is a lack of faith in their ability to negotiate discomfort, to recover from emotional wounds, to weather a difficult situation and experience growth as a result; instead, we teach them that bad experiences create permanent trauma and should be avoided at all costs.

The irony is, the result of all this effort to protect Gen Z from feeling anxious has only made their anxiety worse.

For 10 years between 2009 and 2019, I authored a teen advice column. At first, the problems being sent to me were more or less the same ones I struggled with during my own high school years: bullying, crushes, the desperate yearning to be your own person (or at least, to figure out who that person was). But a few years in, something

changed, and the letters began to be imbued with a strange fearfulness—of awkward situations, of ordinary social conflicts, of having to hear, or articulate, the word “no.” Amid all this, there was one phrase that popped up, repeatedly, verbatim: “I shouldn’t have to feel uncomfortable.”

At the time, I thought this was remarkable. And I thought: *Oh, but you should. You do. You must.*

Indeed, the world is an uncomfortable place, filled as it is with 8 billion humans who think differently, talk differently, live differently. People of different religious faiths; people of different political persuasions. People who think it’s morally acceptable to put ketchup on a hot dog! Living in a society means encountering people who test us, or annoy us, or infuriate us—or to whom we ourselves are tiresome, annoying, and infuriating. Two things are true: that a frictionless world would spare us the duty to tolerate all of these people, and that we would be the worse for it. Perhaps it’s for the better, then, that such a thing is unattainable.

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