



---

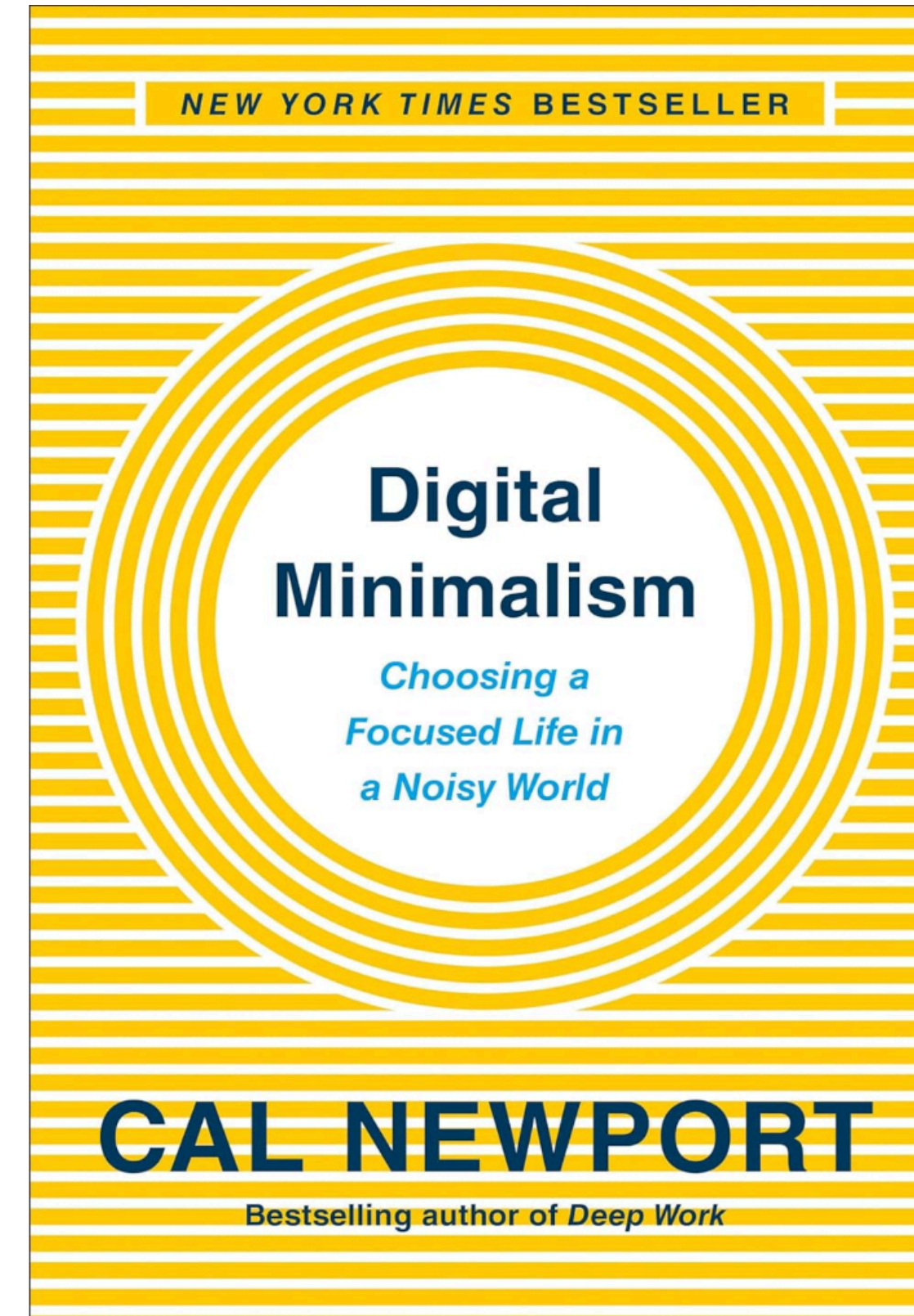
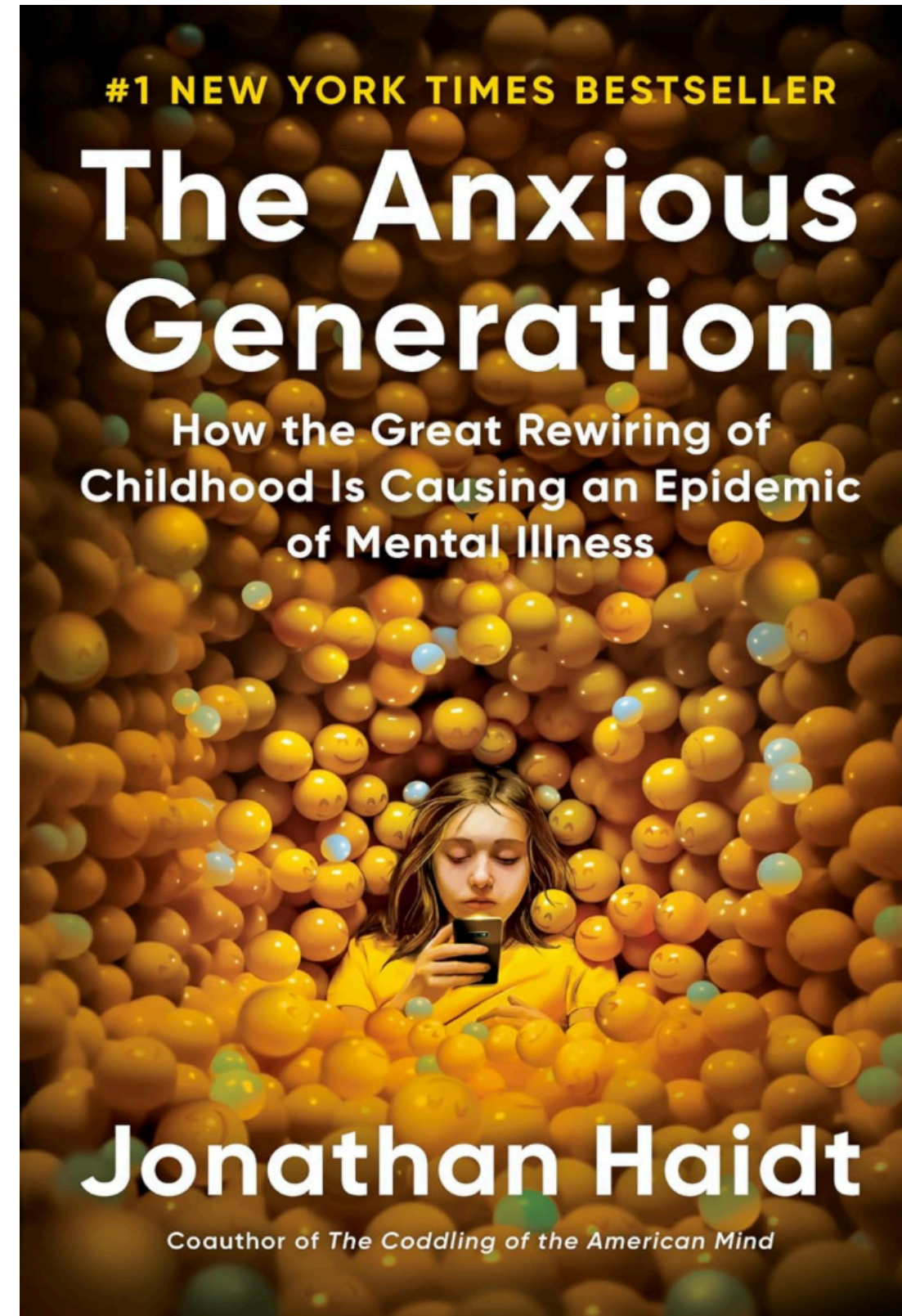
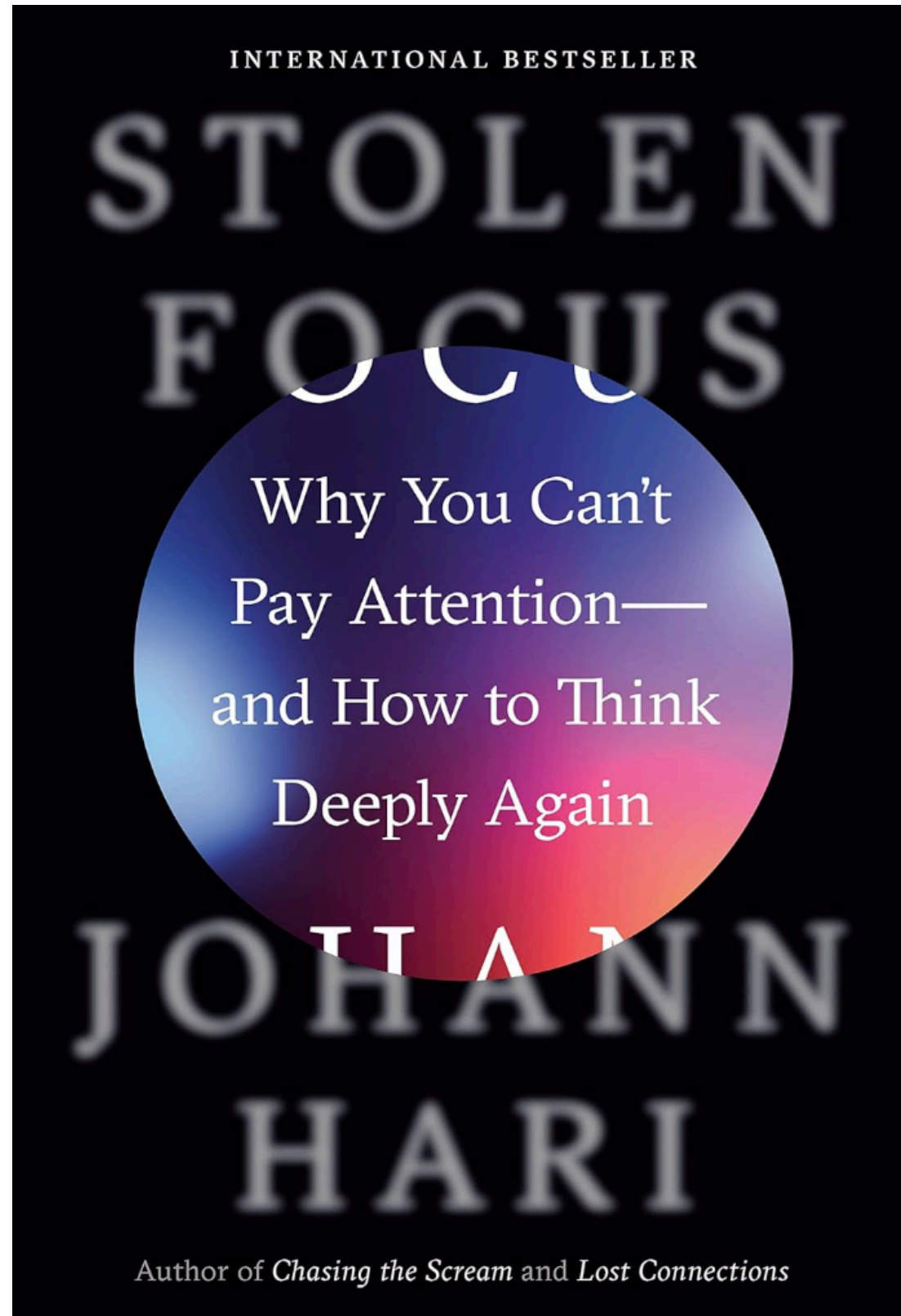
# **Social Media and Teen Mental Health**

---

**RYAN SMITH PHD, LMFTS, LPCS**

---

# Books Worth Reading



# It starts in the early 2010s...

## Major Depressive Episodes in the Last Year (U.S. Teens)

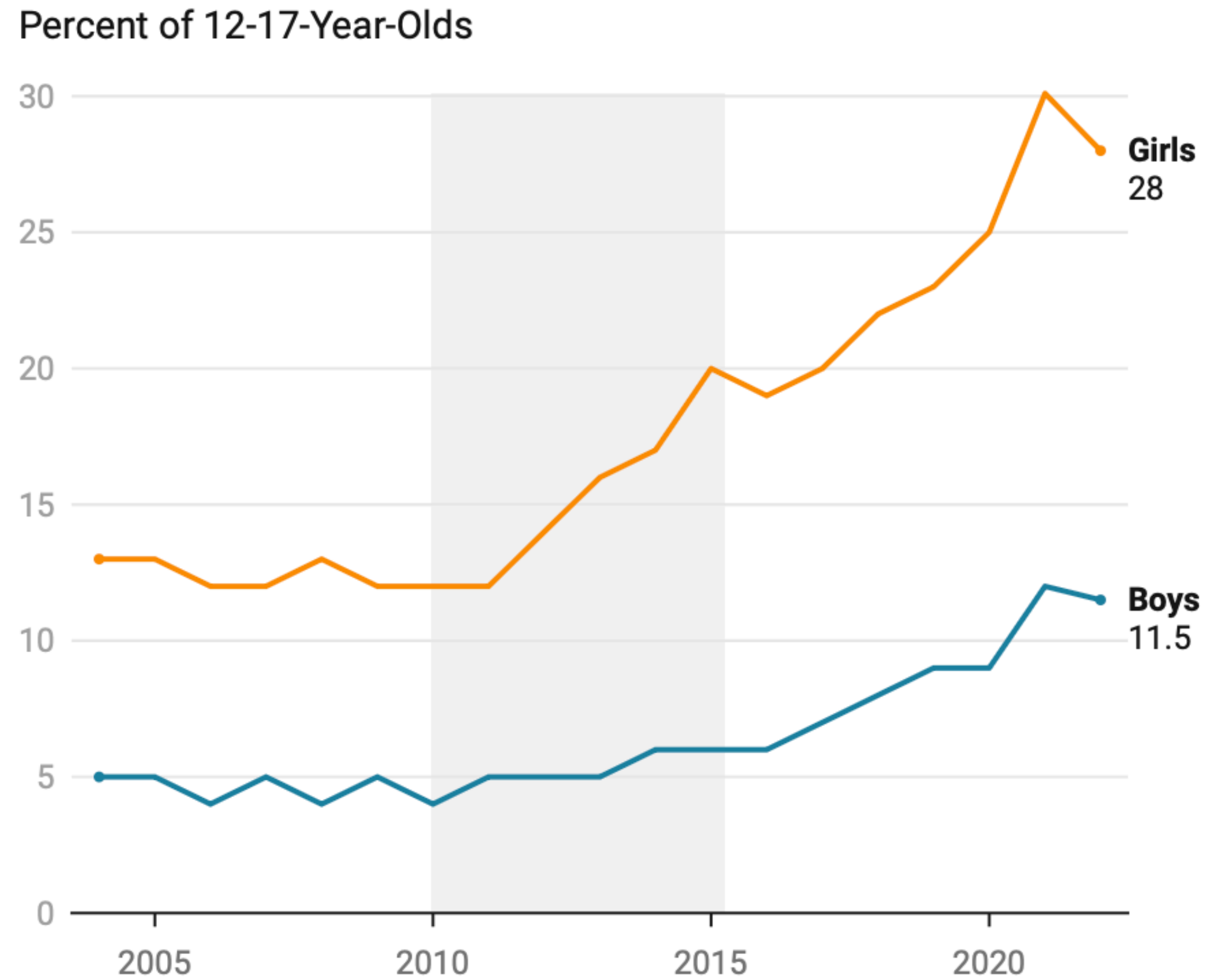
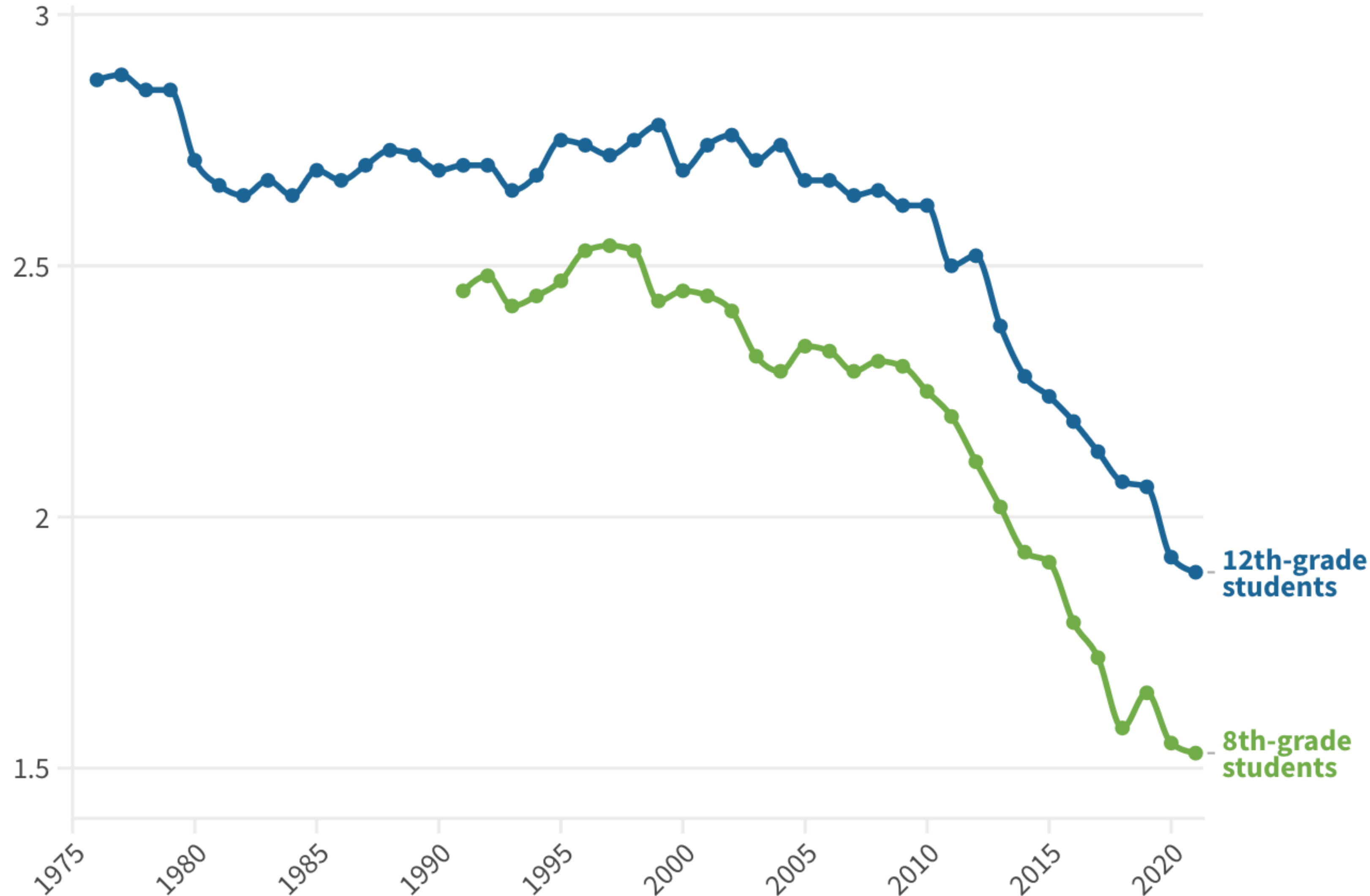


Chart: Zach Rausch • Source: [National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

**Figure 1.** Percent of U.S. teens (ages 12-17) who had at least one major depressive episode in the past year (by self-report based on a symptom checklist). Data from [U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#). This was Figure 7.1 in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, now updated with data beyond 2016. See the [online supplement](#) for these data split by race, region, and social class.

# Teens are spending less face time with friends

Weekly social outings for teens have plummeted in the smartphone era



**Smart Phones and video games are Experience Blockers**

**Kids learn best through experience, which is in decline.**

---

# Quick Primer

- The adolescent brain is still developing key systems: pre-frontal cortex (executive control, impulse regulation), reward system (dopamine circuits), social-brain networks (peer-sensitivity, social comparison).
- Digital/social media can hijack reward pathways (likes, notifications = dopamine hits).
- Attention-fragmentation: constant switching, notifications degrade sustained attention and may undermine the PFC's ability to regulate focus and emotion.
- Sleep-biology: blue light + late use + arousal = suppression of melatonin, shifting of circadian rhythm; we know sleep deprivation is strongly linked to mood dysregulation, irritability, depression risk.
- Social/identity neuroscience: teens are wired to compare, to seek acceptance, to be sensitive to peer evaluation. Social media amplifies this via curated feeds, visible metrics, fear of missing out (FOMO).
- Behavioral science: habits form via reinforcement; algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, which often means more frequent checking, more emotional arousal, more shallow interactions.

---

# 5 Big Issues

1. Sleep disruption & fatigue
2. Social comparison, self-esteem, & identity disturbance
3. Attention/engagement fragmentation & academic/brain impact
4. Isolation, reduced in-person peer connection, free-play decline
5. Addictive dynamics, mood dysregulation & risk of internalizing disorders



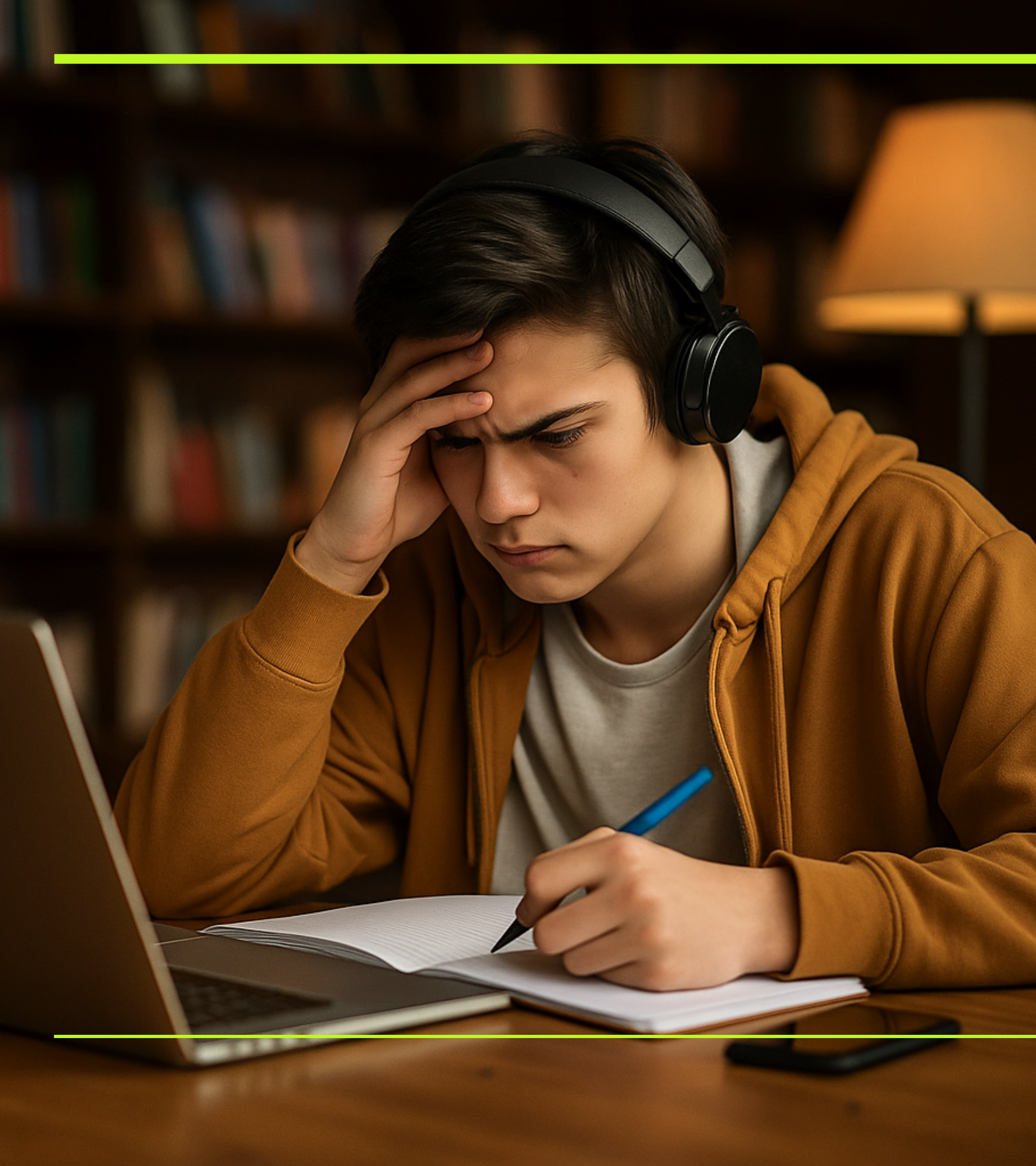
# 1. Sleep Disruption And Fatigue

- Heavy users of social media / smartphones report higher rates of insufficient sleep, which correlates with higher depressive/anxiety symptoms.
- **Parent tip:** Establish a screen-free bedtime zone; set consistent sleep windows; lead by example.



## 2. Social Comparison, Self-Esteem, & Identity Disturbance

- Behavioral science: Self-esteem becomes contingent on external metrics; risk of internalizing disorder increases with repetitive negative comparison.
- **Parent tip:** Help teens build offline identity, value intrinsic qualities, talk about “real life versus highlight reel”



### 3. Attention/Engagement Fragmentation & Academic/Brain Impact

- Behavioral/educational science: Teens heavy in social media may show more difficulty sustaining focus on homework, more distraction, maybe even worse academic outcomes (though causality is complex).
- **Parent tip:** Create “focus zones/times”, teach & model single-tasking, use tools (apps, settings) to minimize distraction.



## 4. Isolation

Reduced In-Person Peer Connection, Free-Play Decline

- **Social/behavioral science:** Real-world peer interaction, unstructured play, physical movement, face-to-face conversation foster social competence, emotional regulation, resilience, identity formation.
- With more time on phones, less time in these domains → teens may feel lonely, disconnected, lacking real-world skills.
- **Parent tip:** Encourage scheduled in-person social time, free-play, unsupervised peer hangouts, family outings without phones.

---

## 5. Addictive Dynamics, Mood Dysregulation & Risk of Internalizing Disorders

- Addiction/binge patterns: notifications and algorithms reinforce frequent checking; reward suppression then withdrawal states; mood swings tied to online experience.
  - Neuroscience: Repeated reward (dopamine) + unpredictable reinforcement = high addiction risk; chronic stress (via online drama, cyber-bullying, comparison) alters HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis, mood networks (amygdala, hippocampus) vulnerability.
  - **Parent tip:** Monitor for signs of addiction/problematic use, create device-break zones/times, help teens self-regulate usage, model healthy behavior.
- 



---

# Bringing it All Together

poor sleep →

mood vulnerability; fragmented attention →

academic stress →

anxiety; isolation → low resilience;

social comparison →

low self-esteem →

internalizing disorders; addiction dynamics →

brain rewiring →

deeper risk

---

# **5 Things You Can Start Doing Today**

---

---

# Action 1: Establish Technology Boundaries

- Bedroom rule: phones out of the bedroom at night.
- Set consistent “screen-off” time X minutes before bed (30-60 mins).
- Use device settings: lock bedtime schedules, screen-time dashboards, app limits.
- Make it a family commitment: Parent-phone behavior matters.
- **Clinical note:** Improves sleep, reduces late-night social/emotional arousal, supports PFC/regulation.

---

# Action 2: Encourage Real-Life Social Connection

- Schedule in-person hangouts: friends, sports, outdoor, unstructured.
- Encourage independent peer time (unsupervised where safe) to build autonomy.
- Family time: tech-free, board games, nature walk, talk.
- Push back on the “digital substitute”: emphasize embodied interaction, face-to-face.
- **Clinical note:** Builds social-brain development, resilience, buffers comparison/mood issues.
- Tip: “One weekend activity this week where phones go away for 2-3 hours.”

---

# Action 3: Teach & Model Healthy Digital Habits

- Conversation with teen: show interest in *how they use* social media, what feelings it stirs.
- Teach single-tasking: homework without phones, dedicated focus time.
- Use tech tools: app limits, silent mode, remove notifications, “do not disturb.”
- Parent modeling: limit your own checking, no devices at dinner, set family screen times.
- **Clinical note:** strengthens attention-regulation, executive control, less reactivity to notifications.

---

# Action 4: Talk About Social Media — Build Offline Identity

- Make explicit: social media is a tool not the core of self-worth.
- Talk about “highlight reel vs real life.” Share your own story of offline success, failure, etc.
- **Encourage offline interest/skill/hobby: music, art, sports, reading, service.**
- Discuss mood check-ins: “How did using Snapchat make you feel?” “Did you notice you compared yourself to \_\_\_?”
- **Clinical note:** Identity development in adolescence thrives on mastery, peer-connection, real-world feedback — not just likes/followers.

---

# Action 5: Create a Family Digital Contract + Parent Self-Care

- Draft a simple “digital contract” with your teen: when/where phones are off/allowed, what constitutes healthy use, what happens if boundary broken.
- Engage teen in crafting it (not just parent imposition) to get buy-in.
- Parent self-care: your own digital habits matter, your consistency signals value.
- Reinforce the idea: this isn’t about fear or banning entirely, it’s about guided participation in digital life.
- **Clinical note:** Adolescents respond better to shared norms than to authoritarian edicts; modeling fosters buy-in and relationship.



Well Connected  
Family Blueprint



## Develop a Healthy Plan in Advance

- **Why it matters:** This allows you to build a technology life around what you want, not just passively allow it to be constructed around “what’s on my phone.”
- **Takeaway:** As long as you control your technology, it’s amazing. But without a plan, it will control you.
- Key theme: Don’t wait until it falls apart. Build a healthy tech life before it does.

---

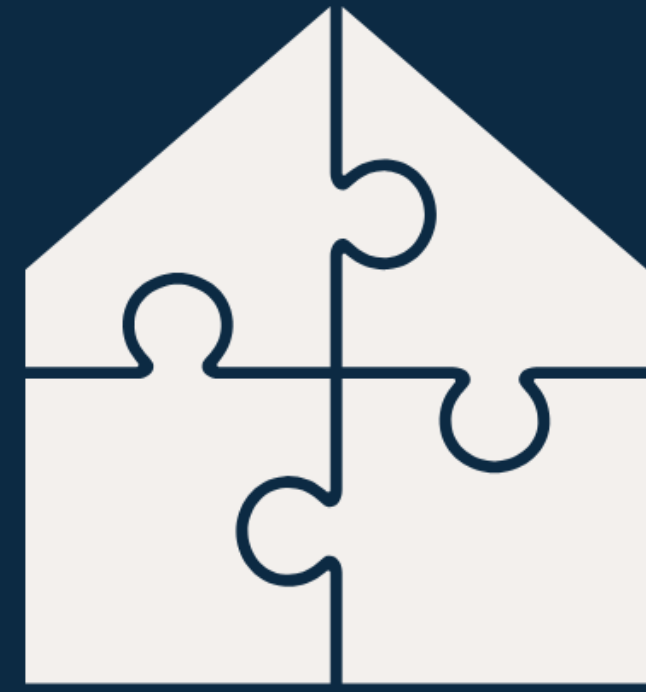
# Addressing Common Objections/Challenges

- **“But all their friends are on social media.”** Acknowledge the peer pressure; emphasize that social norms can change and starting with your family matters.
- **“If I restrict, they’ll rebel.”** Use collaborative framing; focus on explaining why (brain, sleep, identity) rather than just “because I said so.”
- **“I’m too late; they already have phones and social media.”** It’s never too late to adjust habits; incremental steps matter; emphasize change over time.
- **“Social media has benefits too.”** Absolutely: keep balanced. Highlight that it’s about how, when, why, not all or nothing.
- **“Is the science conclusive?”** Be honest: Much is correlational; Haidt emphasizes causation is complex. But the convergence of neuroscience + behavioral data + clinical observation gives us enough reason for precaution and action. And.... as a guy who’s been doing this from the beginning, yes. It’s conclusive and future analysis will confirm it.

---

# Wrap Up Challenges

- “Mini-Challenge”: tonight remove phones from bedrooms OR have a 30-minute phone-free family talk.
- Commit: pick one “action” to start this week.
- Encourage reflection: ask teens “How does being on Instagram feel?” “When did you last just hang out with friends in person without phones?”
- Set a check-in: in 2–4 weeks, review as family: What changed? What felt better? What was harder? Adjust together.



# PARA **VITA**

Therapy and Training



**Book an Appointment**



**Presentation Slides**

---

End of Presentation; All remaining slides are bonus content that will help you more effectively address the digital questions in your home.

---

---

# 10 Best Practices

1. Delay and Limit Early
2. Set Device Free Zones
3. Model the Behavior You Want
4. Create a Family Tech Plan
5. Balance Digital Life with Real World Experiences

---

# 10 Best Practices

6. Be Generous with Screens as Tools, but Not as Toys

7. Talk about Content and Feelings

8. Recognize the Dopamine Loop

9. Encourage Digital Sabbaths

10. Measure screen health holistically, not just in time.

A. Bonus: measure time in weeks, not days.

---

# Bonus Round

1. Collaborate on Limits Instead of Imposing Punishment
2. Prioritize Sleep: Create Tech-Free Wind-Down Routines
3. Watch for Warning Signs and Seek Professional Help When Needed

---

# Lost Time

- What did you love doing most as a kid/teenager? Your fondest type of memories?

**It is estimated that the average 18 year old in 2024 has had somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 fewer person-to-person interactions than any previous generation.**

---

# Effects of a Digital Life

- **The Mental Health Crisis in Adolescents**

- There has been a sharp increase in anxiety, depression, and self-harm among teens, especially girls, since 2010.
  - This is largely due to the widespread adoption of social media, particularly image-based platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, which fuel comparison, cyberbullying, and social exclusion.
  - Boys are affected as well but in different ways—often retreating into gaming and pornography rather than social media.

---

# Effects of a Digital Life

- **Social Media's Design Promotes Addiction**

- Social media platforms are engineered to be addictive, using algorithms that keep users engaged for as long as possible.
- Features like infinite scrolling, notifications, and likes create a dopamine-driven feedback loop that disrupts attention spans and makes quitting difficult.

- **The Loss of Resilience and the Rise of Fragility**

- The constant connectivity of social media prevents kids from developing independence and coping skills.
- Instead of facing real-world challenges and learning from failure, kids are increasingly seeking validation and safety online, which paradoxically makes them more anxious.
- Well-intentioned efforts to protect children from distress have left them unprepared for life's difficulties.

---

# Effects of a Digital Life

- **Social Media and Gender Differences in Harm**

- Girls tend to experience more harm from social media due to its emphasis on social comparison and relational aggression.
- Boys, on the other hand, often disengage from social interaction altogether, spending more time on video games and pornography.
- Both trends contribute to declining mental health and difficulties in forming deep, meaningful relationships.

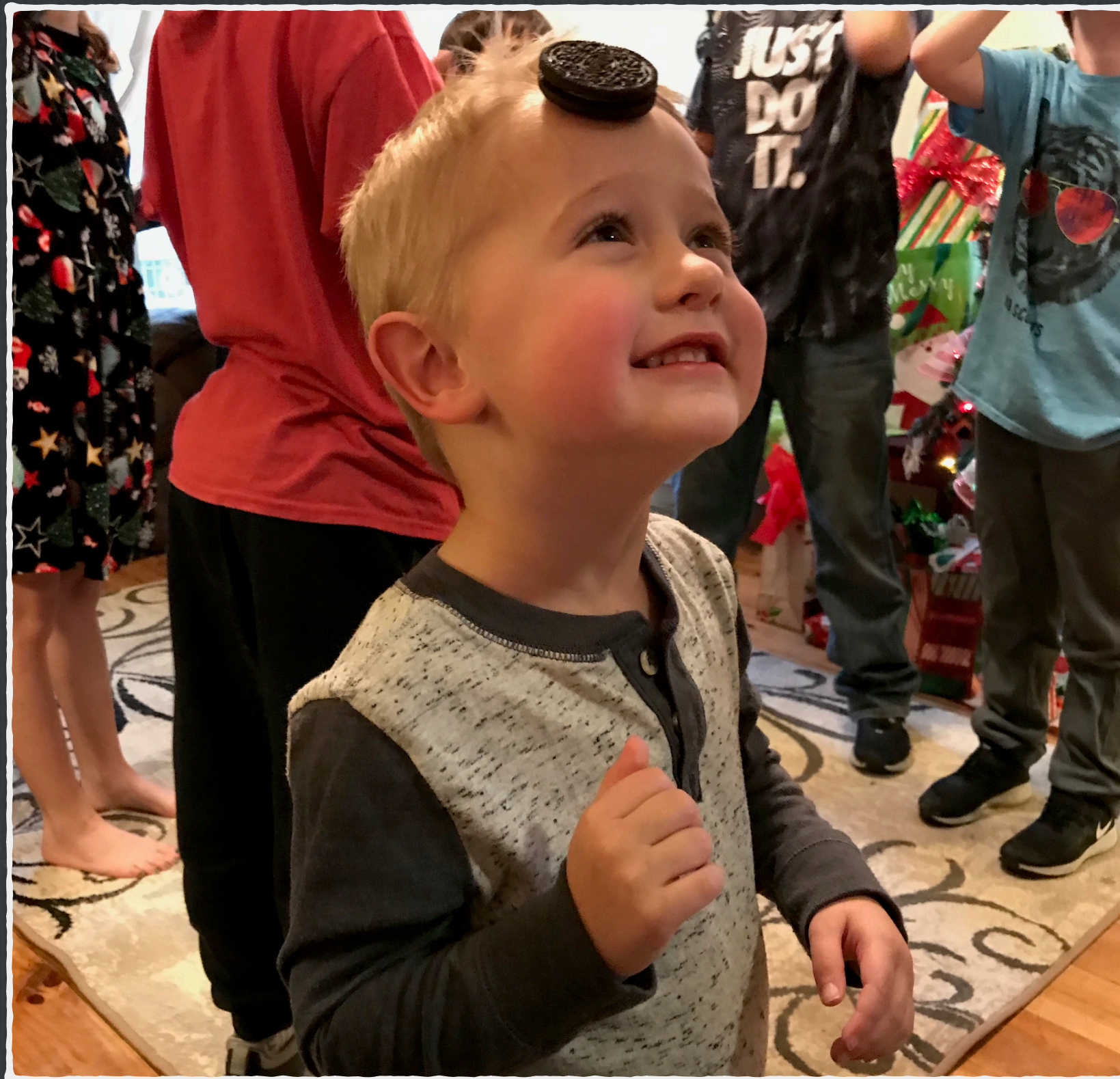
- **The Decline of In-Person Socialization**

- Face-to-face interaction has plummeted since the 2010s as kids spend more time on screens.
- Social media gives an illusion of connection but actually makes users lonelier and more anxious.
- This decline in real-world social experiences contributes to increased depression and decreased social competence.



# Effects Begin Very Early

---



- Digital stimulation:**
  - Every hour per day = 10% increase in the likelihood for later attention problems**
- Cognitive stimulation:**
  - Every hour = 30% decrease in likelihood for later attention problems**

# But Why???

---



**Inattention in early education is positively correlated to the expectation of high levels of stimulation and rapid pacing created by digital input.**

**In other words, digital devices are setting an unrealistic expectation for how fast the world moves and how much control kids will have over it.**

# What A Pre-Digital World Taught Us

- The world doesn't revolve around you.
- You're going to have to work for what you want and make concessions.
- You have to pay for everything with some combination of money, time, and energy.
- If you miss it, you miss it and it's on you.
- Once you've obtained something, value it, because replacing it will be a challenge.



# Analog World

- The world doesn't revolve around you.
- You're going to have to work for what you want and make concessions.
- You have to pay for everything with some combination of money, time, and energy.
- If you miss it, you miss it and it's on you.
- Once you've obtained something, value it, because replacing it will be a challenge.

# Digital World

- The world is on-demand and up to you.
- Acquiring entertainment, knowledge, and information is effortless.
- If something is unpleasant, immediately switch to something better.
- You won't ever miss anything so don't worry about your schedule.
- You don't need to encounter viewpoints different from yours and if you do, you don't need to consider them as potentially valid.
- Obtaining things is easy and you don't need to value anything because everything is easily replaceable.



---

# This isn't a kid Problem

Technology does the same thing to you that it does to your kids. You just don't have anyone correcting you.

**You can't ask  
for healthy  
eaters if you  
stock the  
pantry with  
nothing but  
donuts.**



# **My Big Messages to Parents**

---

- In a very biologically real way, our phones are making us less happy with anything that isn't our phone.**
- Don't create a tech obsessed culture in your home and then blame your kids for their tech obsessions.**
- You can't expect an unhealthy home to produce healthy kids.**
- You can't be angry at what you allow or what you model.**

---

# Facilitate More

- Intentional Family Development
- Time outdoors
- Time without digital stimulation
- Books
- New experiences
- Responsibilities
- Non-digital time with friends
- Sleep
- But the big one.....





**Dialogue is  
Everything**

---

# Conversations for All Ages

- They're not communicating with a phone, they're communicating with a human being.
- People are different with technology than they are in the real world and why.
- How you expect your child to conduct him/herself online.
- **What to do if they see something that concerns them (and what should concern them).**
- People are more important than electronics.
- Devices aren't secretive (good for your marriage, too).
- Once it's sent, it's out of your control.

---

# Conversations for All Ages

- Would you rather sit in a room with 3 people you know well or have a thousand people “like” your post?
- What are some emotions you get from the interactions in your phone? How do you feel when you turn it off?
- How would your life be different if all of your communication had to be done through speaking?
- Do you control your phone or does your phone control you? How do you know?
- Companies all sell something. What do social media companies sell? How do they do it? What is the primary goal of every social media company?

---

# Family Structure Questions

## (How to decide on screen time)

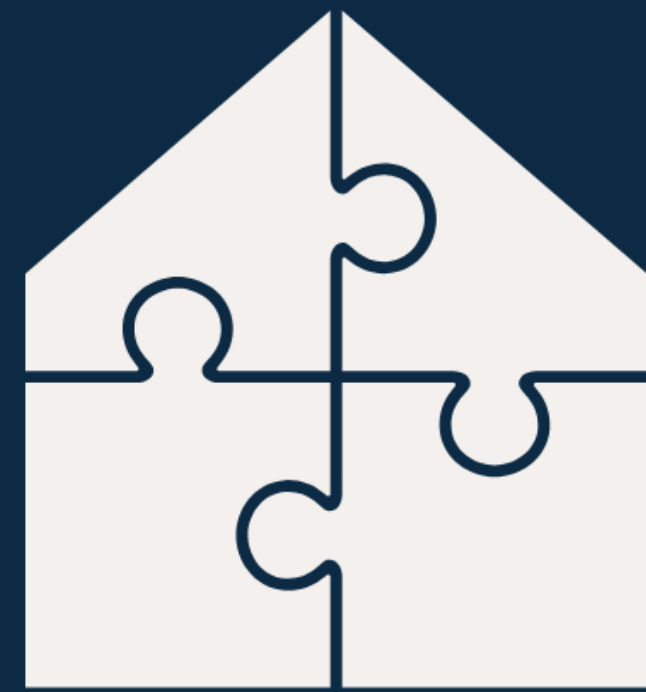
- Measure your life in weeks, not days.
- What do we consider a “good” and “full” week?
  - What sorts of things do we consider healthy and want to be sure we’ve done in the span of a week?
  - Then make a list.....

---

# A Good Week

- Chosen to eat healthy more times than not.
- Played outside for more than an hour, more than twice in a week.
- Gotten dirty enough to need to shower from playing (or played yourself exhausted).
- Played something non-digital that requires imagination.
- Read on at least 3 separate days.
- Done a shared family activity at least twice (board game, movie, digital “together games”). For this question, meals don’t count.
- When it comes time make decisions regarding screen time, ask....

## Has it Been A Good Week?



**PARA VITA**

Therapy and Training

**Well Connected  
Family Blueprint**



---

# Always Remember

- People are more important than electronics
- Who we are online should be consistent with who we are in life.
- Calls/Texts from parents are always answered immediately.
- Devices are not private. They will be looked through.
- We will make a point of talking often together, especially at meals and in the car.
- Talking to human beings in the real world is a high priority that we do every day.

---

# Everyday for Everyone

- Phone's must be (silenced, in "Do Not Disturb", put away) by \_\_\_\_\_ every evening.
- Mobile devices do not spend the night in kids rooms, ever.
- No devices during meals.
- We don't start the day with a screen.
- No devices during \_\_\_\_\_.
- Don't type it if you can talk it.

---

# For the Kids (Part 1)

- Parents always know the password to access your devices.
- No secret accounts (social media, messaging, etc.).
- No anonymous accounts.
- We do not use the internet to hurt people.
- We do not bully people online.
- We never post or send personal information about ourselves or our family.
- We do not post or send negative comments or complaints about our family.
- We try to use our digital presence to make the internet a better place.

---

# For the Kids (Part 2)

- Parents will ask to see your phone, arguing is not ok.
- Technology should never be your only source of entertainment. If it becomes that, we will see it as a sign that we need to reduce our technology use in the home.
- We do not view sexually explicit content.
- We build people up, even online.
- We talk positively about our family online.
- We post about other people's accomplishments and successes.
- We try to use our digital presence to make the internet a better place.

---

# For the Parents (Part 1)

- We will not post things about kids online unless the kids are ok with it.
- We will keep our devices out of our hands when we are with family.
- We will not choose our phones if we can choose a member of the family.
- If we are engaged in a conversation, we will not pick up our phones, even if they make a noise.
- When I am bored, I will look for non-digital options first.

---

# For the Parents (Part 2)

- Technology should never be your only source of entertainment. If it becomes that, we will see it as a sign that we need to reduce our technology use in the home.
- We will be positive on social media and not add to the climate of anger.
- We will put our individual devices down at \_\_\_\_\_ and focus our attention on family and shared experiences (for example, watching something together)
- We do not view sexually explicit content.

---

# Social Media (Part 1)

- We do not use social media to hurt people.
- We do not create angry posts directed at people inside or outside of our family.
- We do not create, search, share, or view sexually suggestive content.
- We do not utilize anonymous accounts.
- We question everything we see from people who are trying to gain followers.

---

# Social Media (Part 2)

- We ask ourselves how our social media feeds make us feel and then adjust accordingly.
- We recognize that connecting digitally is not a sufficient replacement for connecting in real life. It is only a supplement.
- We commit to taking regularly scheduled breaks from all social media (example; one weekend every month, one week every month, or one 24 hour window every weekend).
- We will use our social media accounts to make the internet a better place.

---

# Video Games (Part 1)

- We recognize that video games are fun, but are also highly addictive. We treat them like sugar. It's ok but needs to be controlled.
- We agree that if turning off a video game makes you angry, it is a sign that you're spending too much time on it.
- Parents agree to give kids a warning before turning off video games (typically 10 minutes)
- We agree that video games are only appropriate as a part of our down time. If they are all we do during our down time, that's a problem.

---

# Video Games (Part 2)

- We don't communicate with random strangers in online video games. If the game requires connecting to others to play, we do it without communicating with them.
- Video games must be turned off at least 2 hours before bedtime and cannot be turned on until at least 2 hours after you've woken up. (Beginning or ending your day with video games affects your mood, sleep, and will impact your entire day)
- We will make a point of occasionally playing video games together, as a family.

# Concerning Stuff

---

- Random interval rewards
- Rapid screen changes and pacing (also colors)
- Ability to jump to other options (Tablets and phones)
- Uncontrolled access to other users
- Heavy emphasis on user interaction (is it vital?).
- Mood changes post use

# Not As Concerning Stuff

- Controlled pacing/stimulation
- Limited ability to jump to options (consoles, parental restrictions, educational tech)
- Controlled or no access to other users (ed tech)
- Optional user interaction (Open-world gaming...B.O.W, Minecraft)
- Stable mood

---

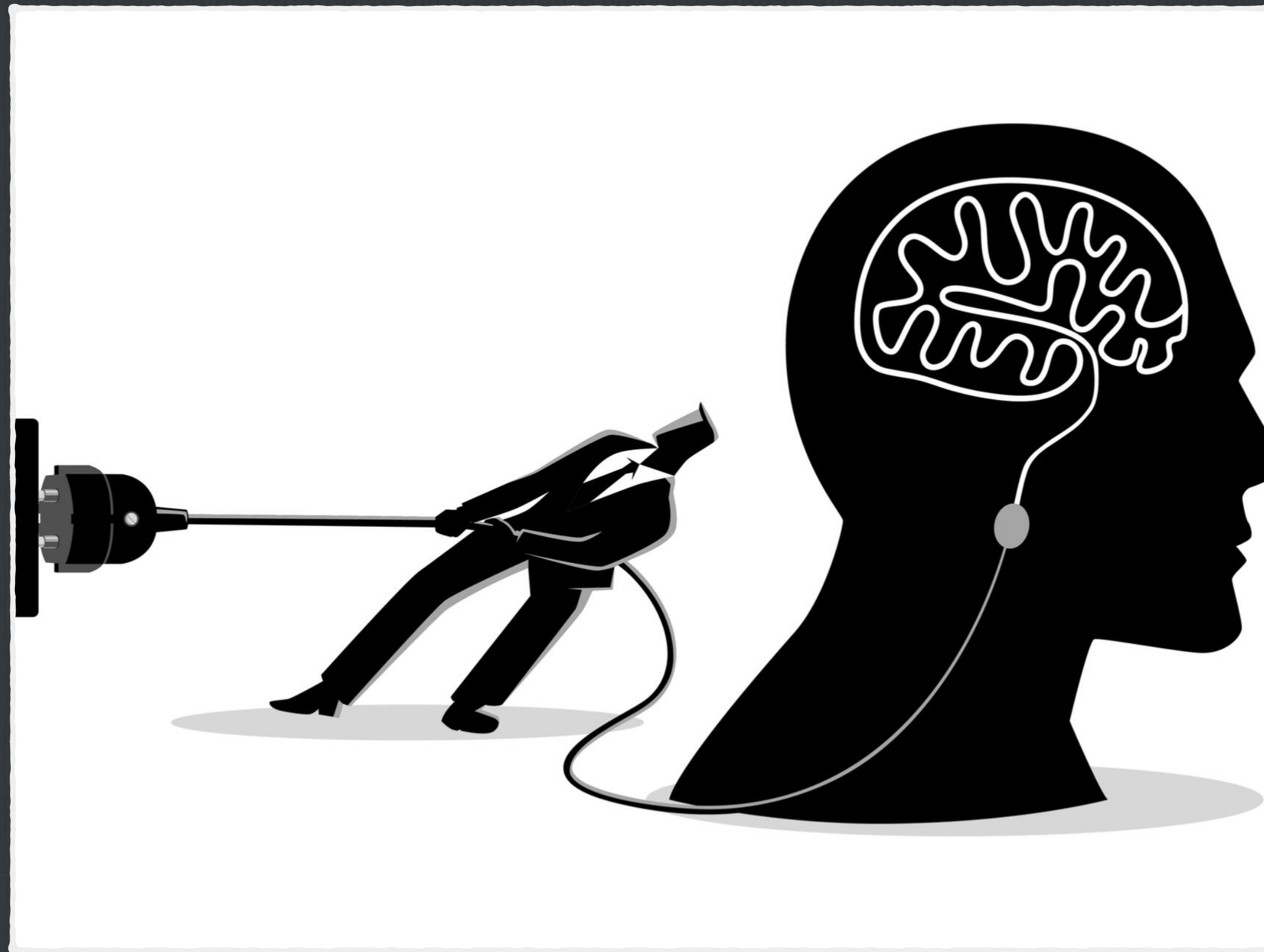
# Family Goals

- Create playlists for each other
- Create playlists that describe our week and then discuss it
- Send each other encouraging texts/messages regularly
- Create and maintain a shared family calendar
- Don't allow our technology to separate us. Instead, find ways to utilize it as a way to connect to each other.

**Sounds good, but what if we've  
already let it get out of hand?**

# How to Hit the Reset Button

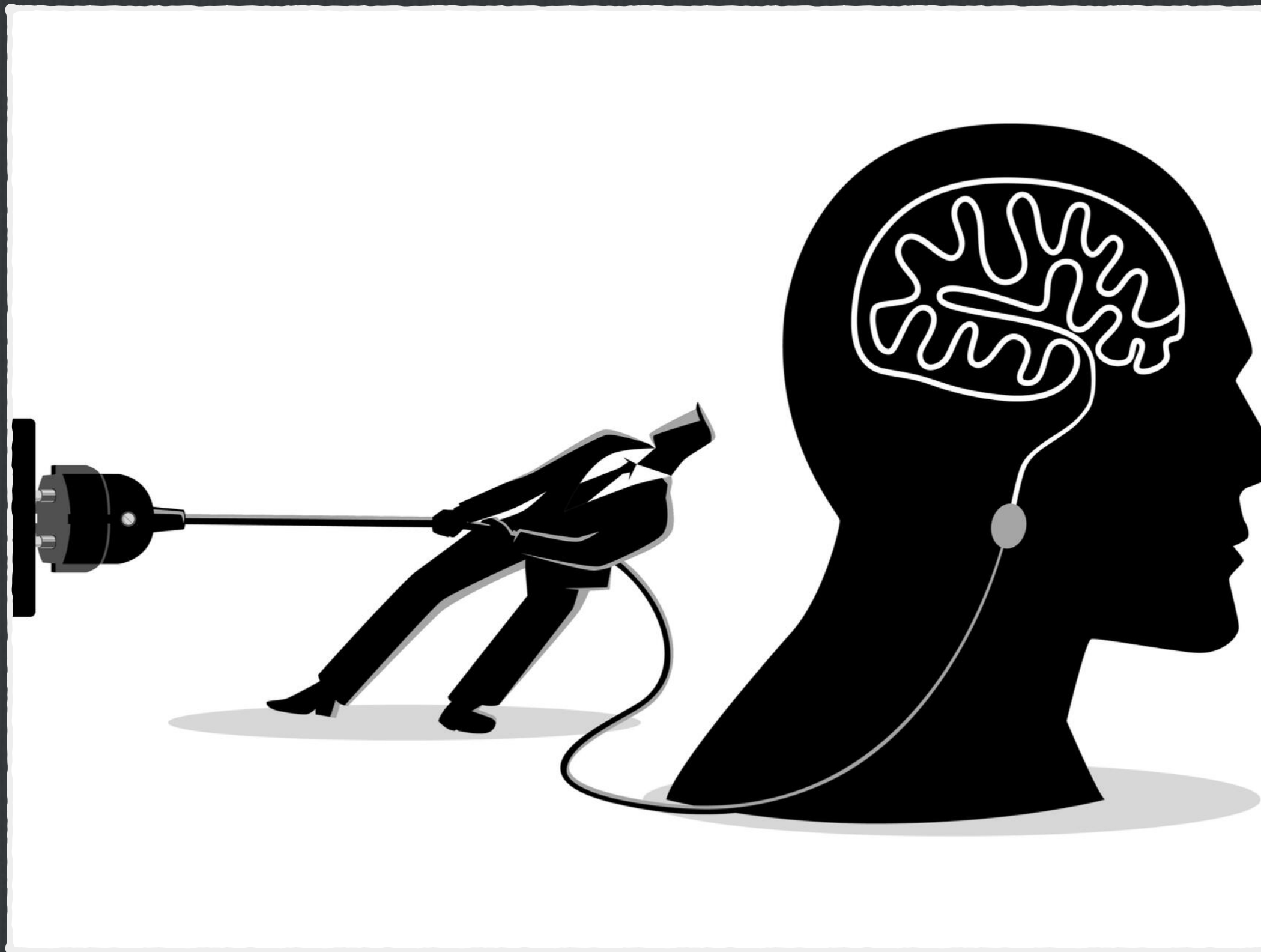
---



- Set a target weekend 6 weeks from now where your whole family is going to unplug from devices for 3 days.
- Set incremental goals each week that reduce screen time (no phones at dinner this week, no phones at dinner or for an hour after everyone gets home the next week, etc.)
- Gradually scale down as the weeks pass. Parents don't get to cheat because you're the parents.
- Enjoy your digital vacation weekend. Parents can't cheat.
- Bring the phones back on Monday with a new plan.

# Your New Plan

---



- Needs to be less focused on time than on environment. Some examples. No phones when:
  - We're in the car together.
  - We're at dinner
  - You're in the living room
  - You're in the bedroom.
- Your new plan needs to be thoughtful. Intentionality is key...