

## THE BIG IDEAS

### The Great Untruths

Three of them.

### We Are Antifragile

That's the truth.

### Emotional Reasoning

And its antidote: CBT.

### Van's Antifragile Gym

Hit It. Get strong.

### Heroic Education

Ben Franklin style.

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

~ Folk Wisdom

# The Coddling of the American Mind

How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure

BY GREG LUKIANOFF & JONATHAN HAIDT · PENGUIN BOOKS © 2019 · 352 PAGES

"This is a book about wisdom and its opposite. ...

We will show you that these three Great Untruths [The Untruth of Fragility, The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning, and The Untruth of Us Versus Them]—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 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. These Great Untruths are bad for everyone. Anyone who cares about young people, education, or democracy should be concerned about these trends."

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt from *The Coddling of the American Mind*

I've had this book for years and have been meaning to read it for as long. During a micro-sabbatical in which I took a break from travel and went DEEP to get ahead on content, I decided to spend a week with Professor Jonathan Haidt—a man I deeply admire.

I had read and loved his first book, *The Happiness Hypothesis* and decided I'd spend a week hanging out with him 1-on-1 as I read this book along with another one called *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (I'm typing this weeks before the 2024 election so this book is especially timely) and his most recent book called *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. As expected, the experience was profound.

Jonathan Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business. He obtained his PhD in social psychology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 and taught at the University of Virginia for sixteen years. He's one of the world's leading researchers/thinkers on the science of moral and political psychology.

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

~ Buddha

Greg Lukianoff is the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and one of the country's most passionate defenders of free expression. He's the author of a number of books (including his most recent called: *The Canceling of the American Mind: Cancel Culture Undermines Trust and Threatens Us All—But There Is a Solution*) and has written on free-speech issues in the nation's top newspapers.

You can learn more about them and the book at [TheCoddling.com](http://TheCoddling.com). There's also a documentary you can rent to [watch here](#). [Trailer here](#). <- That's a GREAT trailer for the book, too!

One of the things I most appreciated about the book was the way in which Jonathan and Greg embodied the virtue of "intellectual humility." They are incredibly rigorous in both the precision of their thinking and the respectful, humble tone with which they communicate their views. Reading this book was an education in not just the \*theory\* of how to engage in thoughtful discussions about challenging subjects, but a wonderful demonstration of that theory in practice.

The book is packed with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorites, so let's get to work.

## THE THREE GREAT UNTRUTHS

"This is a book about the 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."**

The book has four parts. Part I is all about those "Three Bad Ideas" and features a chapter that defines/explains each of them. Part II is all about examples of those "Bad Ideas in Action." Part III asks (and answers!) the question "How Did We Get Here?" by unpacking the six underlying causes. Part IV is all about "Wising Up" and focuses on how to we can create wiser kids, universities, and societies.

In the very last chapter, Greg and Jonathan tell us that they "can summarize the entire book by contrasting the three opening quotations and the three Great Untruths. Here's what they share:

| PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE  | WISDOM  | GREAT UNTRUTH  |
|--|---|--|
| Young people are antifragile.                                      | <i>Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child.</i>  | <i>What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.</i>               |
| We are all prone to emotional reasoning and the confirmation bias. | <i>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.</i> | <i>Always trust your feelings.</i>                           |
| We are all prone to dichotomous thinking and tribalism.            | <i>The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.</i>   | <i>Life is a battle between good people and evil people.</i> |

With that high level wisdom and its opposite framed up, let's look at some practical ideas on how to go about leveling up our wisdom!

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

~ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

*"When we overprotect children, we harm them.*

*Children are naturally antifragile, so overprotection makes them weaker and less resilient later on."*

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

*"If you see yourself or your fellow students as candles, you'll want to make your campus a wind-free zone. ... But young adults are not flickering candle flames. They are antifragile."*

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

## THE TRUTH: WE ARE ANTIFRAGILE

"A culture that allows the concept of 'safety' to creep so far that it equates emotional discomfort with physical danger is a culture that encourages people to systemically protect one another from the very experiences embedded in daily life that they need in order to become strong and healthy."

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

"What really frightens and dismays us is not the external events themselves, but the way in which we think about them. It is not things that disturb us, but our interpretation of their significance."

~ Epictetus

"But discomfort is not danger. Students, professors, and administrators should understand the concept of antifragility and keep in mind Hanna Holborn Gray's principle: 'Education should not be intended to make people feel comfortable; it is meant to make them think.'"

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

"No one has done a better job of explaining the harm of avoiding stressors, risks, and small doses of pain than Nassim Taleb, the Lebanese-born statistician, stock trader, and polymath who is now a professor of risk engineering at New York University.

In his 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 benefit from such falls. But Taleb asks us to look beyond the overused word 'resilience' and recognize that some things are *antifragile*. Many of the important systems in our economic and political life are like our immune systems: they *require* stressors and challenges in order to learn, adapt, and grow. Systems that are antifragile become rigid, weak, and inefficient when nothing challenges them or pushes them to respond vigorously. He notes that muscles, bones, and children are antifragile.

Just as spending time in bed ... leads to muscle atrophy, complex systems are weakened, even killed, when deprived of stressors. Much of our modern, structured world has been harming with top-down policies and contraptions ... which do precisely this: an insult to the antifragility of systems. This is the tragedy of modernity: as with *neurotically overprotective parents, those trying to help are often hurting us the most* [emphasis added].

Taleb opens the book with a poetic image that should speak to all parents. He notes that wind extinguishes a candle but energizes a fire. He advises us not to be like candles and not to turn our children into candles: 'You want to be the fire and wish for the wind.'

As you probably guessed, that's from the first chapter of the book on "The Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Weaker."

Right before that passage, Greg and Jonathan say: "*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.*"

Now...

I want to be REALLY clear about the fact that we don't START out \*fragile\* and THEN work our way up to becoming antifragile.

WE ARE DESIGNED (!) TO BE ANTIFRAGILE.

Period.

It's not up for debate.

But...

When we overprotect our kids (and ourselves!) and avoid the very stressors that would forge our antifragile strength, we BECOME FRAGILE.

That's not what \*any\* of us want.

Obviously—which is why the sub-title of the book is "How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure."

Remember: "*We want to be the fire and wish for the wind.*"

*"As Marcus Aurelius advised, 'Choose not to be harmed-and you won't feel harmed. Don't feel harmed-and you haven't been.' The more ways your identity can be threatened by casual daily interactions, the more valuable it will be to cultivate the Stoic (and Buddhist, and CBT) ability to not be emotionally reactive, to not let others control your mind and your cortisol levels."*

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

*"Depressed people often stick pins into their own life rafts. The conscious mind can intervene. One is not helpless."*

~ Andrew Solomon

*"Teach children the basics of CBT. CBT stands for 'cognitive behavioral therapy,' but in many ways it's really just 'cognitive behavioral techniques,' because the intellectual habits it teaches are good for everyone."*

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

## THE UNTRUTH OF EMOTIONAL REASONING & ITS ANTIDOTE: CBT

"The list below shows nine of the most common cognitive distortions that people learn to recognize in CBT. It is these distorted thought patterns that Greg began to notice on campus, which led him to invite Jon out to lunch, which led to us writing our *Atlantic* article and, eventually, this book. ...

**EMOTIONAL REASONING:** Letting your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. 'I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out.'

**CATASTROPHIZING:** Focusing on the worst possible outcome and seeing it as most likely. 'It would be terrible if I failed.'

**OVERGENERALIZING:** Perceiving a global pattern of negatives on the basis of a single incident. 'This generally happened to me. I seem to fail at a lot of things.'

**DICHOTOMOUS THINKING** (also known variously as 'black-and-white thinking,' 'all-or-nothing thinking,' and 'binary thinking'): Viewing events or people in all-or-nothing terms. 'I get rejected by everyone,' or 'It was a complete waste of time.'

**MIND READING:** Assuming that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. 'He thinks I'm a loser.'

**LABELING:** Assigning global negative traits to yourself or others (often in the service of dichotomous thinking). 'I'm undesirable,' or 'He's a rotten person.'

**NEGATIVE FILTERING:** You focus almost exclusively on the negatives and seldom notice the positives. 'Look at all of the people who don't like me.'

**DISCOUNTING POSITIVES:** Claiming that the positive things you or others do are trivial, so that you can maintain a negative judgment. 'That's what wives are supposed to do—so it doesn't count when she's nice to me,' or 'Those successes were easy, so they don't matter.'

**BLAMING:** Focusing on the other person as the source of your negative feelings; you refuse to take responsibility for changing yourself. 'She's to blame for the way I feel now,' or 'My parents caused all my problems.'"

That's from the second chapter on "The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning."

This Great Untruth says... In short: *"Always trust your feelings."* (Eek.)

The wise approach? Greg and Jon tell us that we want to challenge the potentially distorted thought patterns that are often \*behind\* the emotions we're experiencing.

Their specific recommendation? Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

They tell us: *"Everyone engages in these [cognitive] distortions from time to time, so [cognitive behavioral therapy or] CBT is useful for everyone. Wouldn't our relationships be better if we all did a little less blaming and dichotomous thinking, and recognized that we usually share responsibility for conflicts? Wouldn't our political debates be more productive if we all did less overgeneralizing and labeling, both of which make it harder to compromise?"*

And: *"Teach children the basics of CBT. CBT stands for 'cognitive behavioral therapy,' but in many ways it's really just 'cognitive behavioral techniques,' because the intellectual habits it teaches are good for everyone."*

They also make the VERY compelling case for the idea that, in an effort to protect our "fragile" youth, we're actually **TEACHING THEM TO PRACTICE** the very distortions that CBT aims to fix.

P.S. Here's [the 2015 Atlantic cover story](#) that led this book!

*" Aristotle often evaluated a thing with respect to its 'telos'-its purpose, end, or goal. The telos of a knife is to cut. A knife that does not cut well is not a good knife. The telos of a physician is health or healing. A physician who cannot heal is not a good physician. What is the telos of a university? The most obvious answer is 'truth.'"*

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

## VAN JONES' ANTIFRAGILE GYM

"A second and more radical response opens up when you reject the 'speech is violence' view: you can use your opponents' ideas and arguments to make yourself stronger. The progressive activist Van Jones (who was President Barack Obama's green jobs advisor) endorsed this view in February of 2017 in a conversation at the University of Chicago's Institute for Politics. When Democratic strategist David Axelrod asked Jones about how progressive students should react when people they find ideologically offensive (such as someone associated with the Trump administration) are invited to speak on campus, Jones began by noting the distinction we described in chapter 1 between physical and emotional 'safety':

"There are two ideas about safe spaces: One is a very good idea and one is a terrible idea. The idea of being physically safe on a campus—not being subjected to sexual harassment and physical abuse, or being targeted specifically, personally, for some kind of hate speech—'you are an n-word,' or whatever—I am perfectly fine with that. But there's another view that is now I think ascendent, which I think is just a horrible view, which is that 'I need to be safe ideologically. I need to be safe emotionally. I just need to feel good all the time, and if someone says something that I don't like, there's a problem for everyone else, including the [university's] administration.'

Jones then delivered some of the best advice for college students we have ever heard. He rejected the Untruth of Fragility and turned safetyism on its head:

I don't want you to be safe ideologically. I don't want you to be safe *emotionally*. I want you to be strong. That's different. I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take all the weights out of the gym; that's the whole point of the gym. This is the gym.

Jones understands antifragility. Jones wants progressive college students to see themselves not as fragile candles but as fire, welcoming the wind by seeking out ideologically different speakers and ideas."

That's from a chapter in Part II all about "Bad Ideas in Action" in which they talk about "Intimidation and Violence."

The short story here? One of the themes of the book is the creation of a culture that they call "safetyism" in which students and administrators try to create "safe places" (and "trigger warnings," etc.) in an attempt to protect themselves emotionally and ideologically.

Van Jones isn't a fan. I repeat... He tells us: "*I don't want you to be safe ideologically. I don't want you to be safe emotionally. I want you to be strong. That's different. I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take all the weights out of the gym; that's the whole point of the gym. This is the gym.*"

In our Notes on [Brene Brown's \*Braving the Wilderness\*](#), we talk about the same basic idea. She tells us: "*I love Pema Chödrön's 'Lousy World' teaching on this topic. In it, Chödrön uses the lessons of the Indian Buddhist monk Shantideva to make a very powerful analogy about moving through the world constantly pissed off and disappointed. ... She says:*

*'We're laughing, but that's what we all do. That is how we approach things. We think, if we could just get rid of everything and cover it with leather, our pain would go away. Well, sure, because then it wouldn't be cutting our feet anymore. It's just logical, isn't it? But it doesn't make any sense, really. Shantideva said, 'But if you simply wrap leather around your feet.' In other words, if you put on shoes then you could walk across the boiling sand and the cut glass and the thorns, and it wouldn't bother you. So the analogy is, if you work with your mind, instead of trying to change everything on the outside, that's how your temper will cool down.'*"

*" We agree with former Northwestern University professor Alice Dreger, who urges activist students and professors to 'Carpe datum' ('Seize the data'). In her book *Galileo's Middle Finger*, she contends that good scholarship must 'put the search for the truth first and the quest for social justice second.'"*

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

And... Here's how [Shantideva](#) puts it (see Notes on [The Way of the Bodhisattva](#)): "To cover all the earth with sheets of leather— Where could such amounts of skin be found? But with the leather soles of just my shoes It is as though I cover all the earth!"

P.S. Watch the clip of Van Jones [here](#). Watch the clip of [Pema Chödrön here](#).

"Some of the parents may think that making sure their children do whatever it takes to succeed in advanced courses helps their children develop 'grit.' But 'grit is often misunderstood as perseverance without passion,' and that's tragic," psychology professor Angela Duckworth, author of the book *Grit*, told us. "Perseverance without passion is mere drudgery." She wants people to "devote themselves to pursuits that are intrinsically fulfilling."

~ Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt

## HEROIC EDUCATION

"Something is going badly wrong for American teenagers, as we can see in the statistics on depression, anxiety, and suicide. Something is going very wrong on many college campuses, as we can see in the growth of call-out culture, in the rise in efforts to disinvite or shout down visiting speakers, and in changing norms about speech, including a recent tendency to evaluate speech in terms of safety and danger. This new culture of safetyism and vindictive protectiveness is bad for students and bad for universities. What can we do to change course?"

Those are the first words of the chapter on "Wiser Kids" in the final section of the book called "Wising Up" in which Greg and Jon answer the question on how we can raise "children who are wiser, stronger, and antifragile."

They gives us SIX suggestions—including wisdom on how to help our kids forge antifragile confidence by exposing them to risk and letting them engage in free play with other kids, teaching them how to use CBT (NOTE: They are incredibly direct in their recommendation here!), and teaching them how to practice intellectual humility by reminding of things like this: "Having people around us who are willing to disagree with us is a gift. So when you realize you are wrong, admit that you are wrong, and thank your critics for helping you see it."

The final chapter of the book is called "Wiser Societies." These are the FINAL words of that chapter/the book: "In 1750, as he was founding the school that later became the University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin wrote this to Samuel Johnson:

*Nothing is of more importance to the public weal, than to form and train up youth in wisdom and virtue. Wise and good men are, in my opinion, the strength of the state: much more so than riches or arms, which, under the management of Ignorance and Wickedness, often draw on destruction, instead of providing for the safety of a people.*

*This is a book about education and wisdom. If we can educate the next generation more wisely, they will be stronger, richer, more virtuous, and even safer."*

That sounds like Heroic Education to me. Here's to rejecting the three Great Untruths as we cultivate Wisdom, Discipline, Love, and Courage within OURSELVES so we're in a position to teach them to our kids. That's the only way we'll be able to help create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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