

Title: Greg Lukianoff and Jon Haidt on The Coddling of the American Mind
Episode: 34

Transcript

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Narrator: Welcome to Half Hour of Heterodoxy featuring conversation with scholars and authors, and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here your host Chris Martin.

Chris Martin: On today's episode the authors of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jon Haidt.

Greg is the Director of FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education and Jon of course is one of the founders of Heterodox Academy, professor of Ethical Leadership at NYU's Stern School and author of *The Righteous Mind* and *The Happiness Hypothesis*. I interviewed Greg and Jon separately for this episode.

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Chris Martin: *The Coddling of the American Mind* is not just the name of a book but also the name of an article. What's different about the book? Well, for starters, Jon describes it as a social science detective story.

Jonathan Haidt: Because it is perfectly made for social sciences to dive in and say, "What the hell just happened and why is it happening?" and to do it in a way that's not about blaming but about figuring things out. So a metaphor that I use is imagine if you have a desk and you work at your desk every day. One day, a book that has been sitting on your desk for a long time, it just suddenly burst into flames and you might be like, "Wow! How did that happen?"

It turns out that there are all these crystals stuck – you know, like your daughter has a collection of crystals and she's – suction cups and she has been sticking them on the window of your study. Then you see, "Oh, wow!" Here's a little beam of light that gets refracted at exactly 11:05 AM this morning and oh, here's another one and another one. They all add up to actually make one patch be very, very hot.

That's a roundabout way of saying we think that's basically what happened on some American college campuses in the fall of 2015.

Chris Martin: To understand the genesis of the book however, we have to jump a little earlier.

Jonathan Haidt: So what happened was Greg came to me in the summer of 2014.

Greg Lukianoff: We went to lunch at an Indian place in Downtown New York and I just talked about how as someone who personally benefited tremendously from cognitive behavioral

therapy, it sounded like for years, administrators had been teaching this kind of distorted way of thinking about things, kind of those exaggerated threat from speech and students weren't really buying it.

Then suddenly in 2013, 2014, the students started sounding a lot like the administrators and that's what led us to write the first article.

Jonathan Haidt: Our article just focused on understanding this new way of thinking that again not most students are doing this. But you find students at most elite schools, you will find subcultures, subgroups that go in for this way of thinking in which they are fragile and people have to be protected from hateful ideas and words and books.

So that's what we focused on and we speculated that well, maybe it's changes in childhood too. But we didn't really know. We just knew we had an odd phenomenon here. Since things got so much worse after we published the article, we both were still interested in this. As we dug deeper and deeper, we found what I think is an amazing story of sociological convergence, of various factors, all converging, so that kids born after 1995 get kind of a triple whammy and are very poorly prepared for colleges. The colleges then adapt to some of the student demands in ways that make it even worse for them.

Chris Martin: Now that may be true. But in the last couple of years, we've also seen the resurgence of the alt-right, which could be particularly disturbing to younger college students because their generation is more diverse. Do you feel like the alt-right also matters?

Jonathan Haidt: Well, it does but only in the later chapters. So there's no question that now, we are in a polarization cycle in which people on the right see the most outrageous things possible from individual students or professors on the left because there's a right-wing media ecosystem that does nothing but find the most outrageous things, package them to be outrageous and send them around.

But that only really ginned up in 2006. There was a – there was a little of that for the last 10 or 20 years. But the – and that who even heard of the alt-right before 2016? Maybe late 2015. But Greg noticed this problem in 2014 as did I. We wrote an article in 2015. What was going on in campus was in no sense a reaction to the alt-right. Nobody had heard of it. It was just not an issue.

So we have to look for the causes of this and the acceleration of this elsewhere. Now of course once Trump is the nominee or is running, then you get all the, you know, the Pepe the Frog stuff and you get all that stuff. You get trolling and the right has been extremely effective at trolling the left and the left seems never to fail to take the bait

Chris Martin: The political climate does play into this though, doesn't it?

Greg Lukianoff: Well, definitely the current political climate has made all rational discussions harder in some ways because it is such an intense environment. It does seem like the Trump administration, that things look like the kind of stereotype of what the culture war – because

when I started in 2001 – let’s take a step back. You know, both Haidt and I had this interesting position in the culture war. We sometimes feel like we’re almost like referees for it and trying to get each side to sort of tolerate each other and talk to each other.

But conservatives seem to have this really exaggerated sense of what left censors look like on campus and liberals, mostly my friends, sometimes had this exaggerated sense of what the average conservative looked like.

But now in 2018, 17 years later, it does look like – sometimes in some ways, it does look like we’ve almost become these caricatures of ourselves or maybe we’re just more aware of these caricatures because we have a president who is a constant presence on social media and that we’re able to see more.

But I do think that the evidence that we marshal in the book shows that the polarization that we – that this part of our lived experience is very real.

[Music]

Chris Martin: Even though the book is very political and very sociological, chapter seven begins with a personal story.

Greg Lukianoff: Yeah. Just on a very personal note, I wrote that introduction because I wanted to be very honest and emotionally honest about like how I got into cognitive behavioral therapy. I used to have pretty serious chronic bouts of depression. But the scariest and most frankly life-threatening one I had was back in 2007 and in writing that passage, there was something kind of funny that happened sometimes in the writing process that I’m sure you know.

Sometimes it feels like you’re just talking to your computer kind of privately. I wrote up this description of how bad it was and how close to – you know, that I was trying to figure out ways to frankly kill myself and I am fairly explicit about in the book. After we’ve submitted the book, long after I wrote that part, I realized, “Oh my god! This is like the most public thing I’ve ever said. This has more details than I had even shared with my wife or my family.”

So I had a moment of like, “Oh my god. What have I done?” But I wanted to be honest about it. It comes from a really bad depression and my recovery from that depression involved several factors. But the most lasting benefit I got was from cognitive behavioral therapy.

So I still get these sort of moments of feeling the depression coming on every year. But because I learned the intellectual habits of being able to sort of talk back to the voice in your head that says, “You’re broken or you’re doomed,” or all of this kind of really kind of exaggeratedly negative things and just talking back to them rationally, not using the sort of silly power of positive thinking, but just being like, “Am I really doomed?” and getting – and developing that habit over the course of a lot of hard work, over the course of many, many months, almost a year, I now – it comes. It just isn’t as bad as it used to be. I feel like I can mostly fight it off and make my bouts of depression much more manageable.

Chris Martin: At the end of the book, you have an appendix that includes a summary of how to administer CBT and you almost mentioned David Burns' book about CBT. I thought that was a great add-on. I really love his book.

Greg Lukianoff: It's a really good book. Well, I would like to give a special shout out for Robert Leahy who is a very prominent scholar of cognitive behavioral therapy who's very helpful with his time in this book. His specialty is cognitive behavioral therapy. He wrote a book called *The Worry Cure*, which is more directed at anxiety as opposed to depression.

[Music]

Chris Martin: At some points in the book, you seemed to take a Nietzschean perspective on pain and discuss how pain can make you stronger. But at other points, you take a stoic perspective and these two perspectives aren't really reconcilable. So where do you stand on this?

Jonathan Haidt: So first let's distinguish the concept of "antifragility". That's the key concept and this is what I will stake my life and my reputation on, that this is a useful concept and it's not quite what Nietzsche was talking about...or rather let me put it this way.

So antifragility, the idea from Nassim Taleb, I think most of our listeners will have heard of it, that there are some systems that – there are some things that you need to protect because they're fragile and it doesn't help them to drop them, like a wine glass. But the immune system or the banking system, they're a variety of complex systems, that if they're not challenged or stressed or dropped, they get soft, they get fragile, they lose their ability to respond.

So you can cause autoimmune diseases in your kid if you protect them from bacteria very effectively. So kids need to be exposed to experiences. They need to have all kinds of experiences and threats to learn how to deal with them. Small threats when they're young but they can handle bigger problems as they get older and if we protect them all day up to college and then send them off to college, they will find small threats to be intolerable.

Now you used the example of pain. Am I saying that if we could just administer pain to seven-year-olds, we would make them better? No. It's not suffering per se. It's coping with a problem and overcoming it. So I live in New York City. I've had to wrestle with the question of when to send my kids out. It's very safe here. We live in Greenwich Village. It's extremely safe. But it's a little scary to send your kids out. But I want my daughter – my daughter is eight. My son is twelve. I want them to experience getting lost in the neighborhood and then having to actually ask someone, "Which way is Washington Square Park?"

That's a basic skill that we all had to learn when we were growing up. So it's not that I want my daughter to suffer period. But I do want her at times to get lost, to be anxious and to realize, "Oh, I can ask someone for help."

That is antifragility. That is learning from experience. I think Nietzsche would support me on that.

Chris Martin: When I was doing research for my dissertation, I heard from a therapist who had been working at a college for decades that she's now seeing students who've never had any failure experiences prior to college, which is troubling and it's not like we want people to feel pain per se. But you want people to learn that they can cope with failure.

Jonathan Haidt: That's right. I mean this is – and I think this is why psychology has been – well, I was about to say this is why psychology is so essential to Heterodox Academy. No, it's probably just that I'm a psychologist and a bunch of the early members were psychologists.

But think about it this way. Your kid has to learn to not touch a hot stove after people have been cooking on it. You know, the stove stays hot afterwards and there are two ways that your kid can learn. One is you can give lectures and show them photographs and say over and over again, "Don't touch the stove for an hour after it was on." The other way is that they touch it once, they get burned and then they never do it again.

Which way is more likely to work in a lasting way? I mean this is just basic behaviorism. This is operant conditioning and bringing some Pavlovian as well at times. So if we deprive our kids of learning experiences, including the discomfort of negative feedback, we are crippling them as surely as if we put a bubble around them to protect them from bacteria and viruses.

[Music]

Chris Martin: Readers of Jon's last book, *The Righteous Mind*, won't be surprised to learn that part of this book is about political divisiveness.

Jonathan Haidt: One of the most basic principles is me against my brother, me and my brother against our cousin, me and my brother and cousin against a stranger. So that one proverb perfectly captures the idea, that people are really, really good at forming shifting coalitions based on the current threat.

So if you imagine trying to build a really diverse college community. That's what we're all trying to do. Every school in the country practically – certainly all the top ones are actively trying to increase diversity. OK, that's great. I can have many, many benefits. But how do you do it?

If you bring people to campus and you teach them, you teach them certain currently fashionable ideas that lead them to see people in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation and that lead them to see certain ends of those dimensions as good and others as bad. If you teach them to play up group differences and moralize those differences, then you're taking what could be a real plus in the form of diversity and turning it into constant struggle, recrimination and distrust.

So a lot of people are realizing this, that identity politics, that starts from a common humanity view as Martin Luther King did, where you say we're all Americans or we're all humans – he used a lot of Christian language. He used all kinds of ways of encompassing everyone together and then saying some of our brothers and sisters are not being accorded equal dignity or equal opportunity. That works. That appeals to people of all races. That is beautiful.

Unfortunately, many people go the opposite way. That is they say, “Let’s unite! We have to all unite against them, against the bad people!” and to do that in a diverse environment, it’s – I mean what kind of social scientist could look at this, could look at this common enemy identity politics and think this was a good idea?

Chris Martin: So Greg, do you talk to college administrators about this issue?

Greg Lukianoff: I do. The one thing that FIRE has always tried to do and it’s something that could be quite challenging particularly at first is we go to conferences of – for example the Association of Student Conduct Administrators. You know, I went there for years by myself to give talks on free speech. That’s a tough crowd to speak in front of because of course we’re their watchdogs. So we’re not the most popular kids in the room. But we didn’t want to be – we’ve never wanted to be the group that just sort of preaches to the choir or talks to people we already agree with. That might feel good but it’s hollow and meaningless.

When we do talk to administrators – but there is an interesting paradox here though. Sometimes you get like what – in the current environment, can you blame people for being angry or upset? And the answer is no. I don’t blame anybody for feeling a little bit crazy in the current, bizarre world that we live in.

That being said, given some of the trends we’ve seen on campus that have made professors nervous about what they can say and given how we’ve seen this kind of – now it’s not just the sort of more liberally-leaning students you have to worry about. It’s the right-wing outraged mobs on the internet as well. I am starting to see administrators ask for our help more often and that has been for years now, that administrators will come to us and ask kind of like how do I – you know, what can we do?

The easiest thing universities do in a lot of cases is reform their speech codes or pass some version of the Chicago Statement of Academic Freedom. The thing I’m always advocating is try to teach them some of these concepts of academic freedom and freedom of speech upfront because I have heard for most of my career there’s a lot of blaming the students even when the students might have been interactionally quite good on these issues about – you know, some of the more ridiculous cases of censorship we see at FIRE and my response was always to the administrators. Like have you taught them anything about these concepts?

Very natural to believe that people who disagree with you are evil. The idea that one, you should tolerate them, is quite a huge step and the idea that sometimes you should actually listen to them, that’s hard. That’s not intuitive and that’s not most of human history, that you actually listen to even what your enemy says just in case they might have a point.

Chris Martin: And Jon, you’ve noticed that some other journalists and scholars are also writing about divisiveness.

Jonathan Haidt: Actually, I’ve got a list of them here. But it’s like – so Amy Chua in her book *Political Tribes*. Francis Fukuyama has a book out just this week on identity politics. My book

was just – this book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, was just reviewed by Thomas Chatterton Williams. He’s African-American.

So there are all these different people who are saying, “Wait. This is madness. We’ve got to stop doing this.” Who else? Oh, Anthony Appiah, his new book *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity Politics*. He’s a wonderful philosopher here at NYU. I did a panel with him at Middlebury and it’s really clear. I mean he has been thinking about identity for a long, long time. He has been really a leader in thinking about, “What does it take for us to get used to each other and live productively and amicably alongside each other?”

He’s from Ghana and he’s used to multicultural situations. So all the – it’s just very exciting that I think there’s a lot of new thinking about identity politics, which is much more sociologically-informed than the kind that has the loudest voice on campus.

Chris Martin: Now in the section on divisiveness, you say one of the great untruths we have to combat is that the world can be divided into good versus evil people and I see your point. But at the same time, I feel like some people genuinely are evil. Take Vladimir Putin for example. Do you feel like no one should be classified as evil?

Greg Lukianoff: No, I don’t. Sometimes I even – I’m a secular atheist and sometimes I sort of jar my fellow atheists when I say that I actually do believe in human evil. I just don’t believe it’s all that common. I think that the tendency to assume people who do something you don’t like have negative characteristics or have negative – are coming from negative motivations is extremely common whereas actual human evil is comparatively rare.

We’re not saying it doesn’t exist but immediately jumping to the idea that the people on the other side of this, for example a political issue, are obviously motivated by evil is not a constructive starting point given I think – like I said, I think we’re lucky enough that human evil is fairly rare.

There’s a pop psychologist who actually, when I was in high school, wrote some stuff that I still find of lingering value. M. Scott Peck wrote a book called *The Road Less Travelled*. But he also wrote a book called *People of the Lie* and it’s his attempt to sort of quantify evil from a psychological standpoint and basically he thinks of evil people as primarily sociopathic but with a particular kind – with an element of sadism as well.

I thought that was probably about as close to a sort of clinical definition of evil that I could find.

[Music]

Chris Martin: Jon and Greg conclude the book with suggestions for how to fix the problem.

Jonathan Haidt: So if listeners will go to www.HeterodoxAcademy.org and [then if you go to then slash “Mill,”](#) you get our version of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, which is wonderful. I think every incoming freshman should read it. Every university should assign it. If you go to www.OpenMindPlatform.org, it’s this wonderful program that I created with Caroline Mehl, who – we’ve now spun it off. It’s no longer part of Heterodox Academy. It’s an independent

organization because it actually is working not just at universities but in all kinds of organizations.

But www.OpenMindPlatform.org is a wonderful resource that will help any institution develop norms of open-minded discourse.

Chris Martin: Meanwhile FIRE has plans for younger audiences.

Greg Lukianoff: We want to do a lot more outreach at a high school level. We want to do a lot more outreach even to a K through 8 level. That's definitely where we think there's a lot of room to grow and a lot of possibilities to try to explain and boil down some of these concepts that we can take for granted are really actually quite sophisticated concepts to a younger audience. I think we kind of surprise ourselves by coming to the conclusion that for example, having a cultural expectation of a gap year, I think would be really helpful. A gap year between high school and college for example, to give students that sense of locus of control that we think is missing from – particularly from students who have this kind of over-parenting effect.

Because the problem is if you do have your time scheduled to death, all the time, there's a sense that you're not really competent to control your own life. I think a year where people do – where people do something other than school and actually go out and work a job, maybe in some other part of the country, just – it's irreplaceable in how much it can teach you about your own abilities and competence that – you know, in a way that colleges can't do.

Chris Martin: So one of the things that occurs to me is that there's a difference between residential and non-residential colleges. In residential colleges, dorm living almost encourages irresponsible behavior.

Greg Lukianoff: Yeah. I refer to this as my superpower in undergraduate. I started working in a restaurant when I was 11 years old and I worked all the way. By the time I was going to college, I already was a sous-chef. So I had like a skill.

I had a level of personal freedom that even today some people might consider maybe a little irresponsible. But my super power was that I was over the novelty of personal freedom and watching a lot of my fellow students kind of seem like moths to the flame in their first couple of – in the first couple of years because this was our first experience of personal freedom. It did make me wonder if some additional real life experience before college would be helpful.

Chris Martin: In addition to resources for college students and high school students, there may even be something for very young people in the works.

Greg Lukianoff: I've always wanted to write a children's book about freedom of speech, to kind of explain this from a very early age. Of course I have two kids under three and people are like, "OK, Mr. Free Speech. How are you going to feel when it's your own kids?"

My answer is always since I think the primary value of making freedom of speech useful is epistemic humility and that you don't know all that much, I hope to be able to convey to my two

sons that – a very deep sense of how little all of us know. That helps them take better advantage of hearing people out.

Chris Martin: Greg, you mentioned you're always happy to hear from listeners and readers. How can people get in touch with you?

Greg Lukianoff: I'm Greg at www.TheFire.org. I'm also @glukianoff on Twitter and check out our website called "The Coddling" about the book. We intentionally picked that name because we thought it sounded kind of silly because we want – we know that people sometimes have a hard time with the title and we kind of like to make fun of it ourselves, like as if it's like "the blob". But really all we're saying is that sometimes attempts to protect kids and students can actually have deleterious effects.

[Music]

Chris Martin: Before we go, I would like to ultimately know, are you hopeful?

Jonathan Haidt: Yes. There's a wonderful phrase from Bill Clinton that I just heard from his first inaugural. He said there's nothing wrong with America that can't be fixed by what's right with America, something like that.

I think that same thing is true of universities. We have extraordinary minds working on every aspect of diversity and inclusion and racism and psychological adaptation. We have historians of the academy. We have intellectual historians. We can figure out what's going on. I think there's a growing recognition in the last two years that the way we're going is unsustainable. These new ideas are making it very hard for university leaders. I heard one say recently that universities are becoming ungovernable. They're making it hard for professors. I hear more and more now when I speak at different schools, when I talk with professors over lunch, now most of them either have a real – a horror story or at least someone close to them does.

So there's a growing recognition that we have serious problems. Faith in higher ed, trust in higher ed is plummeting on the right. It's even dropping on the left because of price issues. But it's plummeting on the right, which is terrible for universities in red states, for state universities in red states. So higher ed has been due for a reckoning for a while for financial reasons and we're really shooting ourselves in the foot if we make ourselves poster children to be used and exploited by the right-wing media.

We've got to get our house in order and my point is we know how to do that. We know how to improve a culture, to set it up for open-ended inquiry and the kind of productive, trusting interaction and debate that we need to do our work. So that's what we're doing. So at Heterodox Academy, that's our mission. Our mission is to help universities improve their academic culture and climate to welcome free inquiry, viewpoint diversity and constructive disagreement.

My point is we have a problem. We have a good understanding of the problem and we have the tools to deal with the problem. So I'm hopeful that we can drop the moralism, step out of the

culture war and just say, look, we all want what's best for our students. We all want thriving, vibrant, well-respected universities. Let's go at it. Let's do it.

[Music]

Chris Martin: *The Coddling of the American Mind* is now available in bookstores online and on audio book read by Jonathan Haidt himself. The website is www.TheCoddling.com. If you enjoyed this podcast, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find the show.

As always, this show was produced by Heterodox Academy. You can find us online at www.HeterodoxAcademy.org, on Twitter @HdxAcademy and on Facebook. Thanks for listening.

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