

# BEHIND THEIR SCREENS

What teens are facing - and how adults can help them **thrive**

Emily Weinstein & Carrie James



CENTER FOR  
DIGITAL  
THRIVING



**Social media is taking  
a dangerous toll on  
teenage girls**

**Social media is driving teen mental health  
crisis, surgeon general warns**

**Screens are poisoning kids' minds**





CENTER FOR  
DIGITAL  
THRIVING

## MISSION

To create relevant  
knowledge +  
research-based  
resources

## VISION

A world where young  
people **thrive** -  
however technology  
fits into their lives


# OUR APPROACH



LISTENING TO & PARTNERING WITH YOUTH

What are adults **MISSING** that you most need us to understand?





**Teen and Young Adult Perspectives on Generative AI**  
Patterns of use, excitements, and concerns

HOPE LAB   common sense<sup>®</sup>   HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION CENTER FOR DIGITAL THRIVING



What's one thing adults should know about how teens use AI (artificial intelligence)?

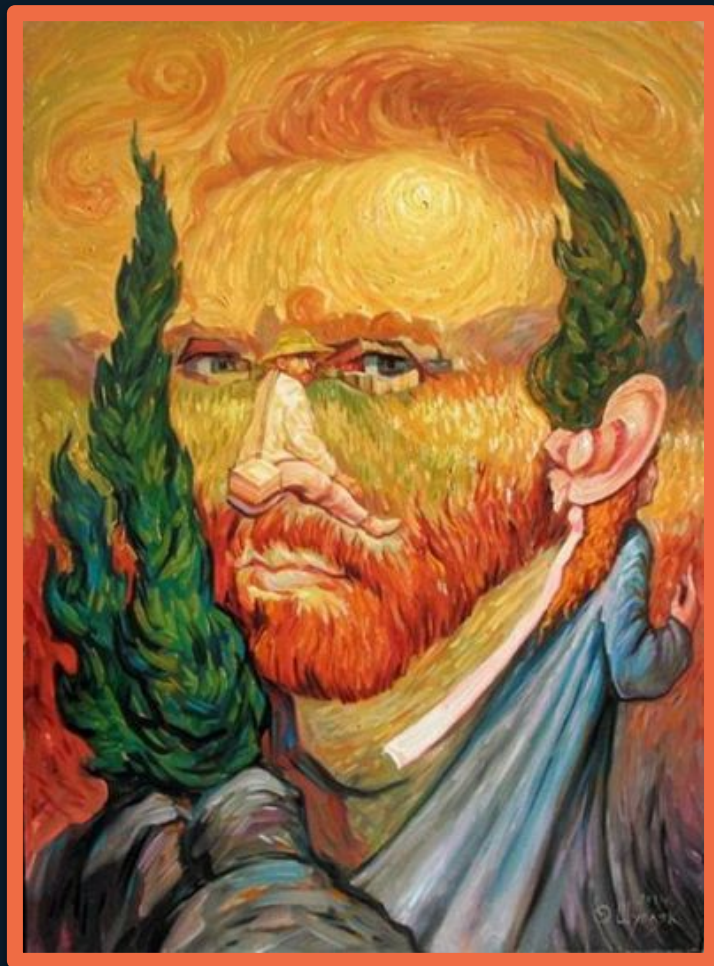
“ that robot makes  
me feel **important** ”



“ it **listens** ”

“ We use AI **bc we are lonely**  
and also **bc real people**  
**are mean** and judging  
sometimes and AI isn't. ”





Oleg Shupliak. "Double portrait of Van Gogh." 2011.



**ASSUMING**

**ASKING**



**Questions  
we asked**



**Insights  
from teens**



**Parenting  
Moves**



**Mindshifts**

GenAI ✓

The Pull of the Screen

Friendship & Social Information

Pressures aka “grind culture”



What's **worries** you  
**most** about growing  
up with today's  
technologies?



# THE PULL OF THE SCREEN

Teens worry about it, too.



“

I feel like I'm too interested in my  
phone instead of what's happening around me.  
**I WISH THAT I DIDN'T USE MY PHONE SO MUCH.**

(13-year-old)

“



It's just scary to think that  
I only get one childhood, and **I COULD  
ACCIDENTALLY SLIP INTO A HABIT WHERE  
I JUST WASTE IT AWAY ON SOME POINTLESS GAME.**

(14-year-old)



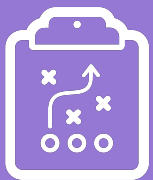


# Why do people turn to smartphones during social interactions? ☆

Ryan J. Dwyer  , Aaron X. Zhuo, [Elizabeth W. Dunn](#)

## Abstract

Smartphones can undermine the well-being people derive from social interactions, and yet nearly 90% of smartphone owners report having used their phones in their most recent social interaction. Why do people so readily turn to their devices, if doing so makes them less happy? To investigate this question, we asked participants to spend 20 min with 2–3 unacquainted peers in a makeshift recreation room. We randomly assigned groups to either have their phones accessible or to leave them stored away, and we assessed enjoyment for each 5-min phase of the 20-min period. We predicted that phones would provide some initial benefits; but, over time they would increasingly undermine the enjoyment people would derive otherwise by connecting with others. Contrary to our hypothesis, phones failed to confer any detectable benefits. Instead, participants who had access to their phones reported worse overall subjective experience and socialized significantly less (on both self-report and objective measures) compared to those who did not have access to their phones. The findings from this registered report cast doubt on the possibility that people are making sensible—albeit myopic—choices to use their phones, suggesting that people may be acting against their own best interest when they use phones in social situations.



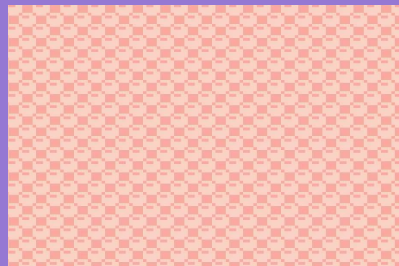
# TALK ABOUT DESIGN TRICKS

AUTOPLAY

INFINITE SCROLL

NOTIFICATIONS

LIKES

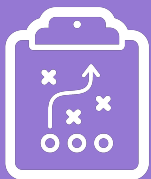




# TALK ABOUT DESIGN TRICKS



[digitalthriving.link/kqed01](https://digitalthriving.link/kqed01)



# TAKE ON TECH HABITS (TACTFULLY)

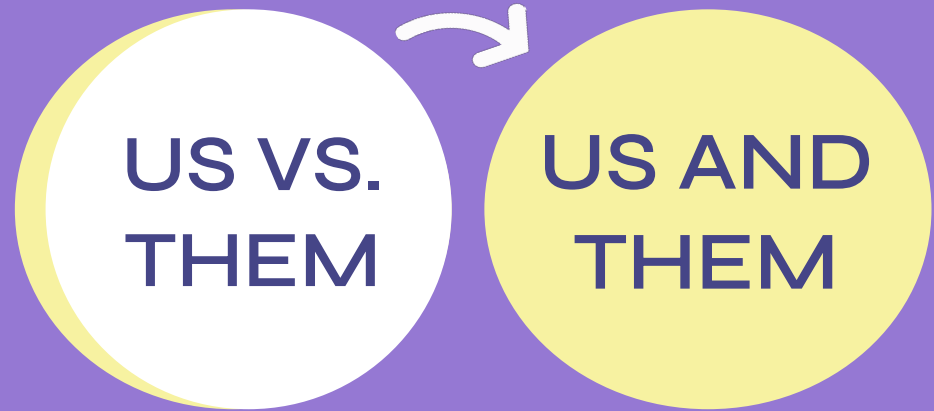
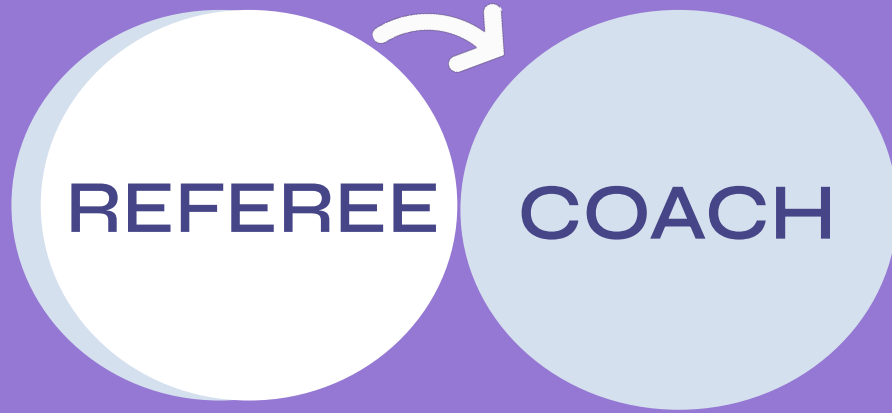
**HABIT:** What is one tech habit **YOU** want to change or start doing differently?

**ALTERNATIVE:** What do you want to do instead?

**TRICKS:** Are there any tricks that could help you stick to your habit challenge?

**CHALLENGE:** Habit science shows that it helps to write out your plan: "Instead of \_\_, I'm going to \_\_. I will try this for \_\_ days."

**HELP:** Who can help you stick to your challenge? How can they help?





# FRIENDSHIP DILEMMAS

Being a 'good friend' is complicated  
in a 24/7 digital world



**I don't want to hurt  
anybody's feelings**  
if I can't stay in touch  
with them

(17-year old)



**I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings**  
if I can't stay in touch  
with them

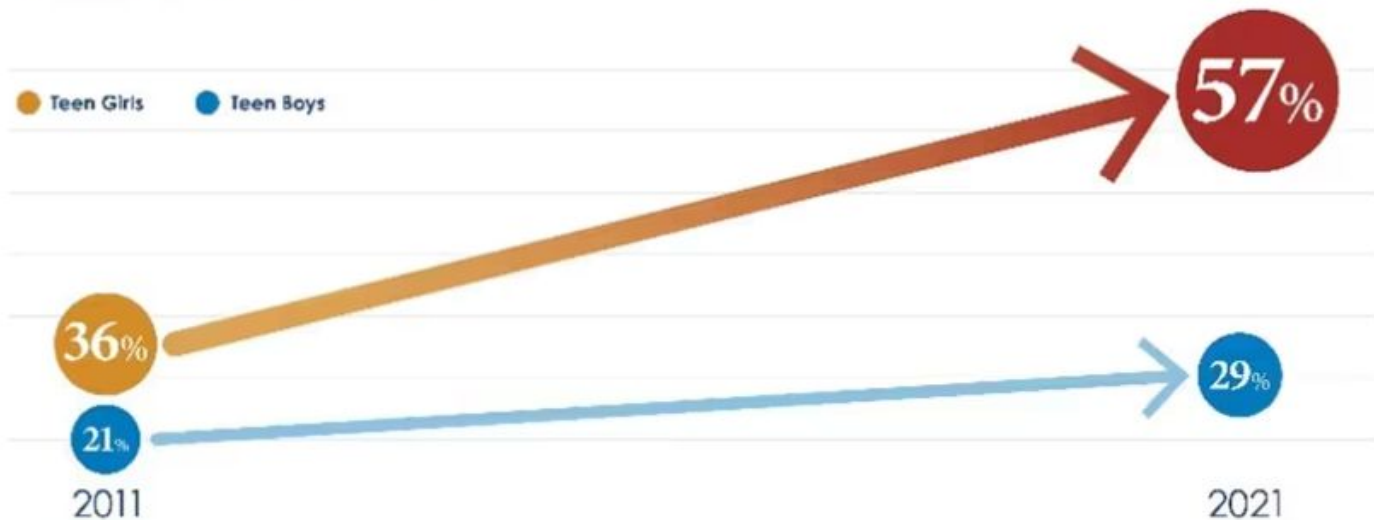
(17-year old)

(14-year old)

[my biggest worry is that]  
I don't have enough  
contact with **friends who  
are struggling.**

Because I don't want my  
friends to **do something  
bad just because I didn't  
respond in time** to stop  
them from harming  
themselves or worse.

## TEEN GIRLS WHO PERSISTENTLY FELT SAD OR HOPELESS INCREASED DRAMATICALLY FROM 2011 TO 2021



Centers for Disease Control. (2023). Youth Risk Behaviors Survey.

TIME

Social Media Has Made Teen Friendships More Stressful



# SOCIAL INFORMATION STRESS






▶ Opened · 3h

Hey. Are we ok??

Read 9:39 pm



*"My friend didn't reply to my text. She must be mad at me."*

# MIND READING


When you assume you know what someone else is thinking or feeling.



# THINKING TRAPS

automatic, negative thoughts






*"I'm annoying so  
my friends didn't  
invite me."*

**PERSONALIZING**  
When you put the blame on  
yourself for a situation

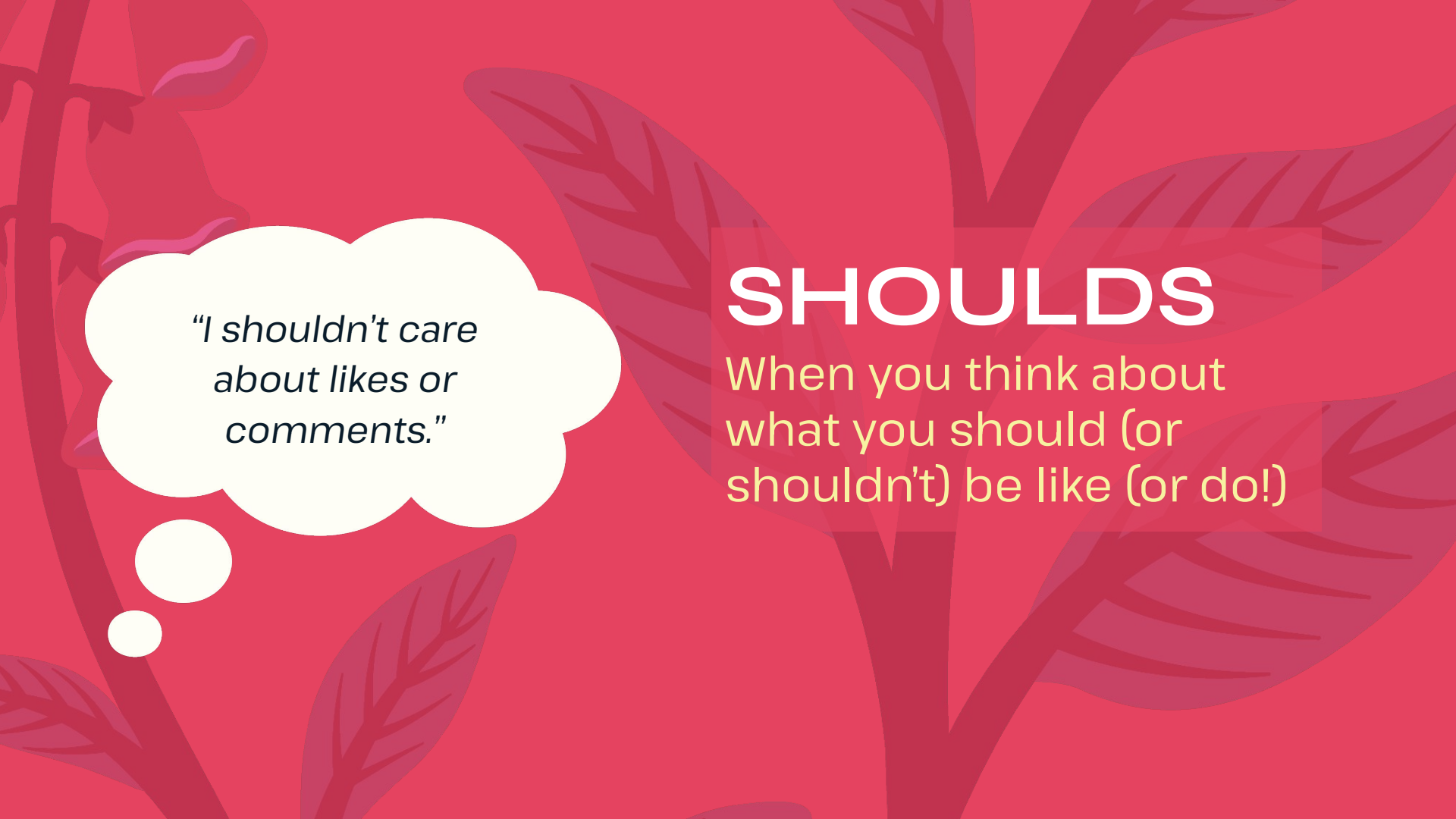




*“All my friends have better lives than me.”*

# ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

When you make big generalizations using words like all, always, never, nobody, etc.



*"I shouldn't care  
about likes or  
comments."*

# SHOULD

When you think about  
what you should (or  
shouldn't) be like (or do!)

## THINKING TRAPS

Thinking traps are exaggerated or irrational **negative thought** patterns, and they can **lead us to believe things that aren't necessarily true**. Here are some examples that come up related to technology and social media:



### THE THOUGHT

"My friend didn't respond to my text so she must be mad at me."

"If my photo doesn't get a lot of likes, it means I'm a failure."

"Everyone I follow is happier than me."

"I get distracted by my phone because I don't have any self-control."

"I can't stop thinking about that one negative comment."

"I sent a text when angry and now my friend will never talk to me again."

"I shouldn't care how many likes I get!"



### THE TRAP

#### MIND READING

When you assume you know what someone else is thinking or feeling.

#### LABELING

When you use negative labels for yourself.

#### ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

When you make big generalizations. (Words: All, Always, Never, Nobody, etc.)

#### PERSONALIZING

When you put the blame on yourself.

#### NEGATIVE FILTER

When you focus only on the negatives.

#### FORTUNE-TELLING

When you assume you know what will happen, and it's going to be bad!

#### SHOULD

When you think about what you "should" (or shouldn't) do or be like.

## Glossary

# Common Thinking Traps + Tech



This resource was created by the Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard Graduate School of Education, in partnership with Common Sense Education. It is shareable with attribution for noncommercial use. Remixing is encouraged!

CENTER FOR  
DIGITAL  
THRIVING

 common sense education



# TALK ABOUT THINKING TRAPS

## THINKING TRAPS

Thinking traps are exaggerated or irrational **negative thought** patterns, and they can lead us to believe things that aren't necessarily true. Here are some examples that come up related to technology and social media:



### THE THOUGHT

"My friend didn't respond to my text so she must be mad at me."

"If my photo doesn't get a lot of likes, it means I'm a failure."

"Everyone I follow is happier than me."

"I get distracted by my phone because I don't have any self-control."

"I can't stop thinking about that one negative comment."

"I sent a text when angry and now my friend will never talk to me again."

"I shouldn't care how many likes I get."



### THE TRAP

**MIND READING**  
When you assume you know what someone else is thinking or feeling.

**LABELING**  
When you use negative labels for yourself.

**ALL OR NOTHING THINKING**  
When you make big generalizations. (Words: All, Always, Never, Nobody, etc.)

**PERSONALIZING**  
When you put the blame on yourself.

**NEGATIVE FILTER**  
When you focus only on the negatives.

**FORTUNE-TELLING**  
When you assume you know what will happen, and it's going to be bad!

**SHOULD**  
When you think about what you "should" (or shouldn't) do or be like.



This resource was created by the Center for Digital Thriving at Harvard Graduate School of Education, in partnership with Common Sense Education. It is shareable with attribution for noncommercial use. Remixing is encouraged!



KQED

Sign In

Home

Shows

Explore

TV Schedules

Shop

Donate



LIVE TV



ABOVE THE NOISE

## How Your Brain Tricks You Into Negative Thinking

Season 7 Episode 14 | 8m 7s | CC

+ My List

Ever find yourself in a negative thinking spiral? Of course you have! It's human nature. Cognitive distortions aka thinking traps—are basically exaggerated or irrational negative thought patterns that can lead us to believe things that aren't necessarily true.

Aired: 07/19/23 | Rating: TV-PG

From: PBS Digital Studios >



[digitalthriving.link/ThinkingTraps](https://digitalthriving.link/ThinkingTraps)





# DISCUSS WAYS TO GET OUT OF THE TRAP

The screenshot shows a video player interface. The video title is "How Your Brain Tricks You Into Negative Thinking" from the series "ABOVE THE NOISE". The video is Season 7 Episode 14, 8m 7s long. The video content shows a man speaking with several red text boxes overlaid: "NEVER", "ALWAYS", "NOTHING", "ALL", "NO ONE", and "EVERYONE". The video player includes a progress bar at 2:35 / 8:07, a "Continuous Play Settings" button, and social sharing options for Facebook, Twitter, and a link icon. Below the video, there are links for "Problems Playing Video? Report a Problem" and "Closed Captioning".

Come up with alternative explanations.

Try to prove yourself wrong!

What advice would you give a friend experiencing this thought?

What is a more kind or helpful explanation for the situation?



**WHAT  
THE  
HECK?**

**WHAT'S  
FAMILIAR?**

GenAI ✓

The Pull of the Screen ✓

Friendship & Social Information ✓

Pressures aka “grind culture”



**Social media is taking  
a dangerous toll on  
teenage girls**

**Social media is driving teen mental health  
crisis, surgeon general warns**

**Screens are poisoning kids' minds**



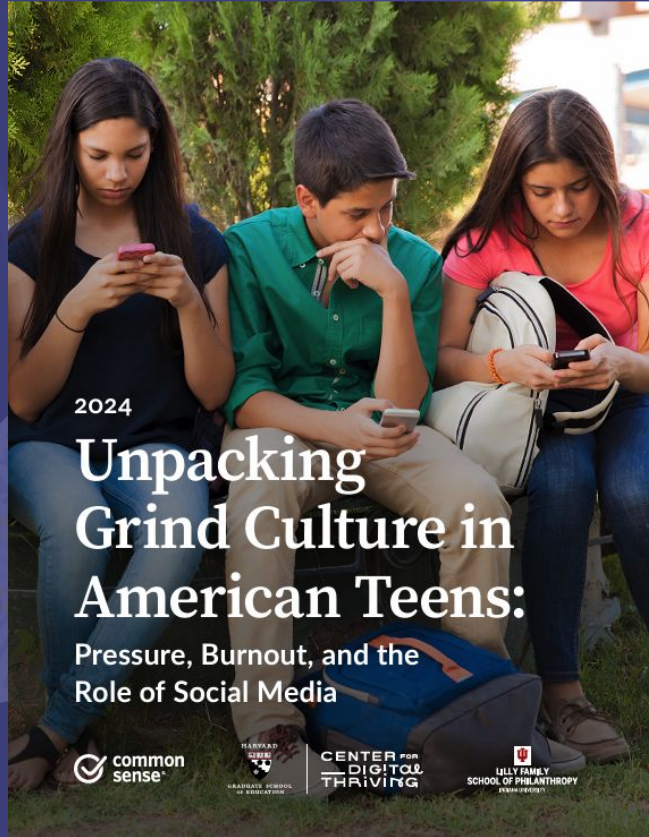
**The hardest part about growing up with today's technologies is actually my mom **blaming everything on 'always being on my phone.'****



“The culture of needing to be **productive** all the time and, like, needing to be **working all the time** and, like, **THE GRIND...** it’s so damaging.”

“A toxic culture of productivity”

“Pressures that make me feel bad”



?

What kinds of pressures  
make you feel bad?  
What makes these  
pressures better? What  
makes them worse?



CENTER FOR  
DIGITAL  
THRIVING



# HEADLINES

**1 in 4 teens** report feeling **burned out**



## GAME PLAN

The pressure to have a future path all figured out.



## ACHIEVEMENT

The pressure to achieve the most or be impressive.

**Game Plan & Achievement pressures** loom largest for teens.

→ made worse by **school adults**, **“myself,”** and **parents/family**



# HEADLINES

CENTER FOR DIGITAL  
THRIVING

**Appearance and Social Life pressures** are prevalent too

→ made worse by **social media**, **peers/classmates**, & **“myself”**



## APPEARANCE

The pressure to look your best or present yourself in a certain way.



## SOCIAL

The pressure to have an active social life (in-person) after school and on weekends.



# HEADLINES

CENTER FOR DIGITAL  
THRIVING

**Social media** is only part of the story - and its impact depends on the teen



**Gaming** can be a pressure-valve release



# ADVICE FOR ADULTS

One of the things [my parents] told me a lot is: take a lot of opportunities that interest you ... be really open.

But the more important thing they told me was: **'Don't take every opportunity.'**

You can **help prevent overload.**

You can **recognize the effort vs. just the outcome.**

You can **help them protect self-care practices**

You can **share in their joys.**

I just want my parents to have fun with me.





**TECH  
CENTERED**



**TEEN  
CENTERED**

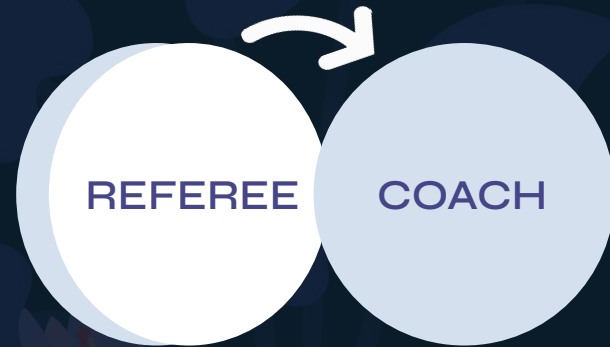
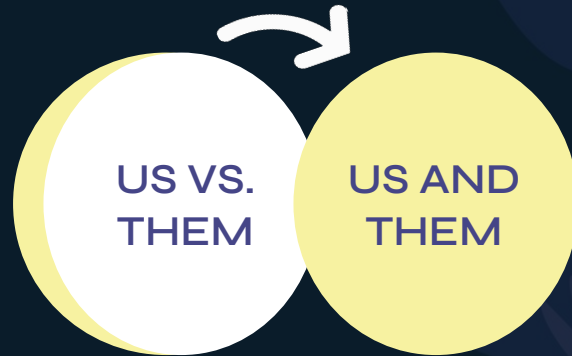
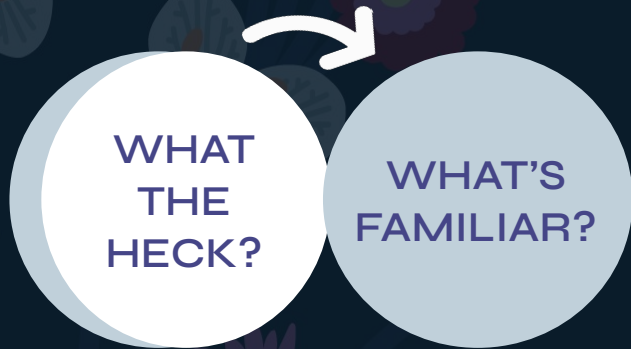
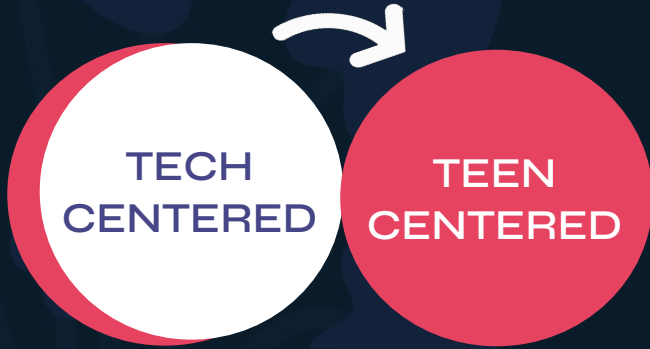
We often have an impulse to talk about digital well-being by starting with **technology**

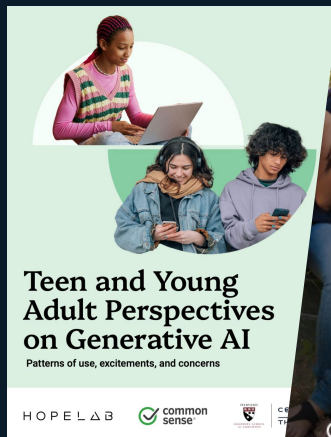


What if, instead, we started by asking youth:  
**What gives you joy & hope?**  
**What's hard for you right now?**

And then: **How does tech make things better or worse? Or both?**







[centerfordigitalthriving.org](https://centerfordigitalthriving.org)