**House Calls #1003: Likes Over Life: The Loss of Innocence and Ourselves**

Dr. Barry Dworkin

We are participating in the world's largest psychological clinical trial of child and adolescent development with minimal accountability or provision for outcome or consequences.

Look at what is going on this week at the US congressional hearings.

There is also a significant trial in California about the impact Instagram use on children's mental health. I will get into these shortly.

There are a few concepts I want to review for the purpose of this bed.

- Neuroplasticity
- Pathophysiology Dopamine

We are seeing increased rates of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder diagnoses, behavioral problems, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues being diagnosed in her children.

Human beings tend to focus on events happening near us; we can base conclusions on anecdotal evidence that may not necessarily be borne out by larger population studies. That is why it is important to try to review the information that we have available now and use that to further improve our understanding to determine a course of action.

- Is a true that we are seeing diminished critical thinking skills?
- Are we seeing shorter attention spans in our children?
- Are children losing the ability to develop social skills to talk face-to-face with people and deal with interpersonal conflicts that normally occur during our lives?
- Is there a loss of resiliency? Are children and adolescence finding it more difficult to deal with normal conflict and failure?
- Are they losing the opportunity to learn from failure?
- Is it true that they are becoming more hooked on immediate gratification?
- In the quest for "likes", are they losing their sense of who they are and thwarting normal adolescent development?
- **Nosedive (Black Mirror Season 3, Episode 1, 2016).**
  In a pastel dystopia, people rate every interaction on a 1–5 star scale via phones/eye implants. Your average score determines socioeconomic status, privileges, housing, jobs, and access—higher "likes"/ratings mean more privilege and status; low scores lead to exclusion and penalties. Protagonist Lacie obsesses over boosting her 4.2 rating for a luxury apartment, but mishaps cause a "nosedive."Directly satirizes social media validation, performative positivity, and status tied to likes/follower-like metrics.

•In *Sapiens*, Yuval Harari (Homo Deus, Nexus) and says humans became special because our brains are very flexible (neuroplastic). This lets us invent language, share stories, and create shared beliefs, so we could adapt and build complex societies—unlike animals with fixed instincts.

- Social media takes advantage of that same flexible brain. It hijacks our natural drives (like wanting approval, fearing exclusion, or craving rewards) and rewires how we pay attention and connect with others.
- Instead of helping us adapt better like the original Cognitive Revolution did, today's heavy social media use can weaken important skills: it may shrink our ability to think deeply, question things, or feel real empathy.
- It copies the way culture once shaped our brains, but now it speeds up harmful changes—especially in teenagers whose brains are still developing.

**Introduction to Brain Rot** Defines "brain rot" as harm from excessive low-quality social media scrolling; noun, verb, or adjective. Catherine Price (award-winning journalist, #1 NYT bestselling author of "How to Break Up With Your Phone") states smartphones are rotting brains. Source: National Post article, "Minding Your Time Online," Feb 21, 2026.

**Effects of Scrolling on Brain** A 2025 meta-analysis (Nguyen et al., including lead author Miranda Darrah) A recent meta-analysis of 71 studies (98,299 participants) found increased short-form video use (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts) associated with poorer cognition ($r = -0.34$), strongest for attention ($r = -0.38$) and inhibitory control ($r = -0.41$), plus poorer mental health ($r = -0.21$), strongest for stress ($r = -0.34$) and anxiety ($r = -0.33$). These are correlations only—no proof of cause.
Source: Nguyen L et al. (including Darrah M), Psychological Bulletin 2025;151(9):1125-1146 (doi:10.1037/bul0000498); cited in National Post "Minding Your Time Online," Feb 21, 2026.

**Natural Brain Distractibility** Brains naturally wired to investigate distractions (e.g., loud noises, potential threats) for survival, but constant app notifications and interruptions fragment attention, making sustained focus harder. Source: National Post article, expert explanation.

**Attention Shift Example** 20-minute tutorials feel uncomfortably long compared to short content, demanding more attention effort. **TLDR** Nataliya Kosmyna (Ph.D., Research Scientist, MIT Media Lab) notes this discomfort. Source: National Post interview with Kosmyna.

**Long-Term Brain Implications** Heavy social media users show differentiated brain connectivity between regions. Jason Chein (Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, Temple University) notes correlation, not causation; distracted individuals may gravitate more to phones. Source: National Post interview with Chein.

**2025 Study on Screen Time** Study in Translational Psychiatry (>7,000 children) linked higher screen time to reduced cortical thickness in regions for higher-level thinking, memory, decision-making (e.g., right temporal pole, left superior frontal gyrus). Source: Shou et al., Translational Psychiatry, 2025 (doi:10.1038/s41398-025-03672-1); cited in National Post.

**Cortical Thickness and Impulse Control** Reduced cortical thickness impairs inhibitory control, increasing impulsivity and dopamine-seeking from social media; associated with more ADHD symptoms. Mitch Prinstein (Chief Science Officer, APA; Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, UNC Chapel Hill) explains. Source: National Post interview with Prinstein.

**Screen Time and Sleep** Nighttime screen use reduces adolescent sleep (below recommended 8+ hours); less white matter growth impairs sophisticated adult-like thinking. Source: National Post

interview with Prinstein; supported by related studies (e.g., JAMA Pediatrics 2025 on screen time, short sleep, cingulum bundle changes mediating depression).

**Cognitive Impacts** Highest screen users show lowest scores across cognitive measures, including impulsivity, reading comprehension, vocabulary. Source: National Post interview with Prinstein, referencing "an interesting study."

**Your Brain on AI Chatbots** K Nataliya Kosmyna (Ph.D., Research Scientist, MIT Media Lab) observed students using chatbots for assignments. Study (54 participants): groups used own brain only, search engine, or AI chatbot (ChatGPT) for essay writing; EEG recorded brain activity. Chatbot users showed weakest functional brain connectivity (up to 55% lower in low-frequency networks), poor retention (couldn't quote own essays), reduced engagement, and low ownership. Source: Kosmyna et al., arXiv 2025 (arxiv:2506.08872); MIT Media Lab project "Your Brain on ChatGPT."

**Mitigation Strategies** No screens in bedroom (charge overnight elsewhere); use old-fashioned alarm clock for better sleep. Choose screen time deliberately; platforms influence choices. Add friction to limit ease. Prinstein: brains love shortcuts, but outsourcing costs learning; need moderate struggle and challenge for growth; if you don't use a skill, you lose it. Source: National Post interviews with Prinstein and Kosmyna.

**US Congressional Hearings**

- Senate Commerce Committee held Jan 15, 2026 hearing "Plugged Out: Examining the Impact of Technology on America's Youth," chaired by Ted Cruz; focused on harms from excessive screen time, mental health issues, development delays; experts recommended banning social media for under-18s, AI chatbots for minors, phones in schools; reintroduced Kids Off Social Media Act (KOSMA) to prohibit under-13 accounts and algorithmic feeds for 13-17.

- House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee held Dec 2, 2025 hearing on "Legislative Solutions to Protect Children and Teens Online"; examined ~20 bills including Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) for safeguards against harm, Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) for data protections, RESET Act banning under-16 accounts, Sammy's Law for parental monitoring tools.

**Synopsis of The Guardian article (Feb 11, 2026): Instagram CEO dismisses idea of social media addiction in landmark trial**

Landmark Los Angeles Trial: Social Media Companies Sued Over Youth Mental Health Harms

In a landmark case before the Los Angeles Superior Court, hundreds of families and school districts have brought lawsuits against major social media companies—Meta (Instagram), Snap, TikTok, and YouTube—alleging that their products are addictive and have caused significant harm to the mental health of young people. Plaintiffs claim these platforms contributed to increased rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and eating disorders among youth.

## Bellwether Case: KGM v. Instagram

The trial's central focus is a bellwether case involving a 20-year-old plaintiff, identified as KGM, who alleges that Instagram's addictive features—such as endless scrolling—worsened her depression and suicidal ideation. The case is being closely watched as representative of the broader claims.

## Legal Strategy: Challenging Liability Shields

Plaintiffs' lawyers are targeting the intentional design of these platforms to be addictive, likening them to "digital casinos." By focusing on product design rather than user-generated content, the legal team aims to bypass federal liability shields that typically protect platforms from responsibility for third-party content.

## Opening Arguments and Internal Evidence

In opening arguments, the plaintiff's attorney, Mark Lanier, referenced internal Meta documents that described Instagram in terms such as "IG is a drug" and "we're basically pushers," with explicit mentions of dopamine and targeting children as young as four years old. These documents are presented as evidence that company executives were aware of the potential risks and addictive nature of their products.

## Instagram CEO's Testimony

On Wednesday, Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri took the stand as the first executive witness. Mosseri rejected the term "social media addiction," arguing that it is not recognized as a clinical diagnosis. Instead, he described excessive use as "problematic use," similar to watching too much television. He emphasized that the company tests new features for safety and strives to "be as safe as possible but censor as little as possible."

## Meta's Defense

Meta's legal defense disputes the existence of "addiction science" in this context and attributes KGM's mental health challenges to family abuse and other unrelated factors, rejecting the application of the addiction label to their platform.

## Broader Context and Potential Implications

Internal documents suggest that company executives were aware of the potential harms related to dopamine-driven engagement but chose to prioritize growth. Parents involved in the lawsuits, such as John DeMay—whose son died by suicide following Instagram-related sextortion—hope that these trials will prompt substantive changes or even force the companies into bankruptcy through damages. The outcome of this case could pressure social media platforms to alter their designs and brings attention to ongoing concerns that companies have prioritized profits over the safety of young users, despite being aware of the risks.

Sources report allegations in California lawsuits that Meta (Instagram's parent) monitored and exploited children's psychological vulnerabilities through data harvesting, targeted advertising, and dopamine-manipulating algorithms that promote compulsive use and mental health harms.

ADHD diagnoses in U.S. children have risen significantly over the past 15 years (roughly 2010–2025), though not necessarily "unprecedented" compared to longer-term trends starting in the 1990s. Childhood behavioral and mental health issues (like anxiety, depression, conduct problems) have also increased, especially post-2010. Evidence links **higher screen time/social media** to **worsened ADHD symptoms**—particularly inattention—but it's mostly correlational, not proven causation. Reverse effects (ADHD kids seeking more media) or confounders (genetics, parenting) are possible.

**ADHD diagnosis trends**

- Around 2010: Parent-reported ever-diagnosed ADHD was about 8.4–8.5% for kids 3–17 (NHIS data). Source: CDC historical trends; Statista summary of NHIS.
- By 2018: Rose to 9.8–11.0% (various surveys, e.g., NSCH). Source: Same CDC page.
- 2022: 11.4% ever-diagnosed (7 million kids 3–17), up from ~6.5 million in 2016—a 1 million increase. Source: CDC NSCH 2022.
- 2024: 12.0% ever-diagnosed (boys 15.6%, girls 8.2%). Source: CDC FastStats. This steady climb (roughly 40–50% relative increase since 2010) ties partly to better awareness, broader criteria, and telehealth access, but experts note real rises in symptoms too.

**Broader childhood behavioral/mental health increases**

- Anxiety diagnoses up 61% (10% to 16.1%), depression up 45% (5.8% to 8.4%) in recent NSCH data. Source: HRSA NSCH brief (2023).
- Conduct/behavioral problems: 7.1% in recent surveys; overall mental health disorders rose 29–35% in incidence/prevalence. Source: PMC articles on trends (e.g., Tkacz et al., 2024).
- Persistent sadness/hopelessness in high-schoolers: 39.7% in 2023 (up from 26.1% earlier). Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2023.

**Link to social media/screen time**

- Longitudinal ABCD study (10,000+ kids, ages 9–10 baseline): Higher screen time tied to more ADHD symptoms (small $\beta$=0.032–0.109 effect); linked to thinner cortex in attention/memory areas—partial mediator. No full causation proven. Source: PMC 2025.
- 2018 JAMA cohort (2,500+ teens): High-frequency digital media (incl. social media) raised odds of new ADHD symptoms by ~10% per activity; persisted after controls. Observational—can't rule out reverse causation. Source: JAMA.

- Meta-analyses: Moderate positive link between problematic social media use and ADHD symptoms ($r \approx 0.12–0.3$); social media stands out vs. TV/gaming for inattention growth over time ($\beta \approx 0.03$/year). Source: Various 2022–2025 reviews (e.g., ScienceDirect meta). Bottom line: Rates are up, social media correlates with symptom worsening (especially inattention via dopamine/attention fragmentation), but evidence leans association—not direct cause. More research needed on long-term causality.

**International Policies**

- Australia: Enforced under-16 social media ban Dec 2025 on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube; excludes WhatsApp, YouTube Kids; fines up to $33M for non-compliance.
- Denmark: Plans under-15 ban effective mid-2026; supported by coalition and opposition parties to reduce anxiety, depression.
- France: National Assembly passed under-15 ban Jan 2026; awaits Senate approval; could start Sep 2026; backed by Macron for mental health protection.
- Malaysia: Plans under-16 ban effective 2026; announced Nov 2025 to address online harms.
- UK: Considering under-16 ban and AI chatbot rules as early as 2026; feasibility study underway for restrictions.
- China: Enforces "minor mode" with screen time limits, content restrictions for under-18s.
- Italy: Requires parental consent for under-14 accounts under EU rules.
- Germany: Considering under-16 ban; raised parental consent age to 16 under EU framework.
- Norway: Considering under-15 restrictions; acknowledges enforcement challenges.
- Netherlands: Pushing EU-wide raise of minimum age from 13 to 15; restricts cellphones in classrooms.
- EU: Parliament recommends under-16 ban, with parental consent for 13-16; varying member state consent ages 13-16.

References:


1. Products - Data Briefs - Number 499 - March 2024 – CDC During 2020–2022, the prevalence of ever diagnosed attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was 11.3% in children ages 5–17 years, with boys (14.5%) ...

2. Prevalence and Trends in Diagnosed ADHD Among US Children ...Based on US national representative data, the estimated ADHD prevalence was 10.08% to 10.47% among children and adolescents aged 4 to 17 years ...

3. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Trends in Prevalence of ADHD Diagnosis Among Children · The prevalence of children ever diagnosed with ADHD increased by 42% between 2003 (7.8%) and 2011 (11.0%) ...

4. ADHD diagnoses are rising. 1 in 9 U.S. kids have gotten one ... – NPR Researchers found that in 2022, 7.1 million kids and adolescents in the US had received an ADHD diagnosis – a million more children than in 2016.

5. Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health - 20% of adolescents reported receiving mental health therapy. 20% of adolescents ages 12-17 reported having unmet mental health care needs.

6. Trends in Childhood Behavioral, Mental, and Developmental ... - Tkacz et al. [5] found a 29.4% increase in incidence and a 34.6% increase in the prevalence of mental health disorders, most notably for anxiety ...

7. Youth Mental Health Statistics in 2024 -Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) youth ages 12 to 17 have had at least one major depressive episode in the past year — about 4.5 million adolescents — ...

8. Mental health of adolescents - Globally, one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, accounting for 15% of the global burden of disease in this age group.

9. Anxiety, Depression, and Behavioural Problems Among US ... - Among children aged 3–17 years, 8.4% had anxiety, 3.7% had depression and 7.1% had behavioural or conduct problems.

10. Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties - Childstats.gov - In 2019, 6% of children were reported as having serious emotional or behavioral difficulties. · In 2019, parents of children ages 8–10 (7%) and 15–17 (6%) were ...

11. The Youth Mental Health Crisis in the United States - According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in 2023, 39.7% of high school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness, up from 26.1% ...

12. Behavioral, Developmental Disorders in Children More Common in ... - The researchers observed increases across many conditions, including anxiety (9.5 percent in 2020 to 11 percent in 2022), behavioral and conduct ...

13. Teen Mental Health Facts and Statistics 2024 - Youth mental health hospitalizations increased by 124% from 2016 to 2022 (Clarify Health); 55% of the public believes there is a youth mental ...

14. [PDF] National Survey of Children's Health Adolescent Mental and ... - The prevalence of diagnosed anxiety increased 61 percent (from 10.0% to 16.1%) and depression increased 45 percent (from 5.8% to 8.4%); the prevalence of ...

15. Association of screen time with attention-deficit/hyperactivity ... – PMC - These findings suggest that longer screen time is linked to increased ADHD symptoms in children and adolescents. In addition, the current study ...

16. Digital Media, Genetics, and Risk for ADHD Symptoms in Children - On average, children spent 2.3 hours/d watching television/videos, 1.4 hours/d on social media, and 1.5 hours/d playing video games. Average ...

17. Screen Time as a factor for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ... - The primary outcomes of the study were centered on the increasing rates of ADHD diagnoses among children with excessive screen time exposure, as ...

18. Examining the Impact of Screen Time on Clinical Presentation and ... - It has been reported that over 80% of children with ADHD exceed the recommended screen time limits. In our study, the average time spent with ...

19. Screen time and ADHD: why social media stands out from gaming ... - Social media showed a small but consistent association with increasing inattention over time (standardized β per year approximately 0.03), ...

20. Social media use damages children's ability to focus, say researchers - However, the study found that social media use over a period of time was associated with an increase in inattention symptoms in children.

21. [PDF] The relationship between screen time, screen content for children ... - This study investigates the relationship between screen time, screen content, and the risk of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) ...

22. A new study links prolonged social media use among children to a ... - A new study links prolonged social media use among children to a decline in attention span and increased ADHD risk, prompting serious concerns ...

23. Using social media may impair children's attention - Children who spend a significant amount of time on social media tend to experience a gradual decline in their ability to concentrate.

24. How Social Media Shapes Children's Attention Over Time – EMJ - A large USA study finds social media use is linked to increasing inattention symptoms in school-aged children over 4 years.

25. The association between problematic social media use and ... - The meta-analysis included 15 studies with a total of 35,223 participants. The analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between ADHD symptomatology ...

26. Understanding Problematic Social Media Use in Adolescents with ... - A small relation between ADHD characteristics and media use is demonstrated by one meta-analysis (r = 0.12 [34]), while another found a very small ...

27. Association of Digital Media Use With Subsequent Symptoms of ... - For 10 activities, high-frequency use was associated with an increased odds of ADHD symptoms across follow-ups after covariate adjustment. Table ...

28. Digital Media, Genetics, and Risk for ADHD Symptoms in Children - Digital media use has been associated with ADHD symptoms, although findings remain mixed. Most research is cross-sectional and lacks focus on ...

29. Problematic Social Media use in Individuals with ADHD ... – Springer - Individuals in the ADHD group had a significantly higher prevalence of social media disorder (15% vs. 3.3%). They rated the motives Escape and ...

30. Longitudinal associations between digital media use and ADHD ... - Results showed support for reciprocal associations between digital media and ADHD symptoms, with associations being more consistent for problematic use of ...

31. The relationship between problematic internet use and attention ... - Furthermore, researchers found evidence that addiction-like social media use increases typical ADHD symptoms such as attention deficit, impulsivity and ...

32. Association Between Problematic Social Media Use and Attention ... - A clear correlation was demonstrated in this study linking problematic social media use to anxiety and ADHD symptoms.

33. Problematic Social Media Use in Adolescents and Young Adults - This study seeks to systematically examine problematic social media use in youth and its association with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

34. Unveiling Social Media Content Related to ADHD Treatment - MDPI Methods: An observational study was conducted analysing 254,952 tweets in Spanish and English about ADHD medications from January 2006 to December 2022. Content ...

35. Digital Media Use and ADHD in Adolescents jamanetwork.com
36. Facts About ADHD Throughout the Years - CDC

37. FastStats - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder – CDC - Percent ever diagnosed with ADHD: 12.0% (2024) · Percent of boys ever diagnosed with ADHD: 15.6% (2024) · Percent of girls ever diagnosed with ADHD: 8.2% (2024).

38. Data and Statistics on ADHD – CDC - ADHD diagnosis. Millions of U.S. children have been diagnosed with ADHD.1. An estimated 7 million (11.4%) U.S. children aged 3–17 ...

39. General Prevalence of ADHD – CHADD - An estimated 15.5 million adults (6.0 percent) have a current diagnosis of ADHD (Staley et al 2024). The current combined estimate of adults and children with ...

40. ADHD Prevalence Among U.S. Children and Adolescents in 2022 - Approximately 1 in 9 US children have ever received an ADHD diagnosis (11.4%, 7.1 million children) and 10.5% (6.5 million) had current ADHD.

41. CDC: ADHD Diagnosis, Treatment, and Telehealth Use in Adults - The results showed that approximately 6.0% of U.S. adults, or an estimated 15.5 million people, had a current ADHD diagnosis. Notably, more than ...

42. Products - Data Briefs - Number 499 - March 2024 – CDC - During 2020–2022, the prevalence of ever diagnosed attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was 11.3% in children ages 5–17 years, with boys (14.5%) ...

43. ADHD among children share U.S. 1997-2018 - Percentage of children in the U.S. with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) from 1997 to 2018 ; 2011, 8.5% ; 2010, 8.4% ; 2009, 8.6%.

44. Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) - Prevalence of ADHD Among Adults · The overall prevalence of current adult ADHD is 4.4%. · Prevalence was higher for males (5.4%) versus females (3.2%). · The non- ...

45. Childhood Diagnosis of ADHD Increased Dramatically over Nine ... - Researchers found that the incidence of newly diagnosed ADHD cases rose from 2.5 percent in 2001 to 3.1 percent in 2010 – a relative increase of 24 percent.