

Welcome to the Nimble Youth Podcast, where we explore the challenges and the opportunities facing young people in a rapidly changing world. I'm your host, Matt Buttermann. In recent months, the topic of youth mental health has dominated national conversations. Just recently, NBC's Meet the Press devoted an entire episode to the crisis highlighting the alarming rise in anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among teens and young adults across the country. We've also seen public health leaders take this issue seriously.

Among the guests on the Meet the Press episode included doctor Vivek Murthy, the former US Surgeon General, who has written a powerful new book called Together, which explores the epidemic of loneliness and disconnection plaguing today's youth and what we can do to rebuild real human connections. And another guest, Harvard University professor and so-called happiness expert, Arthur C Brooks, has warned of a serious erosion in young people's sense of joy, purpose, and meaning, while offering some hopeful strategies to help reverse this trend. On today's episode, we'll go beyond the headlines into the therapy room with our guest, Michael Hayes, a licensed clinical mental health counselor at Pathways Counseling in Winston Salem, North Carolina. Michael works on the front lines of the crisis, helping teens and young adults navigate a world full of mixed messages, overwhelming options, and digital connections that, somewhat ironically, too often leave them feeling more alone than ever. We'll talk about anxiety, depression, the overload of information, and how young people can find clarity and resilience in a confusing world.

Please stay with us. This is a conversation we all need to be part of. Before we get into it, we remind you that the content of this podcast is intended for informational purposes only and should not be construed as medical advice. While we aim to provide valuable insights on pediatric mental health, it's important to consult with a qualified health care professional for any questions or concerns regarding your child's mental well-being. Always seek the advice of your doctor, therapist, or other qualified health provider with any medical or mental health concerns.

So, Michael, you work directly with young people every day. In your estimation, what does the youth mental health crisis look like in 2025? Well, I think it's been a growing crisis, you know, since 2007 when the iPhone, you know, burst on the scene, we've seen anxiety particularly steadily grow. The COVID era there for two years really threw kids and parents into a hotel spin about how to manage and, and and both education and interaction and social things. So what we've seen is anxious kids and anxious parents.

And I think it goes both ways. Right. You know, I think, that's that's the biggest issue is anxiety, but I think it is connected, with, some of the connection we see with kids with, you know, their cell phones and their smart watches and their, you know, computers and, you know, game game systems that they communicate on. And we're seeing, you know, the compressed childhood, you know, ending about 10 now because of the expectations of young people, which forces the adolescents to be from about age 10 to about 22, 23, 24. Right.

That's a long developmental period of time both for young people and for their parents. And I think the anxiety shifts and changes as they get older. Absolutely. Absolutely. So it's kind of a perfect storm.

You know, you had COVID, which increased isolation, but yet also this emerging technology, which only sort of exacerbated that trend. So how does untreated anxiety devolve into depression or burnout in young people? I think it's important to understand that anxiety and depression kinda go hand in hand. You know, our brains are, you know, pretty naturally, suited to manage things as they occur in our life. But when our anxiety gets to a certain level that we are overwhelmed, that we have fear about just the world in general, at some point the brain takes kind of a time out which we'll call depression.

And that depression may last for a day, may last for a week, but if it lasts much longer than that, then it's when the anxiety kicks back in because I'm not getting school work done, I'm not, getting up and going to a practice, I'm not, having dinner with my parents. And so it's kind of a back and forth trying to find that balance between those two. Right. Right. And so what are some of the signs that, both parents and teachers should look for?

Well, I think what we begin to see and I think I think most pediatricians would agree with this, a lot of kids aren't sleeping well. They are staying up later than parents are aware of or later than parents can stay up to manage and monitor that. So we see sleep disturbance, kids waking up tired and not understanding that that starts the snowball of the anxiety and the depression. We're also seeing, I have more, because kids have a lot of information at their fingertips, I'm seeing more and more kids come in and saying to me, I think I'm bipolar. Because of their moodiness and they've read all the symptoms of being bipolar and what it really translates into is you've got a lot of mood shifts, there's hormones, there's the sleep deprivation, not eating appropriately, all those things together.

And I think again that, kind of results in some isolation on some kids parts where they kind of retreat, but also anger. And we I look, especially in adolescent males, I look for the anger outburst as a pretty good sign for you know, the combination of anxiety and depression. Right, right. I suppose there's a lot of sort of self diagnosis out there. Oh, yes.

YouTube experts, coming in and telling you what they have. There's some, you mentioned, there has been some mixed messaging coming from people in authority and talk a little bit about that mixed messaging and how young people can help sort of reconcile, messages that pull them in opposite directions. What I hear a lot of times from young people is I think by the time they are in high school, they feel like in some ways they've been lied to or misled. You know, they start in preschool and kindergarten, they do things like share, you know, be nice to people, say I'm sorry, you know, please thank you, those kinds of things. And by the time they get to middle school, they'll become more aware of their world view.

And if we start with a world view and trickle down, are we being nice to each other? You know, are we sharing? Are we taking care of those that are less able to take care of themselves? And

so that's a really strong mixed message. They also have, you know, a value system from their families that the parents are communicating, that they bring into a school which may have alternative value systems.

There are the rules and directions in school about how you act, but then sometimes we don't see adults acting that way, so why should I act that way? Right. So I think it gets very confusing to them when they see the varying values pitted against one another. Right, right. And so what can adults do to sort of provide that more consistent support for people?

So the message I give to parents a lot of times is you cannot afford to be intimidated by your children, and by the fact that they have a perspective that may differ from yours. So, you know, I really push parents to talk about what the values are that you have, what's important about those values, how do you live those values? Because they're watching us very closely. You know, if one of the values in the home is I don't like liars and yet I hear you on the phone telling a little white lie to get out of a volunteer thing or something that the church wants you to do or whatever, then that's a mixed message. Right.

Right. Role modeling is important. Yeah. Yeah. So let's talk a little bit about another issue facing young people today and that's the panoply of options available to them, right?

Because, you know, it sounds like a good thing and in many ways perhaps it is. In the past, if, you know, you were growing up, you and your father, for instance, had a business, you know, you would go into the family business and sometimes in the same trade line of trade. But, there are more options available to today's youth, but there are some issues with that as well. And so how does this abundance of options become sort of paralyzing for young people. So let me start with an overall big picture.

If we saw an interesting study several years ago that if we went back a hundred years and we, you know, labeled all the necessities we needed in life and then the luxuries, people would identify about 30 necessities and about 120 luxuries. We do the same thing today, we'll identify over 300 necessities in life and over 32,000 luxuries in comparison. Mhmm. Alright? All you gotta do is log on to Amazon and be overwhelmed with options that you have and what's the best option for me.

Right. Right. We also begin to hear values steeped in what parents are saying. Oftentimes, when I'm talking to a group of parents, I'll ask how many, you know, how many have you ever said to your children when I was your age? And the hands will go up.

And my statement is you were never their age in 2025. Right. And the options even within the last five years alone have shifted and changed. And so I think the, you know, the options about colleges, you know, do I go to a two year or a four year? Do I, you know, do I go into the armed forces like my grandfather and my father did?

And those options have shifted and changed a little bit. And I think that it is overwhelming when you're presented with a kid who comes in as working with a college counselor and they're applying to 15 colleges, but you know, here are these one these colleges that may suit you the best. Yeah. And then I think that becomes an overwhelming, narrowing down project for the kid to have. So as a therapist, how do you coach them?

How do you guide them in this process? So part of it is, I don't know very many kids that, you know, 14, 15, 16, 17 that could tell you, this is what I wanna do when I grow up. So I ask a different question and the question is, who do you wanna be when you grow up? Yeah. What kind of person do you wanna be?

What matters to you? Mhmm. What are the things that you get joy in, in your life? Can you imagine yourself sitting behind a computer computer screen for eight hours a day like you do gaming, but this is with work? And try to narrow down what you are really searching for?

And then can you tell me what that college or that school or that program offers you that fits what you or that school or that program offers you that fits what you think is important in your life and what you wanna be? And lots of times they can rule out things because they go, well, I don't wanna live 500 miles away from mom and dad. All right, then let's narrow that down a little bit. You know, have you visited any of these schools yet? Because a lot of times if they don't visit, they come back and go, wow, that's a really big school or, you know, wow, there's a lot of people.

Okay. That's the reality check. You need to see it and feel it and smell it and touch it and walk it in order to make a decision. So it has to be real. Yeah.

Absolutely. And so, sort of setting boundaries and and, putting things in in order of priority, that plays a role in mental wellness. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Talk a little bit about that, how how that So I think the the first thing is, you know, the boundaries again, parents cannot be intimidated by their kids.

They need to know as much as their kids know which means you're gonna have to do a lot of research and you're gonna have to be aware of a lot of things and you're gonna have to dig into some things that may make you uncomfortable in order to set the boundaries. You know, I think it doesn't dawn on them that they have the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of the dark side of the ages at their fingertips, but they do not synthesize that information very well. And that's part of the role of parents is how do we synthesize what you're getting out of this and what you're experiencing. We know that children and young adults will not like boundaries. They will respect them if they're constant and they're and they're secure and they're communicated.

Right. Right. So another issue that's plaguing society at large, not only young people but all of us, is this sort of overload of information and discerning what's real or what's important from what's ephemeral, what's not really important or what's completely false as well. Right. Exactly.

So for a young person, for a teenager, you know, their brains are still developing. So what happens in this flood of overwhelming information? Well, what happens I think is they get exposed to things that they do not understand. Okay? And I think that they're trying to process that.

You know, if I'm exposed to something online and I don't know what this means, I don't really wanna ask my mother because she shouldn't know what this means. And I don't really wanna ask my dad because he might know what this means and he'll shut me down so I do it to my friends. And so that's usually the first line of understanding is another adolescent, what this means and their interpretation of that. So again, I think you have to be willing to be exposed to things that make you uncomfortable as a parent. You have to be willing to sit down.

For example, let's say they have a lot of kids and one of the biggest problems they have is being able to view pornography online. It's so accessible. And so parents will finally figure that out. They'll bust them for that and say, no. No.

No. And what I suggest that the parent do, and this just makes the parent uncomfortable, is you log on to that website with them. You watch something with them, and you tell them why it makes you feel uncomfortable and why you have a concern about that for you. And that's a tough task. It is a very tough task but I guess it signifies an investment on the parents' part.

Well, that and your child has already experienced it. Yeah. Yeah. Okay? And how can you respond to their experience if you don't know how it makes you feel as well?

Right. Right? Right. Absolutely. So, there are a lot of other sort of world and social problems, again plaguing our world.

They've been there throughout history, of course. Yes. But, part of the information pipeline that we're all receiving has made the urgency of, both nationwide and worldwide problems, more immediate for all of us. How does that affect your young clients as well? They see things, you know, that I've still haven't seen sometimes as well.

And I think it's in your face, you know. Growing up in this area and the you know, in high school, it was the end of the Vietnam War. And the most information I would have about that were facts and figures in the newspaper and maybe in a time or a Newsweek article to read about that. And then we started getting more photojournalism stills, but not videos of that. These kids are watching in real time, you know, explosions and injuries and other things.

And I think that is what they become, somewhat deadened to the empathy about that because, you know, that looks a lot like the video game I play on a regular basis or, you know, that's happening every single day all the time, but it's not in my backyard. And so I think there is this sense of not having to experience it myself so I don't have the concern until you get a child that does have that empathy and goes, that's not okay. Yeah. There's something wrong about that. Right.

You know? Right. And I think, you know, I think it does affect our ability to say, okay. What kinda world are you guys leaving me? You know?

Yeah. I'm gonna have to clean up this mess. And what we know is there have been messes for every generation to clean up all the time. Sure. But I think this one is so much information and so much awareness than any of us ever had growing up.

It's immediate and there's no time to filter it. Right? No. Exactly. Exactly.

Is there a way for the adults in these young people's lives, is there a way that we can help sort of channel that energy into a healthy engagement instead of just pure anxiety? Yeah. I think, I'm I'm gonna quote Mister Rogers, you know, and that, his mother said to him one time, in the midst of a crisis, look for those that are helping. Helping. Yeah.

You know, and I really urge parents, and and and tell them, this is another way to sell it to them, that colleges are often looking for, you know, you know, besides your grades, what are your extracurricular activities? You know, do you volunteer? Have you been involved in your community in some way? And I, you know, I try to get parents to take their kids and get out. There are so many possible volunteer organizations in this area that you can volunteer on a Saturday morning, you can volunteer on a Sunday afternoon.

And the reality is you get to see real time positive things, you know, helping change things that you have some personal power in, that you're involved in, that you're engaged in something real. Right. And I think that makes a difference, especially if you as a parent are there as well. Mhmm. Saying this is what we do.

Yes, it's hard work. And it makes you feel uncomfortable to provide food to a family that doesn't have it. Or it makes you uncomfortable to be in a community where you feel a little uncomfortable there because you've never been there. You know, this is real life and and you can be an active positive part of that problem. Yeah.

Yeah. That's absolutely great advice. So, young people also face a lot of uncertainty about the future. Again, that's been there for every generation. I mean the world is constantly changing, but there are some larger forces at play here.

Do you think that the uncertainty that we see today is a larger stressor than it has been perhaps in the past? Oh, definitely. I think there are several factors with that. You know, some of the trends that we're looking at now, if they continue to move in that direction, that this generation that are coming up to graduate high school in the next few years will maybe, because of health care, live to be 100 easily. Yeah.

But they also will be working to 75. Right. You know? Right. And they recognize, they see it all the time.

There's not gonna be any social security left for me, so I've gotta make my own. And the population is declining. So the pool of workers sort of fueling social security is Exactly. Going away. And then one of the things that I saw a statistic on is that it's predicted if they start working at 25 and they retire at 75, that's a fifty year working experience and that there may be as many as eight to 10 career changes in that fifty years Right.

Simply because something I trained for in college in ten years is no longer a real job. Exactly. Right. And, you know, an example I use, can you tell me where there is a stand alone camera store? Right.

You know? Yeah. And so if I had had that's what I had done as a photographer and had a store, it is no longer. Right. Same thing with people that's trained in mainframe computer programming.

Yep. It is no longer. Right. These kids see some of this, and so I'm gonna work for fifty years. I'm gonna have these career changes that by the time I graduate college, what I've learned may already be obsolete.

And then you have this elephant in the room, AI. Yes. You know, and that's gonna change all of our lives. Oh, yes. You know, I think I think people will still play a role, but it will change productivity.

It will change the dynamic. Well, here's the other thing I think I see with young people is that there certainly is a fear of failure out there. There are a lot of people that don't want to be failing, but there's also a fear of success. Yeah. Okay?

Yeah. And that fear of success means if I achieve a certain level in high school, there's always one more AP class I can take. There's always one more thing that is recommended for me to do in order to get into the best college, unquote. There's always one more thing that I can improve on or be a leader for. And so it's almost like, if I don't succeed, I could just kinda stay level.

And that fear of success, I think, is, you know, the expectations are you're so smart. You have all the potential. You're gonna do many great things, and so we gotta really pump you up. And at some point, where is the ceiling on that? Yeah.

Yeah. Absolutely. And to add to that, there's this sense of social comparison Uh-huh. That increases anxiety and uncertainty. Right?

Yes. I have permission to use this. I had a young man the other day that is in college and, you know, he's a good looking young man in my opinion. He is very normal, but he has done a social comparison. There was something that he found online that the women were deciding what was the best features of a man from the kind of ears, the kind of nose, their lips, their eyes, their hair.

And he said, I have none of them. And so I really think I'm ugly. And that was his reaction. Right. And he's 19.

Right. Right. Exactly. Exactly. And I think that I've seen more and more young men.

I think most of the pediatricians I would talk to would say the same thing that have had eating disorders in the last five to ten years than I ever saw in the first twenty years of practice. Absolutely. It's been, you know, increasing in both sexes. Yes. And particularly in males. Yes.

Yeah. Yeah. That's very interesting. So, this kinda leads into the next concern I wanna talk about and one that we've covered pretty extensively on this on this podcast, the, technology, addiction, sort of, the abyss of, temptation that technology can Yep. Can engender.

So what does this, you know, connection and addiction look like? So so I I really have seen the studies that say, you know, the addiction to electronics, be it a phone or a computer or a an iPad or a a game system or whatever, that that those you know, and if you've talked about this before, the dopamine hits that you get from either a message that somebody sent to you or somebody's liked. I can't remember the name of the show. It was on Netflix several years ago. The man that developed the like button thought initially that that was a great thing, and then he realized that it's not.

Yeah. But there was so much negative reaction to that. Yeah. And so I think that there I sat in a restaurant the other day, and there were seven young people, male and female, between the ages of 14 and 16. Every one of them is on their phone.

Right. Okay? Right. And it was hard for them to make eye contact with each other unless they had something funny to share. Yeah.

And so I think that that addiction piece, even for us adults, you know, while I would love to give up my phone here, you know, I know it is, you know, it's connected to my work and to my family and to other things as well, even to my dentist. So I know when my appointment is gonna be. Exactly. You know, I would go through withdrawals just like you would for the substance addiction Yep. For the first twenty four to forty eight hours that would have the same kind of feelings mentally and emotionally.

Right. It's very real. Right. So are there any strategies you found useful for detoxing with tech, whether it's like you know, I guess they actually have tech detox camps now. Oh, yeah.

They do. They're expensive. I'm sure they are. I'm sure they are. But, anything else, you know, what are some ways to sort of increase embodied experiences, which I think are very important for brain development and and just relationship development as well.

Yeah. And I really put it back on the parents to manage that. You know, I I used to make a statement that said if your child has an Internet connected device in their bedroom, you know,



after ten or 11:00 at night, then you're asking for trouble, and you see all the parents start to squirm because they have their cell phone beside their bed and their game systems that they own their dresser and everything else. And, you know, I know that there are kids that are up all hours of the night, you know, talking, communicating, etcetera. Right.

And so you've gotta start young. Yeah. You gotta start my granddaughter just got her first watch, and the only people she has in it are her grandparents right now. Mhmm. And so she's starting, and they, you know, in my home, you dock your phone at the on the counter in the in the in the kitchen, nowhere else.

Right. Right. And so, you know, I I get the term strict from my own children, my four children. Dad, you've always been strict about that. I see it as, again, you know, I see the results.

Right. You're fostering healthy relationships. Yeah. So that's one way you gotta set the boundaries early. It's hard to go backwards.

That's a good point. Okay? That's a very good point. It starts young. But the other piece, and I really push this, is you gotta model it.

Mhmm. If you're on your phone at night or you're on your iPad at night or you're you're, you know, you're on Netflix every night watching something, a show Right. You're not modeling that. Yeah. You know, prior to COVID, you know, the American Medical Association recommended no more than three hours of screen time a day for somebody that is in the teen years.

Yeah. That went out the window with COVID Right. For all of us. Right. Yeah.

That was such a, sort of a watershed and sort of a test of our meddle as a society. Are there groups, like clubs, just activities that are helpful for young people to engage with just that get you away from the screen? There are a lot of options. I, you know, I was a scout leader for several years when my son was back in scouts, and we had a strict no cell phone rule when we went on a camping trip or in a meeting. And invariably, you know, this is just the naivete of some of these kids.

You know, about midnight after everybody's settled in their tent, you see some tent light up. Yeah. So It was the same deal with my son who was in scouts too. So we'd go retrieve it and and, you know, and it would take on a camping trip, we would take the first few hours of kids kinda sitting around going, I don't know what to do. And then somebody would pick up a stick and somebody would start chasing somebody and then somebody would be down at the creek and before you know it, they forget about it.

But I think you've gotta push that. And I think there there there's a there's a lot of kids that are over scheduled doing things outside, but I think there's a lot of kids that are under scheduled. They're not just playing. They're not getting outside. And I think parents aren't either.

So you gotta, you know Yeah. No cell phones at the table, you know, at all. No cell phones after 09:00 at night. Whatever it is, you gotta establish some unpopular rules that will not make sense to them. That you have to follow as well.

That you have to follow as well. So kind of wrapping, what is very important and we could probably talk about this for the next few hours. But, wrapping up what we've talked about today, what are some things that adults do in young people's lives, like parents, teachers, community leaders, what are some of the most important things they can do to help support youth mental health? So I think number one, we don't wanna get freaked out. I want to use this quote, that says, I am frightened and forlorn when I look at the youth of today.

When I was a boy, we were taught to respect our elders. And when I look at today's youth, I wonder what's gonna happen to the next generation. That was Hesiod in August. Yeah. Yeah.

Okay? Right. So things don't change, but they do change in some pretty drastic ways. And so I think, you know, I want us to be aware that we don't wanna freak out and think, okay, we're all gonna fail. You know, the reality is we worry as much about our parenting as much as we worry about our kids.

You know? Right. Right. Have I done enough, said enough? Yeah.

But I think, you know, the kinds of things that I really push parents to say, you've gotta be genuine. You know, you can't, you know, say this is what I need you to do and you do the opposite. Okay? You gotta risk being unpopular sometimes and set boundaries and limits. I think you've got to be aware.

You gotta do your own study and say, what is going on out there? Yeah. You know, what is that? What is this server about? What I need to learn instead of what I don't. I don't understand it, so I don't know.

If you don't understand it, I can guarantee your child does. Exactly. Right. And so you've gotta really push yourself to expand your own knowledge base and be willing to explore. Yeah.

Okay. Yeah. For sure. So what are some of the things that give you hope when you're working with young people today? Thank you for asking that because I think sometimes we get stuck on the negative.

As you know, I see 30 plus young people a week. Majority of what I see are young men. And I do see a lot of young men who do have the empathy to understand what's going on around them. I do see them want to make a world, and they are volunteering or they're being active or involved in some way. I do see them saying no to things they know are dangerous.

And so I believe there's that hope that they will continue to be the leaders and the ones that will establish changes in their own world, their own life. I do see a lot of parents that are really trying

very hard. And I tell kids that don't necessarily wanna be in a counseling session, you know, I would rather do proactive work with you because your parents recognize that there's some things that we wanna fix now than to intervene when you're, you know, 21 or 22. You know, that's when there's a lot of difficulty in that proactive work, whether it is counseling, whether we do need to consider medication, whether we need to consider a change in, in a school setting because of what's going on with you, that proactive work can prevent an awful lot of the downfall that comes with extreme anxiety and depression. Absolutely.

We're aware of these issues now. Yes. Whereas before, there was sometimes an ethic of just grin and bear it. Right. Or it's just a phase.

They'll grow out of it. Yeah. Yeah. Exactly, which is not true. Exactly.

Well Michael, thank you so much for sharing your insights and giving us some of a front line window into the youth mental health crisis, which is a huge problem for sure, but as you just told us there are some glimmers of hope and, perhaps, rays of hope Yes. You know, for its resolution. And to invoke the title of Vivek Murthy's book, Together, if we work together Yes. It's something we can address and pull out of. I agree.

Thanks for joining us on the Nimble Youth Podcast. Please do visit our website at [www.nimbleyouthpodcast.com](http://www.nimbleyouthpodcast.com) for the recordings of the past episodes and show notes for each episode. Next time, we'll be speaking with an educator about the use of technology in the classroom, both the drawbacks and the large benefits of new advances in the learning environment. Until next time, please take care of yourselves and each other.