

Jean Twenge Interview

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Transcript

Patricia Martin:

[0:01] Hello, this is Patricia Martin and I'm your host for *Jung in the World*, a podcast of the C.G. Jung Institute of Chicago. Joining me today is Jean Twenge. She's here to talk about her latest book, *Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and What They Mean for the Future*. Jean Twenge is a professor of psychology at San Diego State University. She is the author of more than 180 scientific publications and seven books. She holds a BA and an MA from the University of Chicago and a PhD from the University of Michigan.

[0:39] Welcome, Jean. It's a pleasure to have you on the podcast. Your new book, *The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and What They Mean for the Future* takes a broad and detailed look at four generations living contemporaneously. It's an ambitious scope in an age of limited attention span. What made you think that this is the right time for a book of this scope?

Jean Twenge:

Well, I think generation gaps right now are bigger than they have been for decades. I think they rival some of the generation gaps that baby boomers were having with their parents back in the '60s and '70s. So, this is a time when we're really trying to understand this cultural moment that we're living in with all of its challenges. And it really, coming out of the pandemic, is a great time to consider where each generation is, what the real differences are.

Patricia Martin:

[1:41] You raised the influence of individualism as a powerful force running through the culture. Many psychologists would agree with you. I follow chat rooms and I have conversations at the Institute, and some would argue that individualism contributes to disorders such as narcissism and psychopathy. How do you explain the influence of individualism?

Jean Twenge:

So individualism versus collectivism is a concept that has been extensively researched in terms of cross-cultural psychology, and it does have that broad applicability to explain personality traits as well. But as I'm using it, in this case, it's more at the broader level of cultures... that it's not just that there are cross-cultural differences in individualism, say, the United States tends to be more individualistic than Japan... It's also there's been cultural change toward more individualism. So that the United States, for example, is a more individualistic culture now than it was in the 1950s, which was a much more collectivistic time. And so, with more focus on the self and less on others, you really get a whole different set of values. So, that's what's so valuable, I think, about the concept of individualism is it really helps you understand people's mindsets and the way that they're seeing the world differently than people did 50 years ago or a hundred years ago.

Patricia Martin:

Well, I'm curious to know if we're seeing trends and things that, you know, we've really not seen on a large scale before. So, for instance, there's a lot of trending around the younger generations, Gen Z and younger, disavowing their parents. They're cutting ties with their parents. And I think about previous generations might feel some guilt around that. What has happened to guilt as an organizing mentality?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah, that's it's a great observation. I mean, I think that that's one thing that you get less of with an individualistic culture. There are fewer rules to follow, fewer social rules that you must follow. Relationships are not quite as valued. And that might mean the falling away of guilt, among other things.

Patricia Martin:

Another major theme in the book is about the influence of technology. In fact, I think you really make that an umbrella. It really drives the thesis of the book. What is essential to know about the influence of technology on the society?

Jean Twenge:

Well, you know, the traditional theories of generations focus on major events... so economic recessions and depressions, wars, pandemics and so on. These have an influence on people, certainly, but they don't have as much influence on day-to-day life as changes in technology. So, in thinking about cultural change and thus generational change, that's what I kept coming back to... just realizing how changes in technology underlie so much of what is different about living now than living 200 years ago or 100 years ago or even 20 years ago. So more technology leads to more individualism. Technology makes individualism possible. It's not really possible to be

that independent and just rely on yourself and not really follow of social rules unless you have the underlying technology to help you.

[5:42] Technology also tends to lead to better medical care and longer lives. And that leads to another kind of downstream impact that explains so much of modern life, which is that the developmental trajectory has slowed down at every stage. That children are less independent, that teens are less likely to do adult things like have a driver's license or a paid job while they're in high school, that young adults take longer to get married and have kids and settle into a career, and middle-aged people look and feel younger than their parents and grandparents did at the same age. And then senior citizens live longer. They have more years of retirement, more years of life. So those downstream impacts have an effect on generational differences, on cultural change, in addition to the direct effect of technology, of how our daily lives are very different in the age of the smartphone, say, than they were before that existed. Labor-saving devices in the home are another huge influence. I got kind of obsessed with this in writing the book and thinking about things like washing machines... and how people, usually women, used to have to spend an entire day doing laundry. And the way to do it, you'd have to boil water over an open fire. And the soap is very harsh, and it would usually take a big group of people, and it would take all day long. And now you just throw your clothes in the washer and walk away. It's completely different.

Patricia Martin:

Yes, I have a new washer and dryer, and it does everything but cook my breakfast. I mean, it talks to me. It tells me if the clothes are still a little damp. And it causes me from time to time to think back on my grandmother who was from West Virginia and she did exactly what you described. She hauled water from the river first and then boiled it over an open fire... that fire she built and that soap she made. And we can't even conceive of that now.

Jean Twenge:

You take it for granted.

Patricia Martin:

Yeah. And yet... this is a follow-up question... we also seem obsessed with our productivity... so can you talk about that? Can you speak to that issue of why we're so feeling like we're out of control in terms of our time, even though we have all this technological support?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah, so this is really another big theme that I kept coming back to, that these labor-

saving devices and other technologies have given us the gift of time in terms of hours in our day-to-day life. Technology, because of better medical care, has also led to longer lives. And that's another huge gift of time. But how do we use that time? And that extra time that we have for most people is taken up by things like TikTok and YouTube and social media. So it's really remarkable how we live in this time where we've got all of these advantages, yet the big downside of technology is also very present, that it has a tendency to steal our time because that's how the companies make the most money. TikTok makes the most money when you stay on that app for as long as possible. So the way the incentive system is set up, you end up spending a lot of time that maybe you didn't intend to spend. So, I think we're just not, too often, taking advantage of the extra time that we have. And I know that sounds like a moral judgment—I don't really mean it that way. I mean it more that I think we all feel like these technologies are conspiring against us for our time and attention. And I think we're better off instead of like thinking of it in terms of, you know, moral judgment or pointing fingers that we're all in the same boat. And that might be a reason to think about more regulations, you know, better ways to have these technologies help us instead of hurt us.

Patricia Martin:

I'll quote you, Jean, you [write in your book]: “Humans have the innate desire to believe in something larger than themselves.” But rising generations are also retreating from organized religion, at a steady clip, you point out. Carl Jung believed that religion and belief in a higher power was a profound psychological response to the unknown, both the inner self and the outer world. So, I'm curious if... given the uncertainty of our times... I wonder if you'd speculate on and how future generations will address those yearnings to believe?

Jean Twenge:

[11:01] That's a great question. So, you know, the majority of Americans, even young Americans are still religious—still affiliate with a religion—but there's been a huge increase in the number who do not, who never go to religious services, who don't affiliate with a religion, who never pray... just huge, huge changes in a way that has defied a lot of theories. For a long time, it was, oh, it's just public celebration of religion that has gone down. Nope, it's also private beliefs now. Oh, millennials will come back to religion once they have children. That didn't happen either. Oh, people are more spiritual instead of being religious. At least from the survey data, it doesn't look like that's true either. Spiritual beliefs have—or feeling that you're spiritual—stayed about the same when college students actually gone down. So something has to replace this. And that's the question, what has replaced religion? And there's a lot of speculation on that. Maybe it's social media and the internet. You know, maybe it's beliefs about social justice. There's been all kinds of theories on this.

Patricia Martin:

Rising generations also show a lack of trust in institutions just in general. And, you know, some institutions are in a death spiral for lack of participation and lack of resources. But I began to wonder as I was reading your book... we have to, if we're going to live in a society, collaborate... we have to work collectively on some fronts. Do you have any sense of how millennials and Gen Z will build civic infrastructure in the future?

Jean Twenge:

[12:55] That's a good question. I really wonder about that. I worry about that as do a lot of other people, just thinking about that we're very connected to each other online and through social media. But then there's a huge amount of distrust of institutions that started with my own next generation and then built with millennials and Gen Z. And it really has come out in polls too. There's a poll that I came across while writing the book that showed that young adults are now much more likely to say that America is an unfair society as opposed to fair, that major changes to American government are necessary. I think this is one of the big questions that we'll get an answer to in the next 5 to 10 years is how much of that distrust and pessimism will be channeled toward change, and then how much will end up coming more along the lines of we've got to tear the whole thing down and start over, which is not as productive.

Patricia Martin:

Not as productive, and it's also... I think for generations that have come before... and I'm broadcasting this from Chicago. And when you look at a city like Chicago, there's a lot of infrastructure. We've got old buildings. I know you went to the University of Chicago. All those classic structures, those stone buildings, the way the city brings in water from the lake and distributes it, even... that requires a great deal of infrastructure. And I don't think younger generations are saying tear all of it down, but I also think about how long it took for cities, for instance, to become cities, and what the vision is about when something ends, how does something new get built, or can this just be explained by... sometimes younger generations have ideas and as they grow older, they don't really continue to subscribe to those ideas in precisely the same ways... meaning how much of this will change in 10 years, Jean?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah, I mean, that's the big question. I think as Gen Z and millennials grow older and get more prominence in politics, they will realize, you know, look, we can't absolutely tear everything down and start over. It's just not going to work. So how much they will change and how much will stay the same—that's really the question. If they'll

have that reckoning with being able to maybe change things from within as opposed to having this more nihilistic, very pessimistic view that seems to be very common now of this is terrible... everything is terrible... this is the worst time. You know, it's late-stage capitalism and these types of arguments that are very common now online. And so, let's just get rid of everything. I think a lot of people are hoping that won't necessarily stick around just because it is so nihilistic—but it can be more around constructive change. That would be arguably more beneficial.

Patricia Martin:

Your section on the depressing state of Gen Z is a wakeup call. What is making us so emotionally fragile, Jean? Or are we just more public about it? And so it seems like, you know, we have colossal emotional public pain? Do you think we are genuinely more emotionally fragile or just more amplified?

Jean Twenge:

Well, the data seem to suggest it's not just perception and it's not just being more public. So, just for background, there have been huge increases in anxiety, depression, loneliness, and unhappiness among teens and young adults in particular. There's not as many changes for people over the age of 40 in terms—there's some—but not as many. So we're talking here mostly Gen Z, and then it's starting to move up the age scale for millennials as well with days of poor mental health, depression, and so on going up. And this started with teens, where their depression, for example, started to rise after 2012. So, between 2011 and 2019, even before the pandemic, clinical-level depression among teens doubled. And at the exact same time, their suicide rate doubled, and their rate of self-harm doubled. And so self-harm, that's not self-report. That's CDC data on emergency room admissions for self-harm. So, for 10 to 14-year-old girls, emergency room admissions for self-harm quadrupled between 2009 and 2020. So, these are huge, huge changes. And because it's showing up in behaviors, not just in symptoms, that makes it pretty clear that it's not just people being more public about things. Even the reports of symptoms are based on screening studies, not people who, say, are seeking help or getting a diagnosis or anything like that. So, it's not over diagnosing. It's not just perceptions, it's not just being more willing to admit to things. Because the trends and behaviors are virtually identical, we know that these are real problems. So, young adults really are struggling with mental health more than they were 10 or 15 years ago.

Patricia Martin:

And, not to get too personal, but I know you're a mother... and I'm just curious... when you were writing this book and maybe *iGen* and the books before, do you talk to your children about what you're studying and what you're learning?

Jean Twenge:

I do. Sometimes I bring them with when I give talks. And so, they've seen my talks. My oldest is 16. She read the whole Gen Z chapter, in this new book... gave me some great feedback about her own generation... and we talk about that. It's particularly around technology use. I mean, that is what most parents of teens are dealing with these days. And our house and family are the same... just trying to find a balance with these technologies, using them for what they're good for, but then not using them too much is a perpetual challenge.

Patricia Martin:

Yeah, I'm curious... what works? Have you had conversations where it's like, oh, well, that went well?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah. I mean, look, everybody's struggling with this. I mean, first, just know that... know that you're not alone in this. So the two things that I usually give is advice to parents, because I'll give talks to high school parents on a pretty regular basis. Put off the smartphone for as long as possible. That's advice that, you know, really we need starting in elementary school because that's when kids get their first smartphone these days, more like nine or ten. But put that off. Give them a flip phone. Give them a gab phone, which is a phone that my 13-year-old has. You can only text, call, and take pictures, and that's it. There's no internet access. There's no ability to download social media or anything like that. So, that's the first one. And then no devices in the bedroom overnight, not just for teens, but also for adults. Tons and tons of research shows that if you have that phone within arm's reach, you're not going to sleep as well. It's just too tempting to look at it, you know, when you wake up. So what people usually say to me next is: but I have to have my phone in my bedroom overnight because it's my alarm clock. So buy an alarm clock. That's the solution.

Patricia Martin:

I'm sure there are going to be people out there in the audience really listening and taking notes on that, Jean, thank you. I also want to go to this idea of public versus private life that's being revised. And the deep inner work that Carl Jung advocated for was previously considered a private exploration that was between you and your analyst.

[21:42] Millennials and Gen Z seemed to make all aspects of the self more public. Did you see a cost to that in your research?

Jean Twenge:

Well, I mean, we certainly see those mental health trends, and those trends coincide with the rise of the smartphone and social media. So, you could argue that, because there's a lot of mechanisms, the rise of those technologies could lead to issues around mental health. And one of them is just having that self be so public and judged constantly. That's what social media often is about. How many likes and followers did I get? You know, as opposed to bullying, negative comments, you know, these other types of things that happen just so frequently. And it makes popularity a number. It gives instant feedback in a way that can be validating, but also can be very, very harmful when it's not positive.

Patricia Martin:

Yes, and I guess I also wonder about how amplified the persona is, you know, and it's the most fragile part of the self, so we're out there presenting all the time. And I just wonder if, in any of your interviews or in any of the datasets, you began to see if there were any fissures in people's sense of self as a result of being just so public and so presentational?

Jean Twenge:

I mean, I think those mental health trends are probably the clearest indication that maybe the way that we're living with technology now is not good. Because if it were, then you'd expect people to be happier and less depressed. And, instead, we have these record levels of mental health issues.

Patricia Martin:

At the end of your book, you offer forecasts about the future of several categories of life and work. And it made me curious about the future of psychotherapy. You didn't particularly draw that one out, but I'm curious to know, because you're on the podcast of the C.G. Jung Institute of Chicago, if you could talk a little bit about how you forecast psychotherapy... is it a growth category?

Jean Twenge:

[24:23] Well, I mean, clearly with more depression out there, there is more need for therapy in general. And yeah, I think, overall, clinical psychology and therapy is a growth category for a reason that isn't great—which is that more people are depressed—but that's where we are.

Patricia Martin:

I guess, as I was listening to you answer that, it also made me wonder... well, but our pain—this is a very Jungian point of view—our pain is a message from the unconscious that is telling us that something's wrong and that we're not in alignment with, you know, our sense of our own selves. And I wonder if we look at that

collectively... on some level, there's a positive message in that, in that we are getting a wake-up call. Our pain indicators are off the charts. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Jean Twenge:

Yeah, well sometimes in my talks, I will say something that sounds a little odd at first, which is, if these changes in technology are the underlying cause of this mental health crisis among adolescents and young adults, that might actually be good news because it means we can do something about it. When you think about most causes of depression—genetic predisposition, trauma, abuse, poverty, discrimination—those are things that are tough to change. Doesn't mean they can't be changed... well, the genetics really probably can't... a lot of these other things, though, it's very difficult to move the needle on. But with technology, we have at least some control over how we use our time. We have the possibility of policy changes for more regulation around, say, social media, especially for kids. So, we might be able to turn this around because it is a signal. It's a signal that something is going wrong, and we need to listen to that signal and not dismiss it. That's been one thing that's been very frustrating in this area in the last five to 10 years... how many academic psychologists have wanted to just completely deny that we have a mental health crisis when the data is very clear. You still keep hearing the same arguments over and over of, oh, but maybe they're just saying that... or it's over diagnosed... and it's been clear for a while that young people really are suffering more, that it's not just due to self-report issues.

Patricia Martin:

Do you have any reasons you've encountered as for why there's denial around this?

Jean Twenge:

It's a really good question. I wish I knew. I've been trying to figure that out for a long time why people want to deny that. Some of it is, I think, there are some people who only want to see the positives in technology. And they only want to see things that's getting better, at least in that area... while everything, all cultural change has trade-offs. Technology is not all good. It's not all bad. There are trade-offs in it. And the recent technological change is no different.

Patricia Martin:

I was reading the other day a quote from the neuroscientist Oliver Sacks, he said that he wrote to understand what he was witnessing. You've written seven books, Jean. I'm just curious, what do you understand now having written this book?

Jean Twenge:

You know, I think it really gave me a better perspective on the experiences of both the

generations older than me and the generations younger than me. That was really my goal overall for everyone... all readers of this book... just so we can try to understand each other better. And as a Gen Xer, as the middle child of generations, you know, we're in the middle, we can look at the powerful generations older than us, and then our children younger than us, and try to understand where they're coming from. It's really about perspective taking and empathy at its root.

Patricia Martin:

Well, that's a beautiful answer to the people who believe that doing trend analysis of generations and their differences is divisive. And really what you've discovered is: no, it's a way toward understanding. And on that note, I'll thank you, Jean, for a beautiful interview. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And thank you for being on the podcast.

Jean Twenge:

You're very welcome. Thank you.

Patricia Martin:

[29:28] Was there something else you wanted to say in there? Did I cut you off?

Jean Twenge:

No, no. It was all good. No, I mean, it is true that that argument does get made a lot of, oh, it's about stereotyping and the average differences. Of course, there's more variation within a generation than between them. That's all true—but there are differences, and you can't deny that. I mean, living now is different than it was 50 years ago. That's just a fact. So, people's experiences are different... and better to try to understand that and to try to take their perspective.

Patricia Martin:

I agree. And I have young adult children and I couldn't agree more. So, listen, Jean, it's been a delight. I mean, I'm not kidding. I was so looking forward to this. I admired your work for a very long time. And thanks... we're not a huge podcast and the fact you came on the show... we're honored.