iGeneration: teenagers affected by phones

One day last summer, around noon, I called Athena, a 13-year-old who lives in Houston, Texas. She answered her phone — she has had an iPhone since she was 11 — sounding as if she'd just woken up. We chatted about her favorite songs and TV shows, and I asked her what she likes to do with her friends. "We go to the mall," she said. "Do your parents drop you off?" I asked, recalling my own middleschool days, in the 1980s, when I'd enjoy a few parent-free hours shopping with my friends. "No — I go with my family," she replied. "We'll go with my mom and brothers and walk a little behind them. I just have to tell my mom where we are going. I have to check in every hour or every 30 minutes."

Those mall trips are infrequent — about once a month. More often, Athena and her friends spend time together on their phones, unchaperoned. Unlike the teens of my generation, who might have spent an evening tying up the family landline with gossip, they talk on Snapchat, a smartphone app that allows users to send pictures and videos that quickly disappear. They make sure to keep up their Snapstreaks, which show how many days in a row they have Snapchatted with each other. She told me she had spent most of the summer hanging out alone in her room with her phone. That is just the way her generation is, she said. "We didn't know any life other than with iPads or iPhones. I think we like our phones more than we like actual people."

Some generational changes are positive, some are negative, and many are both. More comfortable in their bedrooms than in a car or at a party, today's teens are physically safer than teens have ever been. They are markedly less likely to get into a car accident and, having less of a taste for alcohol than their predecessors, are less susceptible to drinking's attendant ills.

Psychologically, however, they are more vulnerable than Millennials were: rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It is not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.

However, in my conversations with teens, I saw hopeful signs that kids themselves are beginning to link some of their troubles to their ever-present phone. Athena told me that when she does spend time with her friends in person, they are often looking at their device instead of at her. "I'm trying to talk to them about something, and they don't actually look at my face," she said. "They're looking at their phone, or they're looking at their Apple Watch." "What does that feel like, when you're trying to talk to somebody face-to-face and they're not looking at you?" I asked. "It kind of hurts," she said. "It hurts. I know my parents' generation didn't do that. I could be talking about something super important to me, and they wouldn't even be listening."

Once, she told me, she was hanging out with a friend who was texting her boyfriend. "I was trying to talk to her about my family, and what was going on, and she was like, 'Uh-huh, yeah, whatever.' So I took her phone out of her hands and I threw it at the wall."

Though it is aggressive behavior that I don't support, on the other hand — it is a step towards a life with limited phone use. So, if I were going to give advice for a happy adolescence, it would be straightforward: put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something — anything — that does not involve a screen.

Which of the following is NOT true about iGen teenagers, according to the author?

1. Most of them feel extremely unhappy.
2. It is easy to hurt them psychologically.
3. They prefer loneliness to company.
4. They have more physical health problems.