

ON OUR MINDS: THE U.S. SURGEON GENERAL (PART 2): HOW TO CREATE TECH-FREE ZONES WITH

JAMES: From PBS NewsHour, Student Reporting Labs.

BREE: And WETA

JAMES: This is on *Our Minds*

BREE: With Bree

JAMES: And James

BREE: A podcast made by teens for teens

JAMES: Because everyone deserves a place to feel heard.

[theme music fades]

BREE: Our conversation with the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy was too good to squeeze into one episode. We hope you enjoyed part one. Now here's part two...

James: Well Doctor Murthy, I kind of remember the moment like it was yesterday. Years ago in 2015, I watched you in a PSA with Elmo, and you were actually the first person to teach me about vaccines.

Elmo: Oh, hey, Dr Surgeon General, Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA

Dr. Murthy: Hi Elmo, you can just call me, Dr. Murthy.

Elmo: Oh, ok!

James: you were actually the first person to teach me about vaccines.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: Oh my gosh.

James: I imagine it was really cool for you to meet Elmo. A huge inspiration of mine personally. What have been some of your personal favorites so far as Surgeon General?

Dr. Vivek Murthy: Oh wow. This has been like such an incredible experience that I got to say to to have the honor of serving as Surgeon General and to to be able to do so twice. Like my expectations were relatively, relatively modest. I mean, my my parents came to this country with very little, like many immigrant parents do, and they just wanted to make sure their kids had a place where they could get a good education and have good opportunities and be be treated on the basis of not how dark their skin was or the fact that they had a funny sounding name or, what their caste was or anything like that, but where they would be judged on their willingness to be a part of a community, to contribute to a community and based on their ideas and their hard work, like that's what my parents wanted, but they never dreamed that I'd have the chance to to serve in this role.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: I think about what most powerfully guides and influences the work that I do, a Surgeon general. It's it's my role as a dad. I think about a lot through the lens of my children. What kind of world are we creating for them? And that's why, to me, the most important thing we can do is to make sure that we are supporting kids and young people. And that doesn't just mean providing them with mental health access. It means getting at the root causes of what's driving this mental health crisis. It means bringing young people in to the conversation and oftentimes letting them lead, and shape the solutions, that, that we see. Because the truth is, if, when, when people feel inspired and empowered, my belief is that there is there are no limits to what they can do and accomplish.

BREE: You use social media and I actually follow you on Instagram. I really enjoyed your post about the ins and outs of 2024. Social media sometimes connects us, but oftentimes doesn't feel deep, and it could also sometimes be harmful. So how can teenagers best use social media?

Dr. Vivek Murthy: Before I jump into that, actually, can I ask both of you, how do you manage social media in your lives? I know it's tricky. And so I just ask, how does it make you feel?

James: For me, social media was, really cool for me because I think it was around middle school. It became really popular. Like Snapchat. Instagram. Everyone's trying to get as many followers as possible or increase their snaps or whatever it was at the time. So I remember using it so regularly, like whenever I would have the chance, it was almost natural to just take my phone out and click the social media icon. So much so that, like without looking at my phone, I could probably scroll and then click onto the app itself. And so going into high school, I realized that, a balance was really crucial. I found myself, like, in conflict with that a lot, you know, using my phone too much when I

should be studying. And so I found that a really good solution for me, in tackling that was like keeping my phone somewhere where I couldn't even see it in the first place. So I would, like, charge it somewhere else. But even now, it's always like a constant battle of me using social media, when I should be doing something else. I don't know about you, Bree?

Bree: I was always on social media to the point where I needed a detox. It was like the algorithms and the likes and just my own time management kind of just like drew me in more and more. And it was to the point where, like, every, like little action I would take on social media was like me overthinking everything. So it was definitely harmful, to me, to some extent, to the point where I kind of had to like, clear my whole, like, Instagram page and really start fresh because I'd always overthink and be like, what? People like me if I posted this, or how would people react if I posted this and stuff like that. So I fully had to, like, start clean and be like, no, this is what I want to do. I am going to post and use social media on my own terms and now not how. Like I would think anyone else would like it if that makes sense. So I'm really growing a better relationship with it to be honest.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: Well, thank you both for being so honest and sharing what you're going through. Let me just say this. I don't think I've met a young person. As I've traveled and talked to thousands of college students, high school students across the country. I haven't met a single person who's figured it all out with social media. And I don't think people are having these struggles that you both are talking about because somehow your generation is deficient in willpower. I don't think that's what's going on. I think you've just as much willpower and strength as prior generations. But I think what's different is the technology that you're surrounded by. My concern with social media is it's not that there aren't some good things that people get it from social media. Sometimes they can offer an opportunity for people to express themselves in me, to find a community where they otherwise may not have one, and those things could be positive. My concern, though, is how that balances out with a lot of the harms the young people themselves say they're experiencing from social media. And so number one, like just the constant comparison to other people, that people experience on social media, which look, people have been comparing themselves to others for millennia. Right? But but not nearly at the volume and speed at which you're seeing on social like you could on one day. You know, this, like be comparing yourself to thousands of posts that you see, you know, an in in a single day. And I just hear young people all the time talking about how it shredded their self-esteem. It makes them feel worse about themselves. The second thing that I'm really concerned about, it's just exposure to harmful content. You know that there are a large number of, of adolescents who say that they are being bullied and harassed. 6 in 10 adolescent girls are being approached by strangers on

social media in ways that make them feel uncomfortable¹. Again and then this is about volume as well. Like, I got bullied at times when I was in middle school, but maybe once every now and not at the volume and, and the severity that that kids are experiencing online now. So so that's really concerning. The third thing that I'll mention that concerns me is what is being displaced by social media. Like what's what do you not doing because you're spending a lot of time on social media. That's sort of the question. Right. And what it's taking away from it turns out, and particular concerns me the most is sleep. Like a lot of people are actually using their devices late into the night and they say, yeah, let me just check, you know, my feed for ten minutes, and then an hour and a half later, they're still on it, right? That's happened to, like, everyone, right?

Bree: Yeah.

Dr. Murthy: So it takes away from sleep. It takes away from your in-person interactions. So many people these days feel like folks are distracted all the time when they're talking to them, because they're constantly on their devices. But it also actually takes away from learning. Right. Like, and this is a struggle we hear from, like, students and teachers all the time who say that, like they're literally trying to teach history or trying to teach math or trying to work through a challenge in the classroom. But students are often distracted by their devices. And again, I don't think this is happening by accident. I think that, this is by design in the sense that the platforms are designed to maximize how much time Bree, James and everyone else who's using them spends on them. Right? So I think we have a real profound challenge here, because the reason I issued an advisory a Surgeon General Advisory on social media and youth mental health is because there is actually there are two problems. One is that if you ask the question the parents asked me, which is a social media say for my kids, there's actually not enough evidence that we have to say that it's safe for our kids. We haven't done safety studies, you know, on the current platforms to actually assess whether or not they're truly safe. We do that for other things car seats, for cars, for medications. But we haven't done that for social media. But the other thing we're finding is that there's more and more evidence of harm, you know, to self-esteem in terms of exposure to harmful content, impacts on sleep. So. So I'm really concerned about what has now become, I think, an extremely powerful and, and in some cases deadly driver of the youth mental health crisis. And that is social media. It's not the only driver, but I think it has become one of the drivers that we now have to contend with.

James: You don't think that we struggle with mental health because we're weak-minded, which I truly appreciate that perspective.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: James, I will tell you this speaking of adults, The truth is adults struggle with a lot of the same challenges with social media They also can't get off of it, they're also finding it's know, robbing them of sleep and diminishing the quality of interaction they're having. And it's also impacting their happiness levels because they're also constantly comparing themselves to other people.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: So just some things I would just consider if you're out there and if any of this resonates with you, if you're also struggling a bit with social media, a few things I would be mindful of. Number one is. To. Create tech free zones like in your day. And if you're a parent, try to do this for your kids. If you're a young person, try to actually work with you or some of your friends to make a pact that you're going to do this, that's actually what I had to do in my own life. And that could be creating tech free zones around sleep, in-person interaction and learning. Right. And that could look like this look like saying, okay, you know what? I'm going to put my phone away a half hour before I go to sleep, and I'm actually not going to keep it with me at night. You can do what James did, which is I'm going to charge it in another room, like entirely. So I'm not tempted to go at it. That will positively impact the quality of your sleep. You can also say, hey, whatever, I'm having a meal. Whenever I'm catching up with friends. I'm actually we're all going to put our phones away, right? Like, I heard of a common practice that that some young people do where like, you know, when they go all go out to dinner, they'll put their phones in the middle and whoever picks it up first, they try to look at it or something. They pick up the tab for the group. So anyway, behavior change in general, whether you're trying to change your diet, start a new gym routine, change how you use social media hard to do on your own. It's much more likely that you'll be able to sustain that practice than if you try to do it alone.

James: We did have a couple of fun questions prepared for you—

Dr. Murthy: Yeah, go for it.

James: On Instagram, I noticed that you kick off your children's mornings with a delicious breakfast ranging from chocolate chips to Mickey Mouse-shaped pancakes. So what food item do you enjoy preparing the most for your kids?

Dr. Vivek Murthy: If it's a special morning, like, usually Saturday mornings, I usually make chocolate chip pancakes, along with, some version of eggs, sometimes scrambled, sometimes fried eggs. And is that what I always want? To make sure they have enough protein, too.

James: [laugh] True true, true.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: And they both like to actually sit on the counter, but we keep them a little far away from the stove, but they like, after I pour the batter onto the pan, they like to take their chocolate chips and try to throw it in perfectly on the pancakes.

Bree: [laughter]

Dr. Vivek Murthy: It's usually raining chocolate chips.

Bree: Thank you so much for your time and your insightful answers. It was such a wonderful conversation.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: I was so glad that we talked. This is, like, so much fun to talk to both of you.

Bree: It was really fun.

Dr. Vivek Murthy: I just think that the experiences you have to share are actually really powerful for people to hear as well. So thank you for sharing.

[music]

JAMES: Alright, Bree, what are your main takeaways from the conversation with Dr. Murthy?

BREE: I have so many takeaways because he is so knowledgeable. To try to not be so hard on myself, to try to just the importance of reaching out to people and definitely mindful social media use. Many a pact with a friend to use phones in a more healthy way.

JAMES: Ooh, do you want to try that together?

BREE: Yeah, good idea!

JAMES: How about we try not using our phones half an hour before we go to bed?

BREE: Let's do it! Let's check in next episode to see how we're doing.

—

JAMES: OK, I love that. In the next episode, we'll be exploring how recent laws and policies are affecting our education.

BREE: That's gonna be a good one! But before we go, if you liked our conversation with the Surgeon General, check out his podcast - House Calls with Dr. Vivek Murthy. Listen closely to the description of House Calls. You ready, James?

JAMES: I'm ready!

BREE: In each episode, Dr. Murthy and his guests explore how they navigate the messiness and uncertainties of life to find meaning and joy. By sharing openly what's on our minds and in our hearts, we can find strength and healing through connection.

JAMES: I see what you did there. On our minds!

BREE: On our minds! [laughter]

[theme music]

BREE: *On Our Minds*, Season 4 is produced by Student Reporting Labs in collaboration with KUOW's RadioActive Youth Media.

JAMES: Today's episode was produced by Lead Podcast Producer Briget Ganske with help from Associate Producer Jaylah Moore Ross and fact-checking by Simran Gupta.

BREE: Frankie St. Pierre Nelson edited and mixed this episode. Approval and oversight by Editorial Director Marie Cusick and Executive Producer Leah Clapman.

JAMES: Theme music by Joseph Broad. Additional music from Blue Dot Sessions.

BREE: If you or someone you know needs help. We have a list of resources at studentreportinglabs.org/mental-health-resources

[end of theme music]