The Unluckiest Generation

The American Psychological Association shows that Millennials were diagnosed with depression and anxiety at a higher percentage than any previous generation.

Millennial. I don't even like the term. It signifies a generation that has been through the change of the millennium, one foot in the past, and one foot in the future. To me, it signifies a generation of shared trauma and shared experience. I have come of age in a world where I am uncertain and frightened of what happens next. No one is aware of the history you are living through until it has passed. I look back on historic moments I have lived through, and how those moments have shaped my generation.

As a kid, I played in the woods behind my house and walked to the city pool with my friends. If I was going to be home after the streetlights came on, I used a pay phone to Collect Call my mom, and then just yelled "at the park" rather than my name. My parents walked me to the gate at the airport and waved as I boarded alone to visit my grandparents. We used landlines with long cords so you could talk to your friends in private. That seems like a time when things were slower, simpler, safer. A time I am nostalgic for.

Millennials have achieved a higher level of education than any previous generation. We were the first generation to have access to the internet; we saw the birth of the technology we use today. We were also the first generation to experience school shootings, terroristic attacks, and global pandemics.

I belong to a generation straddling the gap between Baby Boomers and Gen Z. I am not sure where I belong, or what I was made for. I am open minded; I am receptive of new things.

But is this because I must be? I am part of a generation that has had to accept a roller coaster of events from an early age. It is no surprise that Millennials are branded as a generation of confused adults who cling to nostalgia like a security blanket.

The teenagers who witnessed the horror of the Columbine High School massacre play out on their T.V. screens seem to be handling the trauma much better than anticipated.

Today, over 90% of schools now have a written crisis plan, while over 75% of schools as young as elementary hold active shooter drills.

I was sitting in my algebra class when my teacher was summoned to open his door. He stuck his head out and was listening to another teacher on the other side. He closed the door and turned on the little T.V. in the corner of the room. I saw his face, and there were no emotions. Flashes of kids running across a high school campus. Students diving out of windows. Parents sobbing. 13 Dead. Shock and sadness washed over me, unlike anything else I had experienced up to that moment. How could teens gun down their own in the cafeteria? Are my peers capable of stalking the halls with semi-automatic weapons? I am unsure if I trust my classmates sitting next to me; are we not all troubled teens? Trench coats are banned. Music is blamed. Counselors are brought in. I am diagnosed with ADHD later that year.

Minute by minute, fear strikes our country as commercial planes strike buildings in New York and Washington. America's sense of security crumbles to the ground. Children in classrooms watched as two New York City towers were obliterated. Thousands are dead in a struggle to escape the fiery chaos.

Third period. I am in my typing class with my headphones on. It's a typical day of high school. School started a couple of weeks ago. Typing class seems so comical now—a cardboard box covered the keys while we were attempting to type 60 words per minute. I can still hear

everyone's click clack through the Destiny's Child song playing in my ear. Just a simple, unassuming day. It seemed like everything in the next few hours happened in a millisecond.

Our door was open, and I could see kids from other computer lab rooms run down the hall. Strange. Hectic. The teacher left to inspect the commotion. She never did that. Everyone took off their headphones and looked around to see if there was any hint of what we should do. She was out of breath when she returned, and hurriedly ushered us down to the nearest classroom with a T.V. She still hadn't said a word, but her face was strained with fear. It's strange trying to interpret adult feelings as a teen, especially when adults try to hide how they truly feel. When I walked in the door to the room, I could tell something was not right by the lack of noise. No one was moving. No one even blinked. The teacher had tears streaming down her face. I turned to look at the screen, and that's when I saw it. The second plane came in so fast. The news anchor was crying out in shock. People were jumping from the building 100 floors up. Black smoke billowing from the tower. Frantic 911 calls. I couldn't move. It felt like I was watching the world end.

Our nation was shattered. School was cancelled the next day. I still cry when I think about those people jumping from the tower. A boy in my class changed his name from Mohammad to Matt. Windows were broken out of the 7/11 on my street. I start to see a therapist in the spring for my anxiety.

Most states enacted shelter-in-place orders when mitigating the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. Emerging evidence shows that these tactics have reduced COVID-19 cases.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected mental health and social well-being in the short term. Potential long-term impacts are still unknown.

I am meeting my friend at the gym after work. Her eyes are frantic. “They are closing everything,” she said. I rolled my eyes. There is no way they can close the world down, right?

I work in the service industry. How am I going to do my job safely? How am I supposed to get my son online for his schoolwork? Who is going to watch him? How am I going to pay my bills? I am scrambling to come up with a schedule with his father so that we can manage for a week or so, maybe it will cool down—back to normal.

I show up to work the next morning, and its chaos. Co-workers are calling off, refusing to come to work. Customers are banging on the doors; angry faces are screaming in the windows, trying to squeeze in before the doors are locked. I get the phone call from the owner: "That’s it, we are shutting down.” It was like the breath was knocked out of me. The chaos around me went silent. A million selfish thoughts are swirling through my head. How can I take care of my family if I cannot work? What if my family gets sick? What is going to happen to my co-workers? The weight of my panic is crushing. They are talking about my profession on T.V.; they show people holding signs demanding my return. The news is paralyzing—24 hours a day covering the same topic; the only time it was shut off was when the Geek Squad came to fix the CNN ticker that was burned into the bottom of the screen. People are drinking excessively; depression rates are at an all-time high.

My son’s father takes his own life in October of 2020. I dropped to my knees, unable to think yet silently screaming inside. I don’t want to give that news to a 12-year-old—*how* do I give that news to a 12-year-old. His eyes searching my face, desperate for it to be untrue, will forever haunt me. Depression has stolen my best friend; it has robbed my son of his father. It has shattered our lives. I’ve never planned a funeral before. Masked faces wait in lines outside to say goodbye. We cried on the front porch together. The tears falling from my son’s face remind me

of the people jumping from the towers. My empty face felt like the Algebra teacher in eighth-grade. Two sides of the same coin, both images forever burned into my brain. The next two years seem to blur together—almost like they have been erased. Defeated. Hopeless. I am a shell of a person. There is no normal anymore.

Ma.trix [ma`triks] – noun

1. *An environment in which something develops; a surrounding medium or structure.*
2. *A mold in which something, such a record or printing type, is cast or shaped.*

I do not realize, in the moment, that I am living through a historic event. No one does I suppose. I fear I have become numb to the shock over time. I have inherited my role in this world and the problems that come with it. I rub some dirt on it, but at the same time I passionately advocate for mental health awareness. One foot in, one foot out. Millennials have this unique skill, acquired from riding this roller coaster. The initial shock is quickly followed by the numbness, then we dust ourselves off and show up the next day. Unlike the silent sufferers before us, we talk about the trauma. We are honest with ourselves, our families, and our therapists.

These events have shaped me—they do not define me. These are the moments I chose to rise because I *must*. As a collective society, we rise together through these shared experiences. We lean on each other in our times of need; we find the common thread. We tell our story. We heal. These memories connect us to each other, to the past and to the future. Millennials are destined to be right where we are, weaving the past and present together with that thread. It is our job to lead the way in this unchartered territory. This is where I fit in. I am cast to develop in this environment.

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"Who are we? The question is not simple. What we call the self is part of a larger matrix of relationship and society. Had we been born to a different family, in a different time, to a different world, we would not be the same."

- Susan Griffin

How the hell did I end up here?

I am supposed to be brainstorming about writing a paper on Susan Griffin's *Our Secret*. I am in my late 30s, and a freshman college student. Obviously, I am still unsure where I belong in this world. I am riding the bus home from a night class; I do my best thinking on the bus, and I should be using my time wisely, not pondering the great questions of my existence. Tonight, I cannot help but think about the lives I interact with and touch every day. Each experience—the good and bad—has created and influenced not only my life, but all the lives around me. I often find myself thinking about the people I interact with and wonder if they think of me. Like the moon pulls the tide, it is the natural ebb and flow of our world. Cause and effect. Life and death. As much as it's scary and uncertain, it's beautiful and surprising. Surprising—because as I struggle to focus on my notes for the text, I realize what Griffin's words are saying to me. She uses our historic events, these tangible connections, to bind the intangible together. It's not about Himmler, or 9/11, or Griffin, or me – but instead a collective *us*. I wouldn't be on this bus, in this class, writing this paper, if *my* history did not happen. I wouldn't be me; I wouldn't have ended up here. The *matrix* pulls us into an unknown direction, and in turn we pull in others. Like an endless blackhole, this field of gravity effects everyone we know, and everyone we don't know yet. So, to me, the question is not "Who are we?" but "How will we be remembered?"

Possibly, as the luckiest generation.