Social Media and Mental Health: What You Need to Know

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In today's digital age, it seems like everyone has at least one social media account. As of 2020, approximately 3.6 billion people use social media worldwide — and this number may increase to 4.4 billion by 2025. [1]

Although social media hasn't been around for a very long time, these platforms have transformed the way we communicate and interact with one another. However, social media use may have a negative impact on many people's mental health, exacerbating feelings of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Understanding how social media can impact our emotions is important; with this knowledge, we can develop a healthier relationship with these platforms and improve our mental health in the process. If you feel sad, lonely, frustrated, and spend an excessive amount of time on social media, it's time to take a closer look at your online activities.

Social Media's Positive Impacts

As humans, social interaction is vital to our psychological well-being. When we cannot see the people we love in person, social media gives us the tools to stay connected. While these platforms cannot fully replace face-to-face interaction, social media can provide a number of positive benefits.

Social media allows us to:

- Seek and provide emotional support during difficult situations
- Raise awareness on important issues and advocate for social change
- Create social connections when you can't access them in person
- Engage in creative self-expression
- Network with people who have similar interests to you
- Find new friends and communities to connect with

Social Media and Mental Health Problems

While the platforms do provide some benefits, other people report a negative experience using social media. We still do not know enough about the long-term impacts of social media use, and current trends suggest that there may be a strong connection between social media and mental health conditions.

These may include negative feelings about their life or appearance, an intense fear of missing out (FOMO), or worsened symptoms of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or self-harm. Certain online activities, such as cyberbullying, also have a severe impact on mental health.

Negative Self-Perception

When people post on social media, they typically share the highlights of their lives. However, when all we see on our feeds are positive experiences and achievements, we can feel worse about ourselves. [2]

These highly-edited highlights of other peoples' lives can directly impact our self-esteem, resulting in negative self-perception. We may see photographs of a popular celebrity who altered their appearance using filters, and feel bad about our appearance as a result. We might see someone we know announcing their

engagement or an impressive new job, and question our own accomplishments.

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

While FOMO is a common phenomenon that we experience on and offline, social media can exacerbate these feelings of exclusion and envy. On sites such as Instagram or Facebook, we may see people at parties and events, hanging out with friends, or traveling to exotic locales — leading us to believe that others lead better or more fun lives.

FOMO can be very harmful to our mental health, resulting in lower self-esteem and higher anxiety levels. This fear may also compel you to check your social feeds more often, resulting in exacerbated feelings of FOMO and an intense compulsion to check each and every notification you receive.

Loneliness and Isolation

Although social media platforms are full of people, social media platforms may make you feel more alone than ever. High social media usage increases feelings of isolation and loneliness, and reducing social media use can decrease them. [3] Focusing on face-to-face interaction with the people around you may improve your overall well-being.

Cyberbullying

When someone uses the internet to send intimidating or threatening messages, they are committing an act of cyberbullying. Online harassment is common among adolescents — approximately 47% of young people have received threatening messages over the internet. [4] Utilizing social media to spread lies and abuse other people can damage a victim's mental well-being.

Depression and Anxiety

Depression and anxiety are common mood disorders that affect millions of people across the United States. There is a correlation between time spent using social media and depression and anxiety symptoms, but it is unclear whether social media is the cause of these issues. [5]

Because social media may foster feelings of FOMO, isolation, and low self-esteem, using these platforms may exacerbate symptoms in people who already have these conditions. Stepping away from social media may improve these symptoms. People who deactivated their Facebook reported fewer depression and anxiety symptoms, and saw increases in their overall happiness levels after just one month off the platform. [6]

Suicidal Ideation

Social media can be a very unhealthy place for people struggling with suicidal ideation. Cyberbullying and online harassment may trigger feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and instability, and when combined with pre-existing stressors, can increase a person's risk for suicide. [7]

Signs Social Media Is Affecting Your Mental Health

While everyone's relationship with social media is unique, using these platforms should not make you feel unhappy or anxious. If you log off Facebook or Instagram feeling worse about yourself than before you started scrolling, your feeds may be impacting your mental health — and you may want to reduce your screen time.

#1: You Feel Sad, Drained, or Stressed

The emotions you feel immediately after scrolling through your feeds can provide insight on how social media is affecting your mental state. If you feel an overwhelming sense of sadness, frustration, jealousy, or loneliness after logging off, your social accounts may have a negative impact on your emotional well-being.

These feelings aren't just in your head — there are direct correlations between social media use, mental health, and self-esteem. [8]

#2: You Constantly Compare Yourself to Others

Constant comparison is a hallmark sign of unhealthy social media use. These platforms almost promote comparison — when someone posts a picture of themselves, it's easy to think about their popularity, looks, and life experiences in comparison to our own.

However, comparing yourself to other people on social media is extremely harmful to your mental health, and is more likely to make you feel depressed. [9] Social media comparison can also directly impact your body image, and may contribute to disordered eating patterns. [10]

#3: You Find It Difficult to Stay Off Social Media

It is important for all of us to take breaks from social platforms — but if you can't disengage yourself from your accounts or approach each experience with social media in mind, you may need to step away from the screen.

People who use social media more frequently have higher reports of depression. [11] In addition, social media addiction is a serious condition that impacts thousands of people each year, resulting in more depressive symptoms than those with healthier social media relationships. [12]
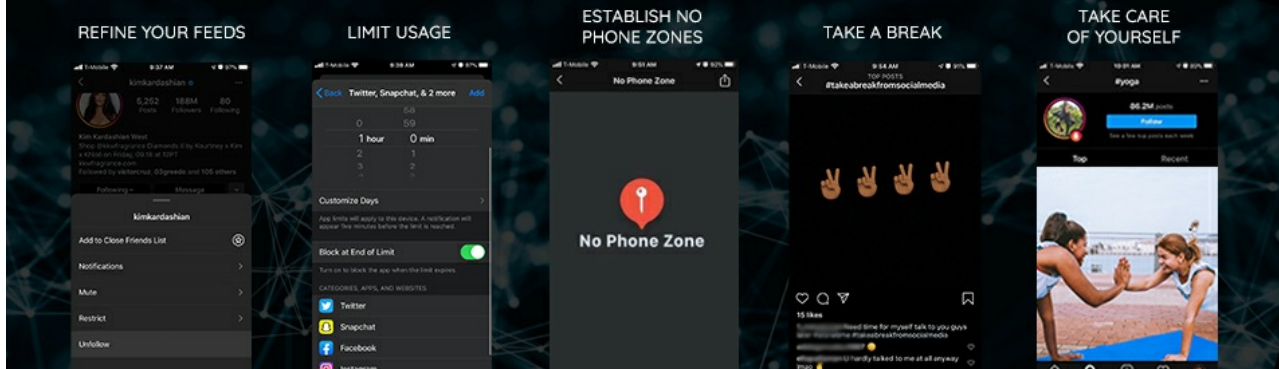
If you spend every moment engaging with social media, you can see consequences in other areas of your life. You may feel distracted at school or work, or disconnected from your real-life relationships. These actions often lead to real-life harm, resulting in stunted self-growth and issues at school, work, and with the people around you.

#4: Likes Directly Impact Your Self-Esteem

Social media engagement triggers the reward response in our brains, leading us to crave likes, follows, shares, and comments after we post. [13] If you don't receive the response you were expecting — or notice your engagement differs from other people you follow — you may feel worse about yourself than before you posted.

While these numbers feel meaningful on these platforms, it's important to remember that online engagement does not equal real-life support. If you find that your self-esteem is directly tied to the number of likes you receive, you may need to step away from the screen.

Tips for Improving Your Relationship with Social Media

Once you understand social media's impact on your mental health, it's time to reevaluate your relationship with these platforms. There are a few actions you can take to improve your online experiences and emotional well-being.

Refine your feeds:

Sometimes, we follow accounts that don't make us feel good about ourselves — leading to constant comparison and worsening self-esteem. Content about other people's lives can increase social media-related depression, while accounts that promote inspirational or humorous content promote feelings of gratitude and vitality. [14] Ask yourself how each account you're following makes you feel, and unfollow those who do not promote positive emotions.

Limit your daily usage:

Skipping online interactions in favor of in-person meetings can help you foster stronger connections with the people around you. First, try cutting down on your daily usage — limiting your time on social media to 10 minutes a day may result in lower depression and loneliness levels, but you can start with an hour or two and gradually scale down. [15]

Establish no-phone zones:

There are certain situations where scrolling through social media should be off limits. To begin the social detox process, commit to staying off your phone during certain times, such as during meals or in the hour leading up to bedtime. You can also keep your phone tucked away during work or school to avoid any conflicts with your responsibilities.

Take an extended break:

While stepping back from social media can be difficult, it is an important step in improving your online interactions. Schedule regular detox periods away from your social accounts for a few days each month — remove your accounts from your phone and have a friend change your passwords to avoid temptation.

After re-evaluating your social media usage, add a few activities to your daily routine to foster healthier connections and improve your mental health.

Engage in beneficial activities:

- Using a gratitude journal or app

- Meditating or practicing yoga
- Volunteering in your community
- Meeting face-to-face with a friend or old acquaintance
- Joining a club to meet those with similar interests
- Exercising, playing a sport, or joining a fitness class
- Starting a new creative hobby

While these activities can help improve your emotional experience, they cannot provide mental health care. Social media is usually not the cause of anxiety or depression — but these platforms can exacerbate these symptoms.

Visit a mental health professional to discuss your symptoms and discuss a treatment program that is right for your condition.

Fostering Healthier Online Interactions During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected multiple areas of our lives, from our work and school schedules to our social calendar. Because staying safe during COVID-19 requires us to limit our in-person interactions, social media is becoming more and more important to daily life. However, the constant stream of virus-related news on these platforms can trigger even more stress and anxiety than usual.

If you are trying to balance social connections and mental health during the pandemic, integrate the following tips:

Communicate regularly with loved ones:

While online platforms can't replace face-to-face interaction, staying in touch with close friends and family members is important during the pandemic. Schedule regular times to connect with these individuals — whether it is a phone or video call for an hour each week or ongoing email correspondence.

Continue to engage in a healthy lifestyle:

Exercising regularly, sleeping enough, and eating a healthy diet are important for mental health. [16] If you are sheltering in place during the pandemic, set aside at least 30 minutes for exercise each day, schedule regular sleep and wake times, and prioritize meals rich in fruits, vegetables, and lean protein.

Schedule fun virtual activities:

While there are some activities that are too risky to engage in right now, you can plan virtual events like movie and game nights, book clubs, and video-call dinners. Plan a brainstorm session with a group of friends or your family and create a calendar of events you can look forward to throughout the month.

Mute and unfollow triggering content:

While it is important to remain informed of public health guidance, social media can be a scary place if you are constantly seeing content about the pandemic. If you are following accounts that share content that is harmful to your mental health, temporarily mute or unfollow them.

While the pandemic may worsen mental health conditions, help is still available. Many therapists are offering virtual sessions for your convenience, and if you rely on medication, you can receive pharmacy orders through the mail. Contact a mental health professional near you to discuss remote therapy availability.

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