



Social Media and Mental Health

Are You Addicted to social media?

Although social media enables ongoing connection, excessive engagement may contribute to anxiety, depression, and social isolation. The following guidance outlines strategies to adjust usage habits and support overall emotional well-being.

What is social media's impact on mental health?

Human beings are inherently social. Our need for companionship is essential for thriving in life, and the quality of our connections significantly influences our mental health and happiness. Social connections can alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression, enhance self-esteem, bring comfort and joy, prevent loneliness, and even extend our lifespan. Conversely, a lack of strong social ties can seriously jeopardize our mental and emotional well-being.

In today's world, many of us depend on social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to connect with others. While these platforms offer various benefits, it's crucial to remember that they cannot replace real-world human interaction. In-person contact is necessary to trigger the hormones that reduce stress and make you feel happier, healthier, and more positive.

Although social media is intended to facilitate connections, extensive use may be associated with increased feelings of loneliness or isolation and could contribute to mental health challenges including anxiety.

If you find yourself spending too much time on social media and experiencing feelings of sadness, dissatisfaction, frustration, or loneliness, it might be time to reassess your online habits and seek a healthier balance.

The pros of social media

While virtual interaction on social media doesn't have the same psychological benefits as face-to-face contact, there are still many positive ways in which it can help you stay connected and support your wellbeing.

Social media lets you:

- Connect with family and friends worldwide.
- Meet new people and communities with shared interests.
- Support or promote causes and raise awareness.
- Give or receive emotional support.
- Access social and professional resources, especially if you're remote or face challenges.
- Share your creativity.
- Find useful information and learning opportunities.

The cons of social media

There is limited research on the long-term effects of social media, but several studies show that heavy use is strongly associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

Social media can contribute to negative experiences, such as:

Feelings of inadequacy regarding one's life or appearance. While it is widely understood that many images shared on social platforms are edited or selectively presented, these portrayals may still lead individuals to experience insecurity about their own circumstances or self-image. Furthermore, although it is common knowledge that users typically highlight positive aspects of their lives and seldom share challenges or setbacks, this awareness does not necessarily mitigate the envy or dissatisfaction that may arise when viewing curated photographs of holidays or learning about career achievements shared online.



Fear of missing out (FOMO) and social media use. The concept of fear of missing out or FOMO existed before the development of social media, but platforms like Facebook and Instagram may intensify perceptions that others are experiencing more enjoyment or have improved lifestyles. This perception can affect self-esteem, contribute to anxiety, and increase social media use, potentially resembling addictive behaviors. FOMO may lead individuals to check their phones frequently for updates or react quickly to notifications, which can result in behaviors such as interrupted

Isolation A study by the University of Pennsylvania found that higher usage of social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram is associated with increased feelings of loneliness. The research also indicated that reducing social media use can result in lower levels of loneliness and isolation and may support improved overall wellbeing.

Depression and anxiety Research suggests that face-to-face contact is important for mental health. Frequent engagement in social media interactions instead of personal relationships may increase the risk of mood disorders including anxiety and depression.

Cyberbullying Approximately 10 percent of teens report experiencing bullying on social media, while other users encounter offensive comments. Social media sites such as Twitter have been identified as spaces where harmful rumors, misinformation, and abuse can occur.

Self-absorption Posting frequent selfies and personal content on social media may contribute to increased self-focus and potentially lead to less engagement in real-life connections.

Factors Influencing Social Media Utilization

Currently, many individuals access social media through smartphones or tablets, offering a high level of convenience for maintaining connections. This increased accessibility, however, results in continuous exposure to social media platforms. Such persistent connectivity can contribute to challenges in impulse regulation, as frequent alerts and notifications may detract from concentration, disrupt sleep patterns, and foster dependency on mobile devices.

Social media platforms are intentionally engineered to capture user attention, encourage prolonged engagement, and stimulate frequent interaction with content updates. This approach is commercially beneficial for platform providers. Comparable to behavioral compulsions associated with gambling or substance use, social media activity may elicit psychological cravings. Positive engagement—such as receiving likes, shares, or affirmative feedback—triggers dopamine release, a neurotransmitter linked to reward-driven behaviors. The reinforcement this provides can increase the desire to engage with social media, potentially impacting other areas of one's life.

Additional Contributors to Unhealthy Social Media Engagement. The phenomenon known as fear of missing out (FOMO) often drives repeated returns to social media platforms. Even though most information does not require immediate attention or response, FOMO may lead individuals to believe otherwise. Concerns about exclusion from discussions in academic or professional settings, apprehension about relationship dynamics, or anxiety over missing invitations or events are commonplace motivations. Furthermore, many individuals utilize social media as a means of comfort in situations characterized by anxiety, awkwardness, or isolation. However, reliance on digital interaction in these contexts may impede the development of face-to-face communication skills that are effective in alleviating anxiety.

Excessive engagement with social media may be indicative of underlying concerns such as stress, depression, or boredom. If increased social media usage occurs when experiencing low moods, loneliness, or boredom, it may serve as a coping mechanism to avoid unpleasant emotions or temporarily regulate one's mood. While initially challenging, allowing oneself to acknowledge and process these feelings can facilitate the development of healthier strategies to manage your moods.

The Cycle of Unhealthy Social Media Engagement

Overuse of social media platforms can lead to a negative, self-reinforcing cycle:

- Feelings of loneliness, depression, anxious states, or stress prompt more frequent use of social media as individuals seek relief from boredom or a sense of connection.



- Increased social media consumption may elevate experiences of FOMO (fear of missing out), inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and isolation.
- These heightened negative feelings further impact mood and may exacerbate symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, and stress.
- As these symptoms worsen, social media usage tends to increase, perpetuating the downward spiral.

Signs That Social Media Is Impacting Mental Health

Individuals vary widely, and there is no exact threshold regarding time spent on social media, the frequency of checking for updates, or the number of posts made that definitively signals unhealthy usage. Instead, the key consideration is how social media affects one's mood and other facets of life, as well as the underlying reasons for its use.

For instance, social media use may become problematic if it leads to neglect of face-to-face interactions, interferes with professional or academic responsibilities, or contributes to feelings such as envy, anger, or depression. Additionally, if the primary motivation for engaging with social media is rooted in boredom, loneliness, or the desire to elicit negative emotions in others, it may be appropriate to evaluate these habits.

Potential indicators that social media is adversely impacting mental health include:

- Spending more time on social media than interacting with friends in person, with online engagement serving as a replacement for offline relationships. Even during social gatherings, feeling compelled to monitor social media—often due to concerns that others are experiencing greater enjoyment—can be detrimental.
- Making unfavorable comparisons to others on social media, which may result in decreased self-esteem, negative body image, or patterns of disordered eating.
- Experiencing cyberbullying or feeling powerless over what others share about you online.
- Encountering distractions at school or work, because of pressure to post frequently, obtain feedback through comments or likes, or respond promptly and positively to peers' posts.



A lack of time for self-reflection can occur when social media engagement occupies every available moment, leaving little opportunity to consider personal thoughts, behaviors, or motivations—crucial processes for individual growth.

Participation in hazardous activities to obtain likes, shares, or positive feedback on social media platforms is increasingly prevalent. Such behavior may include performing dangerous pranks, sharing compromising content, engaging in cyberbullying, or using mobile devices while driving or in other unsafe environments.

Social media use can sometimes exacerbate symptoms of anxiety or depression. Instead of alleviating distress or enhancing mood, individuals may find themselves feeling more anxious, depressed, or lonely after online interactions.

Concerned about Social Media and Mental Health?

If you suspect that your social media usage has developed into an addiction or is contributing to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, FOMO, or isolation, the strategies outlined below can assist you in modifying your habits and reshaping your social media engagement:

Step 1: Reduce Time Online

A 2018 University of Pennsylvania study demonstrated that limiting social media exposure to 30 minutes per day significantly decreased feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep difficulties, and FOMO. Even if such a reduction is not feasible, being more mindful of social media usage can yield notable improvements in mood and concentration.

While a target of 30 minutes daily may be challenging for many, reducing smartphone usage and overall time spent on social media remains beneficial. Consider implementing the following recommendations:

- Utilize an application to monitor daily social media activity, then set goals for incremental reductions.
- Power off devices during specific periods, such as while driving, attending meetings, exercising, dining, spending time offline with friends, or playing with children. Avoid bringing devices into private spaces such as bathrooms.



- Refrain from taking mobile devices to bed; instead, power them down and charge them in another room overnight.
- Deactivate social media notifications to minimize distractions and facilitate greater control over time and attention.
- Gradually reduce checking frequency, for example, begin by limiting checks to every 15 minutes and progressively increase intervals, aided by applications that restrict access.
- Remove social media applications from smartphones, opting to access them via tablets or computers. Alternatively, remove one application at a time and evaluate its absence.

Step 2: Change Your Focus

Many people engage with social media routinely or to occupy brief moments of inactivity. By evaluating your intentions when accessing these platforms, you can decrease usage and enhance the quality of your experience, thus avoiding several detrimental effects. Your social media experience varies purposeful use, like finding information or connecting with loved ones, is quite different from logging in out of boredom or to check for likes and updates.

Before accessing social media, it is advisable to pause and consider the reasons for doing so.

Reflect on whether social media use is serving as a replacement for real-life experiences. Consider if there are healthier alternatives; for instance, inviting a friend for coffee may address feelings of loneliness, while engaging in physical activity such as walking or visiting a gym can help alleviate symptoms of depression. Pursuing a new hobby can effectively address boredom. While social media offers convenience and immediacy, alternative methods may provide more meaningful and beneficial outcomes. Value whether your engagement with social media is active or passive. Passive consumption, such as scrolling through posts or following others' interactions without participation, does not foster genuine connection and may increase feelings of isolation. Conversely, actively participating tends to facilitate greater interaction and engagement with others.



If social media makes you feel inadequate or dissatisfied, try focusing on your achievements and strengths—listing them can help during tough times. Remember, online profiles rarely show the whole truth; everyone faces challenges and disappointments, whether they share them publicly.

Step 3: Dedicate More Time to Offline Relationships

Meaningful in-person interactions are essential for well-being. While social media can facilitate real-world connections, it is important not to let virtual relationships supplant genuine face-to-face friendships. There are numerous strategies to establish substantive connections without depending on digital platforms.

Schedule regular offline engagements with friends and family each week. Aim for consistent gatherings during which phones remain off to encourage quality interaction.

If personal connections have been overlooked, consider contacting a former acquaintance or an online contact to arrange an in-person meeting. For those with demanding schedules, suggest combining errands or participating in exercise together.

Participate in clubs or groups aligned with your interests, hobbies, or fitness pursuits, fostering a sense of community among like-minded individuals who meet routinely.

Social discomfort should not deter efforts to forge relationships. Even those who experience shyness may benefit from proven approaches to overcoming insecurity and developing friendships.

For individuals feeling isolated, initiate contact with acquaintances. Many people share apprehensions about forming new friendships; taking the first step by inviting a colleague to lunch or asking a neighbor or classmate for coffee can help build rapport.

Engage with unfamiliar individuals. By looking up from screens and interacting with those encountered in public spaces—such as transportation, coffee shops, or stores—even simple gestures like a smile or greeting can uplift one's mood and potentially lead to new connections.



Step 4: Express Gratitude

Taking time to reflect and express gratitude for various aspects of life may help counteract negative feelings sometimes associated with social media.

Consider maintaining a gratitude journal or using an app to record positive experiences and important people or events. Individuals who frequently share negative posts might choose to express gratitude privately rather than publicly on social media platforms.

Practice mindfulness. The tendency to experience FOMO (fear of missing out) and to compare oneself to others on social media can contribute to dissatisfaction and frustration. By practicing mindfulness, it is possible to focus more on the present moment and potentially lessen these negative effects.

Help other people or animals.

Helping a child or teen with unhealthy social media use

If there is concern about a child's social media usage, removing their devices may not be the most effective solution and could disrupt their social interactions. Alternative approaches may assist children in using platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram more responsibly.

Monitor and limit your child's social media use. Understanding how a child interacts online allows for identification and management of potential concerns. Parental control apps can set limits on data usage and restrict phone access during certain hours. Adjusting privacy settings may reduce exposure to inappropriate content or contact.

Discuss underlying issues with your child. Excessive social media use may indicate other challenges, such as difficulties at school, shyness, social anxiety, or stress from home environments.

Establish regular breaks from social media. For example, social media access might be withheld until homework is completed, or phones could be restricted during meals, before bedtime, and during family activities. Shutting off devices at least one hour prior to sleep may help prevent sleep disruptions.



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Educate your child about social media's limitations as a reflection of reality. It is important for them to understand that online profiles often highlight selected aspects of life, and images or posts may be manipulated.

Exercise is beneficial for managing anxiety and stress.

[More Information](#)

Helpful links

[Study](#) – Details study linking time spent on social media with decreased wellbeing. (Penn Today, University of Pennsylvania)

[Impact](#) – Briefing paper analyzing the impact of social media. (Centre for Mental Health)

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