

Social Media and Teens: How Does Social Media Affect Teenagers’

Mental Health?

Teenagers can use social media to find community, but their mental health is often negatively affected by this culture of comparison

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The verdict is still out on whether social media is damaging to the mental health of teens. This is in part due to the lack of research. Some studies show that online connections with small groups of people can be beneficial to teens, while other research points to a rise in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

The other reason it’s difficult to get a good read on the issue is that social media is constantly changing and evolving. Plus, no long-term studies have been completed. So, we’re left making educated guesses based on current research. There’s just not enough data to back up the potential long-term pros and cons of living on “likes”.

SMALL STUDIES, WORRISOME RESULTS

One study out of the University of Pittsburgh, for example, found a correlation between time spent scrolling through social media apps and negative body image feedback. Those who had spent more time on social media had 2.2 times the risk of reporting eating and body image concerns, compared to their peers who spent less time on social media. The participants who spent the most time on social media had 2.6 times the risk.¹

Results from a separate study from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine showed that the more time young adults spent on social media, the more likely they were to have problems sleeping and report symptoms of depression.²

And another small study of teens ages 13-18 from the UCLA Brain Mapping Center found that receiving a high number of likes on photos showed increased activity in the reward center of the brain. Further, teens are influenced to like photos, regardless of content, based on high numbers of likes.³ Bottom line: It feels good to be “liked” and herd mentality is big on social media. Like what others like and you’re in.

THE UPSIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR TEENS

There are some positive aspects to social media. It’s important to remember that teens are hardwired for socialization, and social media makes socializing easy and immediate. Teens who struggle with social skills, social anxiety, or who don’t have easy access to face-to-face

socializing with other teens might benefit from connecting with other teens through social media.

Teens in marginalized groups—including LGBTQ teens and teens struggling with mental health issues—can find support and friendship through use of social media. When teens connect with small groups of supportive teens via social media, those connections can be the difference between living in isolation and finding support.

THE DOWNSIDE SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY TEENS

Read enough of the current research and you'll find that the negatives tend to feel bigger than the positives. While teens can use social media to connect and create friendships with others, they also confront cyberbullying, trolls, toxic comparisons, sleep deprivation, and less frequent face-to-face interactions, to name a few.

Too much time spent scrolling through social media can result in symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. Here's how social media can be destructive:

- **Focusing on likes:** The need to gain “likes” on social media can cause teens to make choices they would otherwise not make, including altering their appearance, engaging in negative behaviors, and accepting risky social media challenges.
- **Cyberbullying:** Teens girls in particular are at risk of cyberbullying through use of social media, but teen boys are not immune. Cyberbullying is associated with depression, anxiety, and an elevated risk of suicidal thoughts.
- **Making comparisons:** Though many teens know that their peers share only their highlight reels on social media, it's very difficult to avoid making comparisons. Everything from physical appearance to life circumstances to perceived successes and failures are under a microscope on social media.
- **Having too many fake friends:** Even with privacy settings in place, teens can collect thousands of friends through friends of friends on social media. The more people on the friend list, the more people have access to screenshot photos, Snaps, and updates and use them for other purposes. There is no privacy on social media.
- **Less face time:** Social interaction skills require daily practice, even for teens. It's difficult to build empathy and compassion (our best weapons in the war on bullying) when teens spend more time “engaging” online than they do in person. Human connection is a powerful tool and builds skills that last a lifetime.

There's a happy medium in here somewhere. The key to helping teens learn to balance social media with real life friendships is to keep the lines of communication open and keep talking. Honest communication shows your teen that you are there to support, not to judge or lecture. It's also important to walk the walk. Disconnect on weekends and show your teen that there is a whole world out there that doesn't require a handheld screen. She may miss her phone a lot less than she thinks she will and this is a very good lesson to learn.

Why social media can be damaging for young people

Advice includes protecting your online reputation, don't give in to pressure and know where to find help.

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The highest incidence of social media use is among young people aged 16-24 where 91% using the internet for it

There should be official guidelines about how social media is used by children amid fears over how it impacts their mental health, says the Health and Social Care Secretary.

Matt Hancock said he was "very worried" by the growing evidence of the detrimental effect on the health of young people.

He has told Dame Sally Davies, the UK's chief medical officer, [to begin preparing official guidance on safe time limits](#) that would work in a similar way to safe alcohol limits.

While there are no official time limit guidelines on social media, a study last year found watching television for more than three hours each day is associated with poorer language skills in 11-year-old children.

Tips to prevent too much social media use and use it safely

The NSPCC says there is currently no common set of child safety rules or laws that social media sites have to follow. Each site gets to decide what steps they take to keep children safe.

Most social media apps have a minimum age rating of 13.

MORE FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

If a social network has set an age limit it means that some of the content may not be suitable for a younger child.

Parents are encouraged to research the social network and discuss with their children if they are mature enough to handle the type of content they may see on social platforms.

Earlier this year, WhatsApp announced a new age limit of 16 for users based in Europe.

Digital detox expert on smartphone tips

The UK Safer Internet Centre has the following tips for 11 to 19 year olds:

Protect your online reputation - Use the services provided to manage your digital footprints and think before you post. Content posted online can last forever and could be shared publicly by anyone.

Know where to find help - Understand how to report to service providers and use blocking and deleting tools. If something happens that upsets you online, it's never too late to tell someone.

Don't give in to pressure - If you lose your inhibitions you've lost control; once you've pressed send you can't take it back.

The Internet Watch Foundation has these tips for parents:

- :: Talk about online safety with your children, as soon as they have access to internet connected devices
- :: Set up parental controls and filters
- :: Make a family agreement about device usage
- :: Learn to safely live stream
- :: Teach your child when to say no
- :: See abusive content? Report it!

What can you do if you think you are addicted to social media?

Psychology Today says that if you want to check whether you may be at risk of developing an addiction to social media, ask yourself these six questions:

- :: Do you spend a lot of time thinking about social media or planning to use social media?
- :: Do you feel urges to use social media more and more?
- :: Do you use social media to forget about personal problems?
- :: Do you often try to reduce your use of social media without success?
- :: Do you become restless or troubled if you are unable to use social media?
- :: Do you use social media so much that it has had a negative impact on your job or studies?

If the answer to all six of these questions is "yes" then you may have or be developing an addiction to using social media. It said "may" because the only way this can be confirmed is through a diagnosis from a clinical psychologist or a psychiatrist.

Social media platforms had affect mental health and sleep

If you answered "yes" to a few of these questions, it is more likely that you are a habitual social media user and that what you should do is engage in 'digital detox' strategies that simply allow you to reduce the amount of time spent on social media.

This can include simple steps, such as turning off sound notifications and only allowing yourself to check your phone every 30 minutes or once an hour.

Other simple steps include having periods in the day where there is self-imposed non-screen time (such as during meal times) and leaving your smartphone in a separate room from where you sleep (just so you don't get the urge to check social media before bedtime, during the night, and when you wake up).

For the small number of individuals that are genuinely addicted to social media use, treatment is warranted.

The most successful type of treatment for online addictions appears to be cognitive behavioural therapy (a talk therapy designed to help people change the way they think and behave), although there are relatively few published studies examining its efficacy in relation to internet addictions.

Medical experts have been told to draw up guidelines for the amount of time young people spend on social media.

:: What's the problem?

Social media addiction is thought to affect around 5% of young people and has been described as more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol.

Recent studies have raised serious concerns about the potential detrimental effects of increasingly frequent social media use on young people, particularly on their mental health.

:: How can social media affect mental health?

Research suggests that young people who are heavy users of social media - spending more than two hours per day on social networking sites - are more likely to report poor mental health, including psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression).

Seeing friends constantly on holiday or enjoying nights out can make young people feel like they are missing out while others enjoy life.

These feelings can promote a "compare and despair" attitude in young people.

Individuals may look at a heavily photoshopped, edited or staged photographs and videos and compare them to their seemingly mundane lives.

The findings of a small study commissioned by Anxiety UK supported this idea and found evidence of social media feeding anxiety and increasing feelings of inadequacy.

The unrealistic expectations set by social media may leave young people with feelings of self-consciousness, low self-esteem and the pursuit of perfectionism which can manifest as anxiety disorders.

:: Social media can also affect sleep

Numerous studies have shown that increased social media use has a significant association with poor sleep quality in young people.

Using social media on phones, laptops and tablets at night before bed is also linked with poor quality sleep, even more so than regular daytime use of social media.

It is thought that the use of LED lights before sleep can interfere with and block natural processes in the brain that trigger feelings of sleepiness, as well as the release of the sleep hormone melatonin.

This means it takes longer to fall asleep and people end up getting fewer hours of sleep.

Image: Instant messaging apps can become a problem as they used for circulating bullying messages and spreading images

One in five young people say they wake up during the night to check messages on social media, according to a report.

It adds they are three times more likely to feel constantly tired at school than their classmates who don't use social media during the night.

:: Body image

Studies have shown that when young girls and women in their teens and early 20s view Facebook for only a short period of time, body image concerns are higher compared to non-users.

One study also demonstrated girls having a heightened desire to change their appearance such as face, hair and/or skin after spending time on Facebook.

Others have suggested social media is behind a rise in younger generations opting to have cosmetic surgery to look better in photos, which has implications for physical health through unnecessary invasive surgery.

:: Cyber bullying

Social media presents opportunities for bullies to continue their abuse even when not physically near an individual, says the Royal Society for Public Health .

The rise in popularity of instant messaging apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp can also become a problem as they are used for circulating bullying messages and spreading images.

Seven in 10 young people have experienced cyber bullying, with 37% of young people saying they experience cyber bullying regularly