



Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
May 2022

What to Know About Social Media and Mental Health

By Zia Sherrell, MPH

Many people in today's world live with their smartphones as virtual companions. These devices use electronic social media networks that alert users to updates on friends, favorite celebrities, and global events. Social media has become firmly integrated into a lot of people's daily lives. According to the Pew Research Center, 72% of people in the United States now use social media.

At its core, social media is a powerful communication tool that has changed how individuals interact with one another. It speeds up how people exchange and share information, thoughts, and ideas across virtual networks. However, social media does have downsides. Some evidence suggests that its use — in particular, its overuse — can negatively affect mental health in numerous ways.

Social media has associations with depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation, particularly among heavy users. A 2015 Common Sense survey found that teenagers may spend as much as 9 hours of each day online. Many of these individuals are themselves concerned that they spend too much time browsing social networks. This wave of concern suggests that social media could affect the mental health of its users.

The researchers behind a 2017 Canadian study confirmed this finding. They noted that students who use social media for more than 2 hours daily are

considerably more likely to rate their mental health as fair or poor than occasional users. A 2019 study tied social media use to disrupted and delayed sleep. Regular, high quality sleep is essential for well-being, and evidence shows that sleeping problems contribute to adverse mental health effects, such as depression and memory loss. Eventually, with healthy coping skills, stress can be managed and symptoms can be reduced.

Aside from the adverse effects on sleep, social media may trigger mental health struggles by exposing individuals to cyberbullying. In a 2020 survey of more than 6,000 individuals aged 10-18 years, researchers found that about half of them had experienced cyberbullying. One of the downsides of social media platforms is that they give individuals the opportunity to start or spread harmful rumors and use abusive words that can leave people with lasting emotional scars.

Statistics

Social media has come under a lot of criticism, with many reports connecting its use with severe consequences. National surveys and population-based studies show that the world of social media can have devastating effects on users' mental health. In the U.S. alone, survey findings show a 25% increase in suicide attempts among teenagers between 2009 and 2017.

Although social media may not play a role in each of these incidences, the time frame correlates with the growing use of these platforms. A 2021 study confirms this effect. The researchers reported that while social media use had a minimal impact on boys' risk of suicide, girls who used social media for at least 2 hours each day from the age of 13 years had a higher clinical risk of suicide as adults. Furthermore, findings from a population-based study show a decline in mental health

Continued on the next page.



in the U.S., with a 37% increase in the likelihood of major depressive episodes among adolescents. A 2019 study suggested that teenagers who use social media for more than 3 hours daily are more likely to experience mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, aggression, and antisocial behavior.

Negative effects on health

Social media may trigger feelings of inadequacy. People may feel as though their life or appearance does not compare favorably with that of others on social media, leading to feelings of envy and dissatisfaction. A 2018 study found that high social media usage increases rather than decreases feelings of loneliness. It also reported that reducing social media use helps people feel less lonely and isolated and improves their well-being. Additionally, social media can facilitate cyberbullying and create unhealthy self-centeredness and distance from friends and family.

Positive effects

Despite its drawbacks, social media remains an efficient means of connecting communities and individuals across the world. Social media-based networking among small groups of people is beneficial for many. Through social media, youngsters who struggle with social skills and anxiety can express themselves and socialize. It can be particularly advantageous for marginalized groups, such as LGBTQIA+ communities, as it enables people to meet and interact with other like-minded individuals. Social media also serves as a platform that gives a voice to the voiceless. For example, people who have been subject to violence and abuse can use communities such as the #MeToo community to air their views, talk about what they are facing, and find support. Social media can also educate and inform and provide an outlet for creativity and self-expression.

Linked conditions

Unregulated social media leads to a constant fear of missing out, which many refer to as FOMO. People may feel as though others are having more fun than them, which can affect self-esteem and cause mental health issues. Individuals may compulsively check their phones at the cost of missing sleep or choose social media

over in-person relationships or meetups. Additionally, prioritizing social media networking over physical and social interactions increases the chances of mood disorders such as anxiety and depression.

Managing the effects

An individual can make their use of social media positive by:

- Turning off a smartphone's data connectivity at certain times of the day, such as while driving, at work, or in meetings
- Turning off data connectivity while spending time with friends and family
- Leaving the smartphone out of reach while sleeping
- Turning off notifications to make it easier to resist the distracting beeps or vibrations
- Limiting social media use to a computer rather than a smartphone

Preventing negative effects

People can help themselves avoid some of the adverse effects of social media by limiting use to 30 minutes a day, in turn reducing FOMO and the associated negative consequences. By being more conscious of the amount of time they spend on social media, a person may notice improvements in their general mood, focus, and overall mental health.

References:

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/social-media-and-mental-health>