

Social Media and Mental Health

While many of us enjoy staying connected on social media, excessive use can fuel feelings of addiction, anxiety, depression, isolation, and FOMO. Here's how to modify your habits and improve your mood.

The role social media plays in mental health

Human beings are social creatures. We need the companionship of others to thrive in life, and the strength of our connections has a huge impact on our mental health and happiness. Being socially connected to others can ease stress, anxiety, and depression, boost self-worth, provide comfort and joy, prevent loneliness, and even add years to your life. On the flip side, lacking strong social connections can pose a serious risk to your mental and emotional health.

In today's world, many of us rely on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram to find and connect with each other. While each has its benefits, it's important to remember that social media can never be a replacement for real-world human connection. It requires in-person contact with others to trigger the hormones that alleviate stress and make you feel happier, healthier, and more positive. Ironically for a technology that's designed to bring people closer together, spending too much time engaging with social media can actually make you feel more lonely and isolated—and exacerbate mental health problems such as [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

If you're spending an excessive amount of time on social media and feelings of sadness, dissatisfaction, frustration, or [loneliness](#) are impacting your life, it may be time to re-examine your online habits and find a healthier balance.

The positive aspects 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 enables you to:

- Communicate and stay up to date with family and friends around the world.
- Find new friends and communities; network with other people who share similar interests or ambitions.
- Join or promote worthwhile causes; raise awareness on important issues.
- Seek or offer emotional support during tough times.
- Find vital social connection if you live in a remote area, for example, or have limited independence, social anxiety, or are part of a marginalized group.
- Find an outlet for your creativity and self-expression.
- Discover (with care) sources of valuable information and learning.

The negative aspects of social media

Since it's a relatively new technology, there's little research to establish the long-term consequences, good or bad, of social media use. However, multiple studies have found a strong link between heavy social media and an increased risk for depression, anxiety, loneliness, [self-harm](#), and even [suicidal thoughts](#).

Social media may promote negative experiences such as:

- *Inadequacy about your life or appearance.* Even if you know that images you're viewing on social media are manipulated, they can still make you feel insecure about how you look or what's going on in your own life. Similarly, we're all aware that other people tend to share just the highlights of their lives, rarely the low points that everyone experiences. But that doesn't lessen those feelings of envy and dissatisfaction when you're

scrolling through a friend's airbrushed photos of their tropical beach holiday or reading about their exciting new promotion at work.

- *Fear of missing out (FOMO) and social media addiction.* While FOMO has been around far longer than social media, sites such as Facebook and Instagram seem to exacerbate feelings that others are having more fun or living better lives than you are. The idea that you're missing out on certain things can impact your self-esteem, trigger anxiety, and fuel even greater social media use, much like an addiction. FOMO can compel you to pick up your phone every few minutes to check for updates, or compulsively respond to each and every alert—even if that means taking risks while you're driving, missing out on sleep at night, or prioritizing social media interaction over real world relationships.
- *Isolation.* A study at the University of Pennsylvania found that high usage of Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram *increases* rather than *decreases* [feelings of loneliness](#). Conversely, the study found that reducing social media usage can actually make you feel *less* lonely and isolated and improve your overall wellbeing.
- *Depression and anxiety.* Human beings need face-to-face contact to be mentally healthy. Nothing reduces stress and boosts your mood faster or more effectively than eye-to-eye contact with someone who cares about you. The more you prioritize social media interaction over in-person relationships, the more you're at risk for developing or exacerbating mood disorders such as anxiety and [depression](#).
- *Cyberbullying.* About 10 percent of teens report [being bullied](#) on social media and many other users are subjected to offensive comments. Social media platforms such as Twitter can be hotspots for spreading hurtful rumors, lies, and abuse that can leave lasting emotional scars.
- *Self-absorption.* Sharing endless selfies and all your innermost thoughts on social media can create an unhealthy self-centeredness and distance you from real-life connections.

What's driving your social media use?

These days, most of us access social media via our smartphones or tablets. While this makes it very convenient to keep in touch, it also means that social media is always accessible. This round-the-clock, hyper connectivity can trigger impulse control problems, the constant alerts and notifications affecting your concentration and focus, disturbing your sleep, and making you [a slave to your phone](#).

Social media platforms are designed to snare your attention, keep you online, and have you repeatedly checking your screen for updates. It's how the companies make money. But, much like a gambling compulsion or an addiction to nicotine, alcohol, or drugs, social media use can create psychological cravings. When you receive a like, a share, or a favorable reaction to a post, it can trigger the release of dopamine in the brain, the same "reward" chemical that follows winning on a slot machine, taking a bite of chocolate, or lighting up a cigarette, for example. The more you're rewarded, the more time you want to spend on social media, even if it becomes detrimental to other aspects of your life.

Other causes of unhealthy social media use

A fear of missing out (FOMO) can keep you returning to social media over and over again. Even though there are very few things that can't wait or need an immediate response, FOMO will have you believing otherwise. Perhaps you're worried that you'll be left out of the conversation at school or work if you miss the latest news or gossip on social media? Or maybe you feel that your relationships will suffer if you don't immediately like, share, or respond to other people's posts? Or you could be worried you'll miss out on an invitation or that other people are having a better time than you.

Many of us use social media as a "security blanket". Whenever we're in a social situation and feel anxious, awkward, or lonely, we turn to our phones and log on to social media. Of course, interacting with social media only denies you the face-to-face interaction that can [help to ease anxiety](#).

Your heavy social media use could be masking other underlying problems, such as stress, depression, or boredom. If you spend more time on social media when you're feeling down, lonely, or bored, you may be using it as a way to distract

yourself from unpleasant feelings or self-soothe your moods. While it can be difficult at first, allowing yourself to feel can open you up to finding healthier ways to [manage your moods](#).

The vicious cycle of unhealthy social media use

Excessive social media use can create a negative, self-perpetuating cycle:

1. When you feel lonely, depressed, anxious, or stressed, you use social media more often—as a way to relieve boredom or feel connected to others.
2. Using social media more often, though, increases FOMO and feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and isolation.
3. In turn, these feelings negatively affect your mood and worsen symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.
4. These worsening symptoms cause you to use social media even more, and so the downward spiral continues.

Signs that social media is impacting your mental health

Everyone is different and there is no specific amount of time spent on social media, or the frequency you check for updates, or the number of posts you make that indicates your use is becoming unhealthy. Rather, it has to do with the impact time spent on social media has on your mood and other aspects of your life, along with your motivations for using it.

For example, your social media use may be problematic if it causes you to neglect face-to-face relationships, distracts you from work or school, or leaves you feeling envious, angry, or depressed. Similarly, if you're motivated to use social media just because you're bored or lonely, or want to post something to make others jealous or upset, it may be time to reassess your social media habits.

Indicators that social media may be adversely affecting your mental health include:

- *Spending more time on social media than with real world friends.* Using social media has become a substitute for a lot of your offline social interaction. Even if you're out with friends, you still feel the need to constantly check social media, often driven by feelings that others may be having more fun than you.
- *Comparing yourself unfavorably with others on social media.* You have low self-esteem or negative body image. You may even have patterns of disordered eating.
- *Experiencing cyberbullying.* Or you worry that you have no control over the things people post about you.
- *Being distracted at school or work.* You feel pressure to post regular content about yourself, get comments or likes on your posts, or respond quickly and enthusiastically to friends' posts.
- *Having no time for self-reflection.* Every spare moment is filled by engaging with social media, leaving you little or no time for reflecting on who you are, what you think, or why you act the way that you do—the things that allow you to grow as a person.
- *Engaging in risky behavior in order to gain likes, shares, or positive reactions on social media.* You play dangerous pranks, post embarrassing material, cyberbully others, or access your phone while driving or in other unsafe situations.
- *Suffering from sleep problems.* Do you check social media last thing at night, first thing in the morning, or even when you wake up in the night? The light from phones and other devices can [disrupt your sleep](#), which in turn can have a serious impact on your mental health.
- *Worsening symptoms of anxiety or depression.* Rather than helping to alleviate negative feelings and boost your mood, you feel more anxious, depressed, or lonely after using social media.

Modifying social media use to improve mental health

Step 1: Reduce time online

A 2018 University of Pennsylvania study found that reducing social media use to 30 minutes a day resulted in a significant reduction in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep problems, and FOMO. But you don't need to cut back on your social media use that drastically to improve your mental health. The same study concluded that just being more mindful of your social media use can have beneficial results on your mood and focus.

While 30 minutes a day may not be a realistic target for many of us—let alone a full “social media detox”— we can still benefit from reducing the amount of time we spend on social media. For most of us, that means reducing how much we use our smartphones. The following tips can help:

- Use an app to track how much time you spend on social media each day. Then set a goal for how much you want to reduce it by.
- Turn off your phone at certain times of the day, such as when you're driving, in a meeting, at the gym, having dinner, spending time with offline friends, or playing with your kids. Don't take your phone with you to the bathroom.
- Don't bring your phone or tablet to bed. Turn devices off and leave them in another room overnight to charge.
- Disable social media notifications. It's hard to resist the constant buzzing, beeping, and dinging of your phone alerting you to new messages. Turning off notifications can help you regain control of your time and focus.
- Limit checks. If you compulsively check your phone every few minutes, wean yourself off by limiting your checks to once every 15 minutes. Then once every 30 minutes, then once an hour. There are apps that can automatically limit when you're able to access your phone.
- Try removing social media apps from your phone so you can only check Facebook, Twitter and the like from your tablet or computer. If this sounds like too drastic a step, try removing one social media app at a time to see how much you really miss it.
- For more tips on reducing your overall phone use, read *Smartphone Addiction*.

Step 2: Change your focus

Many of us access social media purely out of habit or to mindlessly kill moments of downtime. But by focusing on your motivation for logging on, you can not only reduce the time you spend on social media, you can also improve your experience and avoid many of the negative aspects.

If you're accessing social media to find specific information, check on a friend who's been ill, or share new photos of your kids with family, for example, your experience is likely to be very different than if you're logging on simply because you're bored, you want to see how many likes you got from a previous post, or to check if you're missing out on something.

Next time you go to access social media, pause for a moment and clarify your motivation for doing so.

- *Are you using social media as a substitute for real life?* Is there a healthier substitute for your social media use? If you're lonely, for example, invite a friend out for coffee instead. Feeling depressed? Take a walk or go to the gym. Bored? Take up a new hobby. Social media may be quick and convenient, but there are often healthier, more effective ways to satisfy a craving.
- *Are you an active or a passive user on social media?* Passively scrolling through posts or anonymously following the interaction of others on social media doesn't provide any meaningful sense of connection. It may even increase feelings of isolation. Being an active participant, though, will offer you more engagement with others.
- *Does social media leave you feeling inadequate or disappointed about your life?* You can counter symptoms of FOMO by focusing on what you have, rather than what you lack. Make a list of all the positive aspects of your life and read it back when you feel you're missing out on something better. And remember: no one's life is ever as perfect as it seems on social media. We all deal with heartache, self-doubt, and disappointment, even if we choose not to share it online.

Step 3: Spend more time with offline friends

We all need the face-to-face company of others to be happy and healthy. At its best, social media is a great tool for facilitating real-life connections. But if you've allowed virtual connections to replace real-life friendships in your life, there are plenty of ways to build meaningful connections without relying on social media.

- Set aside time each week to interact offline with friends and family. Try to make it a regular get-together where you always keep your phones off.
- If you've neglected face-to-face friendships, reach out to an old friend (or an online friend) and arrange to meet up. If you both lead busy lives, offer to run errands or exercise together.
- Join a club. Find a hobby, creative endeavor, or fitness activity you enjoy and join a group of like-minded individuals that meet on a regular basis.
- Don't let social awkwardness stand in the way. Even if you're shy, there are proven techniques to overcome insecurity and build friendships.
- If you don't feel that you have anyone to spend time with, reach out to acquaintances. Lots of other people feel just as uncomfortable about making new friends as you do—so be the one to break the ice. Invite a coworker out for lunch or ask a neighbor or classmate to join you for coffee.
- Interact with strangers. Look up from your screen and connect with people you cross paths with on public transport, at the coffee shop, or in the grocery store. Simply smiling or saying hello will improve how you feel—and you never know where it may lead.

Step 4: Express gratitude

Feeling and expressing gratitude about the important things in your life can be a welcome relief to the resentment, animosity, and discontent sometimes generated by social media.

- *Take time for reflection.* Try keeping a gratitude journal or using a gratitude app. Keep track of all the great memories and positives in your life—as well as those things and people you'd miss if they were suddenly absent from your life. If you're more prone to venting or negative posts, you can even express your gratitude on social media—although you may benefit more from private reflection that isn't subject to the scrutiny of others.
- *Practice mindfulness.* Experiencing FOMO and comparing yourself unfavorably to others keeps you dwelling on life's disappointments and frustrations. Instead of being fully engaged in the present, you're focused on the "what ifs" and the "if onlys" that prevent you from having a life that matches those you see on social media. By practicing mindfulness, you can learn to live more in the present moment, lessen the impact of FOMO, and improve your overall mental wellbeing.
- *Volunteer.* Just as human beings are hard-wired to seek social connection, we're also hard-wired to give to others. Helping other people or animals not only enriches your community and benefits a cause that's important to you, but it also makes you feel happier and more grateful.

Helping a child or teen with unhealthy social media use

Childhood and the teenage years can be filled with developmental challenges and social pressures. For some kids, social media has a way of exacerbating those problems and fueling anxiety, bullying, depression, and issues with self-esteem. If you're worried about your child's social media use, it can be tempting to simply confiscate their phone or other device. But that can create further problems, separating your child from their friends and the positive aspects of social media. Instead, there are other ways to help your child use Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms in a more responsible way.

- *Monitor and limit your child's social media use.* The more you know about how your child is interacting on social media, the better you'll be able to address any problems. Parental control apps can help limit your child's data usage or restrict their phone use to certain times of the day. You can also adjust privacy settings on the different platforms to limit their potential exposure to bullies or predators.

- *Talk to your child about underlying issues.* Problems with social media use can often mask deeper issues. Is your child having problems fitting in at school? Are they suffering from shyness or social anxiety? Are problems at home causing them stress?
- *Enforce “social media” breaks.* For example, you could ban social media until your child has completed their homework in the evening, not allow phones at the dinner table or in their bedroom, and plan family activities that preclude the use of phones or other devices. To prevent sleep problems, always insist phones are turned off at least one hour before bed.
- *Teach your child how social media is not an accurate reflection of people’s lives.* They shouldn’t compare themselves or their lives negatively to others on social media. People only post what they want others to see. Images are manipulated or carefully posed and selected. And having fewer friends on social media doesn’t make your child less popular or less worthy.
- *Encourage exercise and offline interests.* Get your child away from social media by encouraging them to pursue physical activities and hobbies that involve real-world interaction. Exercise is great for relieving anxiety and stress, boosting self-esteem, and improving mood—and is something you can do as a family. The more engaged your child is offline, the less their mood and sense of self-worth will be dependent on how many friends, likes, or shares they have on social media.