



THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN USER HEALTH

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Abstract: Human beings are social creatures. We need the company of others to thrive in life, and the power of our connections has a huge impact on our mental health and happiness. Being socially connected to others can alleviate stress, anxiety and depression, increase self-esteem, provide comfort and joy, prevent loneliness and even add years to your life. On the other hand, the lack of 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 like 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 substitute for real-world human connection. It takes personal contact with others to trigger the hormones that relieve 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 interacting with social media can make you feel lonelier and more isolated — and exacerbate mental health issues like anxiety and depression. If you spend an excessive amount of time on social media and feelings of sadness, dissatisfaction, frustration or loneliness are affecting your life, it may be time to re-examine your online habits and find a healthier balance.

Key words: Fear of missing out, isolation, mental health, social media, virtual interaction.

1. 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 it can help you stay connected and support your well-being.

Social media allows you to [1]:

- Communicate and stay updated with family and friends around the world.
- Find new friends and communities; network with other people who share similar interests or ambitions.
- Promote or join worthy causes - raising awareness of important issues.
- Seek or provide emotional support during difficult times.
- Find a 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 creativity and self-expression.
- Discover (carefully) valuable sources of information and learning.

The negative aspects of social media

Because it is a relatively new technology, there is little research to determine the long-term consequences,

good or bad, of social media use. However, several studies have found a strong link between heavy social media and an increased risk of depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm and even suicidal thoughts.

Social media can promote negative experiences such as [2]:

1. *Inadequacy about your life or appearance.* Even if you know that the images you see 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 are all aware that other people tend to share only the highlights of their lives, rarely the low points that everyone experiences. But that doesn't lessen those feelings of envy and resentment when you scroll through a friend's airbrushed photos of their tropical beach vacation or read about their exciting new promotion at work.

2. *Fear of missing out (FOMO) and social media addiction.* While FOMO exists much longer than social media, sites like Facebook and Instagram seem to exacerbate feelings that others are having more fun or living a better life than you. The idea that you're getting away with things can hurt your self-esteem, trigger



anxiety, and fuel even more social media use, just like an addiction. FOMO can compel you to pick up your phone every few minutes to check updates or compulsively respond to every alert — even if that means taking risks while driving, losing sleep at night, or prioritizing social media interaction. on real-world relationships.

3. *Isolation.* A study from the University of Pennsylvania found that heavy use of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram increases, rather decreases, feelings of loneliness. Instead, the study found that reducing your use of social media can actually make you feel less lonely and isolated and improve your overall well-being.

4. *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 personal relationships, the more at risk you are for developing or worsening mood disorders such as anxiety and depression.

5. *Cyberbullying.* About 10% of teenagers report being bullied on social media and many more users are subjected to offensive comments. Social media platforms like Twitter can be hotspots for the spread of rumors, lies and hurtful abuse that can leave lasting emotional scars.

6. *Self-absorption.* Sharing endless selfies and all of your innermost thoughts on social media can create unhealthy self-centeredness and distance you from real-life connections.

2. WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO USE SOCIAL NETWORKS?

These days, most of us access social media via smartphones or tablets. While this is very easy to do and will help you stay in touch, it also means that social media is always accessible. This 24/7 hyper-connectivity can trigger impulse control issues, constant alerts and notifications that affect your focus and concentration, disrupt your sleep and make you a slave to your phone.

Social media platforms are designed to capture your attention, keep you online and repeatedly check your screen for updates. This is how companies make money. But like a gambling compulsion or an addiction to nicotine, alcohol or drugs, social media use can create psychological cravings. When you get a like, share, or favorable reaction to a post, it can trigger the release of dopamine in your brain, the same "reward" chemical you're about to win a slot machine, grab a bite of chocolate, or light up, pick up a cigarette, for example. The more rewarded you are, the more time you want to spend on social media, even if it becomes detrimental to other aspects of your life.

3. OTHER CAUSES OF UNHEALTHY USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

A fear of missing out (FOMO) can keep you coming back to social media again and again. Even though there are very few things that can't wait or need an immediate response, FOMO will have you believe otherwise [2].

Maybe you're worried that you'll be left out of the conversation at school or work if you miss the latest news or social media gossip? Or maybe you feel like your relationships will suffer if you don't immediately like, share, or reply to other people's posts?

Or you might be worried about missing out on an invitation or that other people feel better than you. Many of us use social media as a "security blanket". Whenever we are in a social situation and feel anxious, embarrassed, or lonely, we turn to our phones and connect to social

media. Of course, interacting with social media only denies you the face-to-face interaction that can help alleviate anxiety.

Heavy social media use could mask 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 calm your mood.

Although it can be difficult at first, allowing yourself to feel can open you up to finding healthier ways to manage your mood.

The Vicious Cycle of Unhealthy Social Media Use Excessive social media use can create a self-perpetuating negative cycle:

1. When you're feeling lonely, depressed, anxious, or stressed, you use social media more often — as a way to escape boredom or feel connected to others.

2. Using social media more often, however, 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.

4. SIGNS THAT SOCIAL MEDIA IS AFFECTING YOUR HEALTH

Everyone is different, and there's no set amount of time you spend on social media, or how often 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 your time on social media has on your mood and other aspects of your life, along with your motivations for using it.

For example, using social media can 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 only motivated to use social media



because you're bored or lonely, or you want to post something to make others jealous or angry, it may be time to reevaluate your social media habits.

Indicators that social media may be negatively affecting your health include [3]:

1. Spend more time on social media than with real-world friends. Using social media has become a substitute for much of your offline social interaction. Even if you go out with friends, you still feel the need to constantly check social media, often driven by feelings that others can have more fun than you.

2. Comparing yourself unfavorably to others on social media. You have low self-esteem or a negative body image. You may even have disordered eating patterns.

3. Face cyberbullying. Or you worry that you have no control over the things people post about you.

4. 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.

5. Not having time for self-reflection. Every free moment is filled with social media interaction, leaving little or no time to reflect on who you are, what you believe, or why you behave the way you do—the things that allow you to grow as a person.

6. Engaging in risky behavior to get likes, shares or positive reactions on social media. Make dangerous pranks, post embarrassing material, cyberbully others, or access your phone while driving or in other unsafe situations.

7. You suffer from sleep problems. Do you check social media last thing at night, first thing in the morning or even when you wake up at night? Light from phones and other devices can disrupt your sleep, which in turn can have a serious impact on your mental health.

8. Worsening of symptoms of anxiety or depression. Instead of helping to alleviate negative feelings and boost your mood, you feel more anxious, depressed or lonely after using social media.

5. CHANGING SOCIAL MEDIA USE TO IMPROVE HEALTH

Step 1: Reduce online time.

A 2018 study by the University of Pennsylvania 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 have to drastically reduce your social media usage to improve your mental health. The same study concluded that just being more mindful of social media use can have beneficial effects on mood and focus.

While 30 minutes a day may not be a realistic target for many of us, we can still benefit from reducing the time we spend on social media. For most of us, that means cutting back on how much we use our smartphones. The following tips may help [4]:

a. 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.

b. Turn off your phone at certain times of the day, such as when you're driving, in a meeting, at the gym, eating dinner, hanging out with friends offline, or playing with your kids. Don't take your phone with you to the bathroom.

c. Don't bring your phone or tablet to bed. Turn off the devices and leave them in another room overnight to charge.

d. Turn off social media notifications. It's hard to resist the constant buzzing, beeping, and beeping of your phone alerting you to new messages. Turning off notifications can help you regain control of your time and focus.

e. Border checks. If you're compulsively checking your phone every few minutes, eliminate yourself 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 can access your phone.

f. Try removing social media apps from your phone so you can only check Facebook, Twitter and the like from your tablet or computer. If that seems like too drastic a step, try removing one social media app at a time to see how much you miss it.

Step 2: Change your focus.

Many of us go on social media just out of habit or to mindlessly kill downtime. But by focusing on the motivation to connect, you can not only reduce the time you spend on social media, but you can improve your experience and avoid many of the negative aspects.

If you go to social media to find specific information, check in on a friend who's been sick, or share new photos of your kids and family, for example, your experience is likely to be very different than if you connect simply because you -you're bored, want to see how many likes you got from a previous post or check if you missed something.

The next time you access social media, pause for a moment and clarify your motivation for doing so.

Do you use social media as a substitute for real life?

Is there a healthier substitute for using social media?

If you are alone, for example, invite a friend for coffee.

Are you feeling depressed? Take a walk or go to the gym.

Bored? Take up a new hobby.

Social media can be quick and convenient, but there are often healthier and more effective ways to satisfy a craving.

Are you an active or passive social media user? Passively scrolling through posts or anonymously watching others interact on social media provides no meaningful sense of connection. It can even increase



feelings of isolation. Being an active participant, however, will give you more engagement with others.

Does social media leave you feeling inadequate or disappointed in your life? You can counteract the 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 like you're missing out on something better. And remember: no one's life is ever as perfect as it looks on social media.

We all deal with heartache, self-doubt, and disappointment, even if we choose not to share them 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 to facilitate 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 casual date where you always keep your phones off.

If you've been neglecting 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 clubs. Find a hobby, creative endeavor, or fitness activity that you enjoy and join a group of people who meet regularly.

Don't let social reactions get in the way. Even if you're shy, there are proven techniques to overcome insecurities and build friendships.

If you don't feel like you have someone to spend time with, reach out to acquaintances. Many other people are just as uncomfortable making new friends as you are – so be the one to break the ice. Invite a colleague to lunch or ask a neighbor or classmate to join you for coffee.

Interact with strangers. Look up from your screen and connect with the people you cross paths with on public transport, at the coffee shop or in the grocery store. Simply smiling or saying hello will improve the way you feel – and you never know where it might lead [5].

Step 4: Express gratitude.

Feeling and expressing gratitude for the important things in your life can be a welcome relief from the resentment, animosity, and dissatisfaction that social media sometimes breeds.

Take time for reflection. Try keeping a gratitude journal or using a gratitude app. Keep track of all the great memories and positive aspects of your life, as well as those things and people you would miss if they suddenly disappeared 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.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Experiencing FOMO and comparing yourself unfavorably to others causes you to dwell on life's disappointments and frustrations. Instead of being fully engaged in the present, you're focused on the "what ifs" and "if only" that prevent you from having a life that matches the ones you see on social media. By keeping your mind occupied, you can learn to live more in the present moment, reduce the impact of FOMO, and improve your overall mental well-being.

Voluntary. Just as human beings are ready to seek social connection, we are also ready to give to others. Helping other people or animals not only enriches your community and benefits a cause that is important to you, but also makes you feel happier and more grateful.

The most affected by the use of social networks are children.

Help a child or teen with unhealthy social media use.

Encourage offline exercise and interests.

Get them 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 it's something you can do as a family.

The more engaged they are offline, the less their mood and sense of self-worth will depend on how many friends, likes or shares they have on social media.

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