

Social Media and Mental Health

Tutor's Handbook



ON CALL

Lay Community Health Advisors

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Social Media and Mental Health – What’s the Problem?

We all know that social media has many benefits. It allows us to connect with friends and family when they don't live close to us. It also allows us to share the milestones of our lives, and also some photos of our last holiday, with friends and colleagues in our network; and it offers great cost-effective marketing tools for entrepreneurs and larger businesses.

Despite all of these benefits, doctors are researching our relationship with social media, and are finding that how we use social media may be unhealthy and is affecting our mental health and wellbeing.

The American Academy of Paediatrics has warned about the potential for negative effects of social media in young kids and teens, including cyber-bullying and "Facebook depression." The following section describes in detail some of the main negative effects that social media can cause for our mental health and general sense of wellbeing.

- **Social Media Addiction:**

Do you ever find yourself mindlessly scrolling through your news feed, without even realising that you have picked up your phone and opened the app in the first place? If you have done this, it may be a

sign that you are using social media too much.

Research conducted into the issue by Nottingham Trent University states that "it may be plausible to speak specifically of 'Facebook Addiction Disorder'...because addiction criteria, such as neglect of personal life, mental preoccupation, escapism, mood modifying experiences, tolerance and concealing the addictive behaviour, appear to be present in some people who use [social networks] excessively."

Like all addictions, when you try to stop using social media, people have been known to show symptoms of withdrawal.

A study a few years ago from Swansea University found that people experienced the psychological symptoms of withdrawal when they stopped using (this went for all internet use, not just social media). Study author Phil Reed said, "We have known for some time that people who are over-dependent on digital devices report feelings of anxiety when they are stopped from using them, but now we can see that these psychological effects are accompanied by actual physiological changes."

- Social Media can be a Trigger for Poor Mental Health:

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that the more frequently we use social media, the less happy we seem to be and so from this we can deduce that social media can be a trigger for poor mental health.

Research supports that “Facebook use is linked to both less moment-to-moment happiness and less life satisfaction—the more people used Facebook in a day, the more these two variables dropped off.” This study suggests that the reason for this may be a type of social isolation that the Facebook environment creates:

“On the surface,” the authors write, “Facebook provides an invaluable resource for fulfilling such needs by allowing people to instantly connect. Rather than enhancing well-being, as frequent interactions with supportive ‘offline’ social networks powerfully do, the current findings demonstrate that interacting with Facebook may predict the opposite result for young adults—it may undermine it.”

Furthermore, an article published in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine found that social media is in fact linked to greater feelings of social isolation. The researchers evaluated how much people used eleven social media sites and compared these findings to their overall

sense of wellbeing and their ‘perceived social isolation’. This study focused on the use of the following social networks: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Vine, Snapchat and Reddit. Through this analysis, the study found that the more time the research subjects spent on social media, the more likely they were to suffer from social isolation.

- Tendency to Compare our Lives against Others’:

This links to the previous point. If you are logging on to Facebook, for example, and you see all your colleagues are out to lunch without you, or a group of people you went to school with have bought houses, gotten married and are driving new cars, or that person in your class who you thought wasn’t very bright in school has recently gotten a new promotion, the natural tendency is to compare these achievements to your own life. Furthermore, when you have so many people to compare yourself to, there will be others who have more than you and you can feel socially isolated from your peer group as a result. It is this ‘bragging feature’ of Facebook and our tendency to compare what we see on social media to our own lives that is particularly harmful for our mental health.

Part of the reason Facebook makes people feel socially isolated (even though they may not actually be) is the comparison

factor. We fall into the trap of comparing ourselves to others as we scroll through our feeds and make judgements about how we measure up.

A paper that is published in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, evaluated “how we make comparisons to other peoples’ posts, in “upward” or “downward” directions—that is, feeling that we’re either better or worse off than our friends.” What was surprising about this study’s findings is that in the realm of social media, they found that “both types of comparisons made people feel worse, which is surprising, since in real life, only upward comparisons (feeling another person has it better than you) makes people feel bad.” However, comparing yourself to others on social media, whether you are doing better than someone or not, can lead to depressive symptoms.

- **Comparisons can Create Jealousy**

As a follow-up point, when we are constantly comparing ourselves to others, this undoubtedly leads to jealousy and envy. However, this is to be expected when people use social media to highlight that they are on holidays, or buying a new house, or gaining promotions in work.

- **Social Media Addiction is a Vicious Cycle**

Even when we are aware that overuse of social media is bad for our mental health, we will still instinctively use it, several times

each day, even though we know it’s not making us happy or contributing to our wellbeing.

- **Virtual Friends don’t Counteract Loneliness**

If you are looking to social media to replace a real-world social life, this is a mistake. Research shows that social interaction is key for loneliness, but people who use social media for all social connections, and even worse, those who use social media passively (i.e. not interacting with anyone online just browsing through newsfeeds), are not engaging in the face-to-face, human-to-human social interaction that we need to be cultivate positive mental health.

Put simply, spending time online with virtual friends does not have the same positive impact on our wellbeing as time with real friends has.

So How do we Stop?

When you read through all of these negative effects that social media can have on our mental health and wellbeing, the most natural reaction can be to try to stop immediately, but when you are faced with even a mild social media addiction, this might be easier said than done. We would recommend that you undertake a social media detox, and that you recommend your group members try this out for a week as well. While we talk about social media addiction and withdrawal symptoms, it is

worth noting that as social media addiction is a psychological addiction, you are best to detox 'cold turkey'. It is not like substance-based addictions where you need to ween yourself off the substance slowly. A social media addiction is all in your mind, so it is best to detox from everything at the same time. Blogger, Joel Lee, has written about how to detox from social media, and gives the following recommendations for starting your detox today:

1. Deactivate your accounts.

This will serve as a hedge against you checking in on a whim, and it will also signal to your friends that you're on a detox.

2. Uninstall all social media apps.

This will eliminate all of those notifications and alerts that play such a crucial role in social media addiction. And you won't be as likely to pop one of those apps open in moments of boredom or stillness.

3. Block all social media sites.

This is for your computers, laptops, and tablets. Use one of these web filtering tools to restrict access to social media sites.

4. Replace social media with another activity:

It's not enough to excise social media from your day. You need to fill that void with something else, otherwise you're just going to claw your way back. I recommend learning new skills, whether creative

hobbies, geeky DIY hobbies, or even hobby programming.

5. How long should the detox last?

While studies are still sparse on this, most experts agree that it takes approximately three months (or 100 days) for dopamine levels to return to normal. It may take longer depending on how long and how intensely you've been addicted, so don't be surprised if it takes upwards of six months or even a year. It's going to be tough, but there is support online from experts and bloggers who can support you through the detox.

Read more at:

<https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/social-media-detox/>

How to use this Resource with your Local Health Group?

This handbook presents some introductory information on the topic of how social media can negatively impact our mental health and wellbeing. In particular, we have examined some of the major negative effects and also outlined a process for completing a social media addiction. It is worthwhile to review this handbook before your session with the group so that you are supported to facilitate a discussion about how social media affects our mental health. Be mindful however, as this is a topic which relates to the physical, psychological and emotional well-being of members of your group, if a group member presents with serious mental health concerns or worries over cyberbullying, for example, please

support them to seek professional medical support and do not try to tackle the issues raised in the group. Support them to contact a school for example, if they are worried that a family member is being cyberbullied.

To accompany this handbook, you will also find a short PowerPoint presentation that can be used with your local health network to introduce some of the negative effects of social media on our mental health. This has been developed to elicit group discussion on the topic. Use this resource to start a conversation in the group about how they use social media and whether they can identify with any of the negative aspects presented in this handbook.

Group Activity

Once you have shared the digital resource and the PowerPoint presentation with your group members, you can start a group discussion about how group members use social media. To start this discussion, you can ask the following questions:

- What social networks are you active on?
- How often do you use social media?
- Is it different for other members of your family or (real-world) friends' groups?
- In general, how does social media make you feel?
- Do you think it contributes to your mental wellbeing in any way?

- Can you identify with any of the negative impacts listed in the PowerPoint slides?

Once all group members have been able to share their experience with social media, you can ask all group members to keep a short log for the next week of all of the times that they use social media. In this log, ask them to note down:

- Time of day they used it.
- Duration of use.
- Purpose of use.
- Whether it was intentional or 'just passing time'.
- Mood after using social media.

In the next session, you can ask all group members to share their logs. If they think that they might have an issue with social media addiction, you can also use PowerPoint slide 9 to introduce them to the process of taking a social media detox – you can add extra information on each step, from the handbook, if needed. Once all group members have completed their logs, you may re-visit this topic at the next group session and encourage those with an issue to try a social media detox for at least one week and report back how they found the experience.



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