

Editorial

The Social Dilemma: Social media and mental health

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Human beings are social creatures that require the companionship of others to make progress in life. Thus, being socially connected with other people can relieve stress, anxiety, and sadness, but lack of social connection can pose serious risks to mental health.¹ Social media has recently become part of people's daily activities; many of them spend hours each day on Messenger, Instagram, Facebook, and other popular social media and many scholars studied the impact of social media and applications on various aspects of people's lives.²

The advent of the digital age has led to changes in the manner and nature of information generation, circulation, and reception. For example, social media connects people through text, pictures, and videos to build a vast social network and significantly influence people's mindset and behaviors.³ Social media has a reinforcing nature. Using it activates the brain's reward center by releasing dopamine linked to pleasurable activities such as sex, food, and social interaction. The platforms are designed to be addictive and are associated with anxiety, depression and even physical ailments. FOMO—fear of missing out—also plays a role. If everyone else is using social media sites, and if someone doesn't join in, there's concern that they'll miss jokes, connections, or invitations. Missing experiences can create anxiety and depression. When people look online and see they're excluded from an activity, it can affect thoughts and feelings, and can affect them physically. A 2018 British study tied social media use to decreased, disrupted, and delayed sleep, which is associated with depression, memory loss, and poor academic performance. Social media use can affect users' physical health even more directly.⁴

The earlier teens start using social media, the greater impact the platforms have on mental health. This is especially true for females. While teen males tend to express aggression physically, females do so relationally by excluding others and sharing hurtful comments. Social media increases the opportunity for such harmful interactions. According to the Pew Research Center, 69% of adults and 81% of teens in the U.S. use social media. This puts a large amount of the population at an increased risk of feeling anxious, depressed, or ill over their social media use. 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 through social media platforms. While each has its benefits, it's important to remember that social media can never be a

replacement for real-world human connection.⁵ 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.

Compulsive web surfing, watching videos, playing games, or checking news feeds can lead to lower productivity at work or school and isolate you for hours at a time. Compulsive use of the internet and smartphone apps can cause you to neglect other aspects of your life, from real-world relationships to hobbies and social pursuits. Compulsive use of internet pornography, sexting, nude-swapping, or adult messaging services can impact negatively on your real-life intimate relationships and overall emotional health. 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.

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