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## Helpful Links:

- [Social Media Dictating your Life-podcast](#)
- [Mental Health and Social Media-podcast](#)
- [Social Media's Effect on Mental Health-podcast](#)
- [TedxTalk-Social Media and Your Life](#)

## Social Media: Is it Causing Decreased Mental Wellness in Teens and Ourselves?

Social media is a constant companion to anyone with a phone or tablet. Adults use it so often there is now a medical diagnosis for its overuse called “Internet Addiction Disorder.” For teens/tweens it is a major part of their social life. Many medical and behavior experts are now questioning if it is negatively affecting our mental well-being. Here are some facts and research findings you need to know.

*“54% of U.S. teens say they spend too much time on their cellphones, and two-thirds of parents express concern over their teen's screen time.” -Pew Research*

Center4Research (Mir and Novas, 2019) listed the most popular social media platforms as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. The Pew Research Center lists the most used platform by 18-24 year olds as YouTube at 94% followed by Snapchat, Instagram, and then Facebook. Most surveys of use are only for 18 and older, but many children under 18 use the sites. According to the Pew Research Center, 81% of surveyed 9-17 year-olds have visited a social media site in the last three months even though sites have a policy that a person must be 13 or older to gain a profile. 38% of Facebook users last year were under the age of 13 (Mir and Novas, 2019).

Social Media can have many benefits, including finding a community of like-minded people that are not always available geographically to you. It is a great help for teens who have social anxiety or lack some social skills rather than connecting face-to-face. Information is more easily accessible by a variety of users than through paper or phone calls. Social media also helps lost or distant connections maintain a stronger friendship than in previous years where a yearly “Christmas card” was the only means of keeping in touch.

While there are several benefits to social media, there may be more negative effects of its increased use than we realize. Many experts have started to study social media effects on human mental health and some findings expose that the negative effects are even worse for teens than adults. Some of the negative effects of social media, as outlined by Lara Jakobsons, PhD (2018), psychologist at North Shore University Health System in Illinois, include:

- **Skewed perceptions and social comparison.** Teens, especially girls, have always felt the pressure to project perfect images. Social media has magnified this greatly. Positive experiences, completely put-together life images, and staged poses only showing the best of a person drive others to maintain that same level of perfection or face peer ridicule. Getting a certain number of likes sets teens up for self-doubt and can lead to depressive thoughts when they feel like they don't measure up. They also experience FOMO, or fear of missing out. When teens see their friends communicating on social media but they are not included, they experience feelings of being left out which leads to feelings of abandonment or isolation.
- **Increased time online leaves less time for self-care.** The more time adolescents are engaged with social media outlets, the higher the risk there is for poor sleep, low self-esteem, and increases in depression or anxiety. The more emotionally invested they are in one site in particular, the more pressure and anxiety they may experience to be available and up-to-date at all times.



*The average use of social media is 9 hours a day for teens according to Common Sense Media.*

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- **Poor advice.** It's nothing new; teens have always been wary of asking parents or other adults for advice. With hundreds of friends on social media in the palm of their hands, teenagers often turn to social networks to seek advice that is often misguided.
- **Instigated fights.** Cyberbullying has become a concern for parents of adolescents. Strangers, even friends, are able to hide behind the screen and say things they often wouldn't be able to face-to-face. Teens often encounter fights on Facebook, sub-tweeting on Twitter and hurtful comments on Instagram – tactics often used just for the purpose of putting others down. This can also lead to physical fights when these teens meet up in person.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the peer-led group that advises the pediatrician your child sees, has recognized many of the above negative impacts of social media and has labeled it as "Facebook depression." A recent report by the group defines Facebook depression as "depression that develops when teens and preteens spend time on social media sites and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression due to the intensity of the online world." The factors that they feel may contribute to depression are the various measures of popularity that Facebook creates such as friend tallies, status updates, and pictures of others always having a good time. For well-adjusted kids, these statistics boost their self-worth by gaining positive replies from friends. However, it does the opposite for a less well-adjusted or "unpopular" teen by widening the gap between the two groups causing the self-doubting teen to have even more depressive symptoms (Mir and Novas, 2019).

Several recent studies have been conducted in people aged 18-26 showing the increased use of social media, and that mental disorders among young adults has become more common according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2016). While that doesn't necessarily mean they are related, the numbers are staggering and deserve attention. In 2016, an estimated 44.7 million adults aged 18 or older in the U.S. had a mental illness. Young adults aged 18-25 had the highest prevalence of any mental illness at 22.1% compared to adults aged 26-49 at 21.1% and aged 50 and older at 14.5% (Mir and Novas, 2019).

Another research study that was recently highlighted in an NEA (National Education Association) article for teachers in the fall of 2018 found that the more time spent on electronic devices resulted in less satisfaction with their lives. This is a quote in 2017 from the author of that study, Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University. "We found that teens who spent five or more hours a day online were 71 percent more likely than those who spent less than an hour a day to have at least one suicide risk factor (depression, thinking about suicide, making a suicide plan or attempting suicide). Overall, suicide risk factors rose significantly after two or more hours a day of time online" (Barrett, 2018).

## What Should You Do?

If you think you or your child might be using social media too much or that social media may be affecting your mental health or the health of someone you know, The Center 4 Research (2019) suggests these tips:

- Turn off your notifications for at least a few hours each day (which you can gradually increase); put your phone in "Airplane" mode or "Do Not Disturb."
- Delete apps that contribute to unhealthy body image or other feelings of inadequacy. Add apps that help you feel better about yourself or inspire you to engage in healthy behaviors. Meditation apps can be a better use of your time, for example: Calm, Insight Timer, and Headspace. [Here is an article with more app suggestions.](#) Use apps that block certain other apps and tell you about your usage. This will help to increase your awareness of how much you are engaging with social media and help you focus on other activities.
- Use an alarm clock instead of relying on your phone as an alarm to prevent you from using your phone the minute you wake up.
- Take a day off from social media to focus on other things. Sunday is a good suggestion since it is a day when you probably aren't in school or at work.
- Consider putting your phone in grayscale. This makes your phone less enticing to look at. With the colorful apps and notifications changed to gray, they may be easier to ignore.
- Set boundaries or only certain times when you can check your notifications.
- Start a habit of placing your phone near the door when you come home — doing it with a friend, partner, or family member can help you stay motivated and accountable! Make a plan with a group of friends to spend more time hanging out in person and less time interacting via social media.

If you are a parent wanting to learn more about how to limit your child or teenager's social media use, check out these additional tips from the [American Academy of Pediatrics.](#)

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## Looking to the future

The above information and statistics may be alarming but social media is not going away any time soon. So what can we do as individuals, parents, and educators to limit the negative effects of social media culture? Here are tips from author Allie Volpe of the [thrillist.com](http://www.thrillist.com) website (2018):

1. Ask yourself what kind of feelings you experience when using social media. Happy? Depressed? Inadequate? Self-doubting? If you find that it makes you less satisfied with your life than you would like, consider limiting your time on the sites and instead connecting with people in a different way such as face-to-face, phone, or email.
2. Turn off notifications on social apps, or one step further, delete them altogether. Make it difficult for yourself to log in and check in on your phone but keep it on a laptop/tablet. Give yourself some stumbling blocks rather than have this default setting be available to you.
3. Customize what is shown on your newsfeeds and include inspiring and positive-only quotes/newsfeeds.
4. Avoid social media during breaking news situations. Often, information during these times is false or educated guesses rather than facts which add to feelings of anxiety without being factual.
5. Follow some meme sites or other sites that aim to make you laugh. Laughter is the best medicine and can improve both mental and physical illness symptoms.

## References

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