

EXCESSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USE COMPARABLE TO DRUG ADDICTION

How People Become Hooked on Social Media and What to Do About It

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March 9, 2020 (www.verywellmind.com; 4690882)

Social media originated as a way for people to connect with family and friends, even if they were thousands of miles apart. But over the years, it has transformed. Now, social media is used in a variety of different ways and a lot more frequently. For instance, businesses, non-profit organizations, and even politicians use it as a way to reach a very targeted market.

Meanwhile, teens and your adults use social media as a virtual scrapbook to document every detail of their life as they are living it. There are even "influencers" with large social media followings, that use their following as a way to promote a product, service or group through social media and gain support for it. Social media is even a valuable resource for and a means of connecting isolated populations with other parts of the world.

In many ways, social media has enriched our lives by connecting and inspiring people. But there is a dark side as well. Aside from all the negative posts on social media, the cyberbullying, and the FOMO (fear of missing out) that exists, recent studies indicate that excessive social media use not only leads to poor decision-making, but people who used social media incessantly often have attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors that mimic those of a drug addict.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADDICTION

Researchers at Michigan State University have found that people who report using social media a lot tend to struggle with decision-making. As part of their study, participants answered questions about their social media use. The questions were tailored to see how dependent people were on social media, as well as how they felt when they couldn't use it and how they would feel about never using it again.

After the survey, the participants completed a common psychological task known as the Iowa Gambling Task, which helps gauge value-based decision-making skills. During the task, the goal is for participants to collect as much money as possible. The researchers found that those participants who spent more time on social media were likely to have less money at the end of the task. Meanwhile, those who spent less time on social media finished the task with more money.

Because this type of deficit in decision-making skills often goes hand-in-hand with drug addiction as well as a gambling addiction, the researchers likened the results of excessive social media use to aspects of an addiction.

In another study, researchers explored what it would "cost" for certain participants to deactivate their Facebook profiles for up to one year. Consequently, experimental auctions revealed that it would cost anywhere from \$1,000 to more than \$2,000 for participants to cancel their Facebook profiles for that length of time.

Still, some users refused to bid at all, which researchers believe signaled their dependence on Facebook and their unwillingness to even consider deactivating their accounts. These results show just how dependent, or addicted to, social media some people are that they would not even consider deactivating their accounts for a year, despite being paid.

OTHER ISSUES WITH EXCESSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

For some people, the thought of not being able to check their social media accounts causes them to break out in a cold sweat. They get nervous and anxious and are not sure how to handle the situation. When this occurs, therapists often refer to this as social media anxiety disorder, which may share similarities to social anxiety disorder.

This connection is not surprising given that anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorder in the United States; and technology seems to be making things worse. In fact, it appears that the more technology people acquire, the more stressed out they become.

For instance, researchers estimate that 20 percent of people with social media accounts cannot go more than three hours without checking them; and for people with social media anxiety disorder, just being away from their social media accounts for just a few minutes can cause severe anxiety.

SIGNS YOU (OR YOUR TEEN) ARE HOOKED

Aside from the obvious anxiety and nervousness that being away from social media can cause some people, there are some other telltale signs that they may have an addiction to social media. These include everything from isolating themselves from others, losing interest in activities they once found enjoyable, and getting agitated, angry, or anxious when they are unable to check social media. Following is a closer look at the signs that you (or your teen) may be hooked on social media:

Anxiety, agitation, or anger when you cannot check social media. Not being able to check social media is not a life-threatening situation. But, for some people, not being able to get online and check their status and their updates can feel like one. Even though they may feel embarrassed or confused by their reactions, they often feel like they cannot control their feelings or their situation.

Interrupt conversations to check social media. Sometimes people can be so obsessed with the online world that they have trouble staying in the moment or paying attention to what others are saying. Consequently, their faces are often buried in their phones; or, they may appear distracted and constantly check their phones.

Lie to others about how much time is spent online. Most people who struggle with social media addiction are embarrassed by how much time they spend online. So, they lie to their loved ones about how much they are scrolling social media. They know they should not be online so much, but they just cannot help it.

Withdraw from family and friends. When social media addiction progresses, it can become consuming of a person's time and energy. As a result, a person with an addiction to social media will withdraw from family and friends and spend most of their time in the virtual world.

Lose interest in other activities. As social media takes up more and more time, it becomes the most important thing in a person's life. Consequently, the addicted person will spend the bulk of their time on social media and very little time doing the things they once loved.

Neglect school or work in favor of social media. One hallmark of addiction, is the way that it consumes a person's time, energy, and attention. For this reason, many people with social media addiction often neglect their schoolwork or their work assignments because they cannot tear themselves away from social media.

Experience negative impacts to your personal or professional life. One of the biggest indicators that you or your teen has a problem with social media is when it starts interfering with your life in a negative way. For instance, grades start dropping and deadlines are missed for school or work are definite indicators that there is a problem.

Feel stressed and that your life is lacking. It is important to remind yourself (and your teen) that what you see on social media is just another person's highlight reel. They have normal, boring days filled with work and obligations just like everyone else. Remind yourself that if social media makes you think that your life is boring, it is not going to get any better sitting there obsessing about it. You have to get out and enjoy your life – experience it – not just document it.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Manage Notifications

Whether notifications from social media ping on your phone all day, every day, it can be challenging not to toggle over to your social media accounts and see what is happening.

For this reason, it can be extremely useful, and preventative, to turn off the notifications on your social media accounts. This way, instead of social media beckoning you to check out what people are posting or saying, you are in control. As a result, you are free to check social media at times that are convenient to you rather than feeling you should check right away when your phone pings.

Meanwhile, you may want to turn on notifications for when your kids post to their social media accounts.

In other words, you can set up notifications on your account to notify you know anytime your teen posts something on their social media account. This way, you can see what they are posting, how often they are posting, and determine if they need some tips on digital etiquette or take something down.

With notifications, hopefully you see a questionable post before too many other people do.

See Certain Posts First

On some social media accounts, like Facebook, you can get guidelines that allow you to see certain social media posts first. What's more, you also can indicate who your "close friends" are so that you get notifications when they post that do not alert your phone immediately. Instead, these notifications are only listed in the notifications tab.)

When you set up these types of parameters on social media, you are making it work for you instead of allowing it to push you into behaving or interacting in a certain way. Additionally, these types of parameters make it much easier to just see what you want on social media rather than scrolling through every post in your feed. This way, it is much easier to limit the time you spend on social media.

Conduct a Social Media Audit

One of the best ways to get a picture of how you or your teen is using social media, is to conduct a social media audit. Take a look at the posts, photos, and comments. Then consider what these things say about you and your social media use.

For instance, are you posting every day, multiple times a day? Or do you go days or even weeks without posting? If you find that you are posting every day, multiple times per day, you may want to take a closer look at how much time you are spending on social media.

Your social media audit could be your first clue that things are starting to go off the tracks somewhat.

Track Your Time on Social Media

Whether you use your phone's settings or get a free app like Quality Time, there are countless ways to manage your time and track how much time you are spending not only on your phone but also on social media, Netflix, and online gaming.

Once you know how you are spending your time, you will be able to set goals and limits for your social media use. Additionally, some apps allow you to add family members so that you can all disconnect or unplug together as well as keep one another accountable.

A Word From Verywell

Social media is a fun way to document and share your life, especially with friends or relatives that live far away. But just as with anything else in life, there is a such thing as too much. If you find that you (or your teen) are spending a lot of time on social media, and it makes you anxious when you cannot check your posts or see what others are doing, then that is a red flag that something is wrong. It is time to take some steps to cut back and truly experience life around you rather than just document it.

Additionally, if you are showing signs of social media anxiety, or if you feel like social media is impacting your decision-making, you may want to schedule some time with a counselor or therapist. They can help you work through your anxiety and make sense of your feelings as well as provide you with ideas on how to make healthy changes in your life.