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SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH



Over the last decade, the rise of social media has been hard to avoid; in fact the vast majority of people reading this brochure will use at least one form of social media on a regular basis. For many people, social media is seen as a largely positive thing as it allows people to keep up to date and in touch with people that they may not see as regularly as they may like. Whilst there are many positives to social media, there is also increasing evidence that extended social media use can be detrimental to a person's mental health. In this brochure we will outline some of the positive and negative impacts of social media.

It is unsurprising that much of the research into social media use and its impacts on mental health have focused more on adolescents and young adults, especially when you consider that those aged between 16–24 are considered to be the first generation who have matured at a time of social media dominance. Approximately 7% of children aged 10–15 spend more than 3 hours a day on social media websites (ONS, 2015). Approximately 84% of adults ages 18–29 claim to use at least one form of social media website; with 81% of adults ages 30–49 using one or more type of social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2021).

But teens are not alone in using social media. 74% of adults who use the internet are also on social media. With so much time being spent on various platforms and apps, it is not surprising that research suggests social media can cause mental health issues. The precise effects are still being debated amongst researchers, with causation often being difficult to determine. For example, it may be that those who are already struggling with mental health problems are more inclined to seek out social media platforms.

What is agreed is that extended social media use is associated with poorer mental health, with those using social media for more than two hours per day being affected the most. However, we feel that we must discuss both the positive and negative impacts of it in this brochure.

Social media platforms provide people with a voice

Social media has provided many young people with a platform on which they can discuss their views and learn from others. Often it helps young people to feel heard when previously they might have felt ignored. It allows people to become involved in, and to fully develop their thoughts and feelings towards, key issues. This in turn enables them to develop an identity that is subject to less internal conflict. Finding a voice and identity through social media can be very empowering and may lead to increased confidence and self-esteem, all of which will be beneficial for a person's mental health.

Social media can provide support

Social media can be an effective tool in providing support for a range of people, in particular those with rare medical conditions and those from marginalised communities. For those with rare or chronic conditions, social media groups are a way of reaching out to people that are going through similar experiences and understanding their thoughts and feelings.

It has also been suggested that social media can alleviate or reduce the symptoms of some mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression

It is also extremely useful for those people whose conditions make them housebound. Social media allows them to continue to socialise with their friends, relatives and likeminded people with relative ease. Social interaction can help prevent the onset of depression that often accompanies isolation.

Whilst others may not be housebound, they may live in an area where support groups for their conditions are not available, especially if the condition is rare.

Social media has shown to be extremely useful in these scenarios, with many groups running exclusively through social media channels. Whilst these may not have all the benefits of in person groups, they provide a level of support and understanding that is not otherwise available. Another benefit is that people can choose to remain anonymous if they wish.

When looking at marginalised groups, it's clear that social media has been useful for those in the LGBT+ community, especially where sites are used to aid identity exploration and development. Whilst there is conflicting evidence about the utility of using social media for gender identity exploration, the findings for sexual identity development appear to be positive.

Social media can reduce loneliness and mental health problems

As you may have noticed if you have read some of the other materials we have produced, loneliness is a big issue when it comes to mental health problems. Not only can loneliness and isolation cause mental illness, but mental illness can result in further loneliness and isolation. This means that the relationship between loneliness and mental illness can become circular and lead to a downward spiral. Social media can break this vicious cycle, reduce loneliness, and subsequently aid their recovery.



It has also been suggested that social media can alleviate or reduce the symptoms of some mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. It can also help facilitate life satisfaction. It can also be a useful tool for people with social anxiety and it allows them to develop relationships without having to enter into anxiety-provoking situations or environments that are often associated with the disorder.

So, it is clear that there are definitely benefits to social media usage for a number of people, and this brochure is by no means an exhaustive list. However, as we have previously mentioned, there is mounting evidence to suggest that there are a number of drawbacks to social media usage, many of which negatively affect people's mental health.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a phenomenon that has gained mainstream media exposure over the last few years. Whilst there are obvious similarities to in-person bullying, (bullying that happens when the perpetrator and the victim are face-to-face), cyberbullying is different in many ways. Firstly, cyberbullying tends to be unrelenting. When a child is subject to bullying at school, they can often take solace in the fact that their home is a safe space and they will not be subjected to bullying outside school hours. This is not the case with cyberbullying. With many teenagers having social media on their smart phones, some people are being subjected to cyberbullying 24 hours a day. Instances of cyberbullying are also often re-experienced when it is shared or reposted multiple times.



The anonymity of the internet and social media also differentiates cyberbullying from bullying. People are now being subjected to bullying from people they do not know and who they have never met. This can make a person feel like the whole world is against them and that there is no escape. Unsurprisingly this is associated with mental illness and can affect social development.

Perpetrators of cyberbullying can often be very different to perpetrators of in-person bullying. For example when cyberbullying someone, a person can write and send something abusive quite rapidly without taking the time to consider the consequences. They also don't witness their victim's responses in person and so cannot pick up on social cues which might otherwise invoke feelings of empathy in the perpetrator. The accessibility of social media also enables a person to victimise many people at the same time, through multiple chat windows. They can also use multiple accounts to target one individual. This makes the victim feel outnumbered, when in reality they are being pursued by one person.

Even more worrying is the fact that anonymity means bullies do not have to fear punishment or retribution while cyberbullying someone, and so that removes quite a substantial deterrent. Many countries are currently lacking specific laws and legal frameworks to deal with this issue.

Given the advent of social media, cyberbullying is a common occurrence for many individuals. According to British government statistics, approximately 1 in 5 children have experienced at least one type of cyberbullying behaviour online. This is the equivalent to 764,000 children experiencing this type of behaviour online (ONS, 2020).

Body image concerns

Social media relies greatly on the posting and sharing of images and videos of oneself, known as selfie culture. These images or videos are often edited and distorted, much like those seen in magazines, to put across an image of perfection. This results in other users trying to emulate these images, without being fully aware that they are heavily edited. This leads to low mood, depression and pressures associated with body image. This may be why there has been found to be an association between increased social media use and an increase in body image concerns and disorders such as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). It is also thought that an increase in cases of self-harm is due to the selfie culture. This problem is thought to be especially prevalent among young females. Body image issues are common, as approximately half of women (48%) and 3 out of 10 men (31%) experience this mental health issue (Mahon, & Hevey, 2021).



Time spent on social media sites was also associated with higher levels of body monitoring, aspirations to be thin and overall lower self-esteem. Another study found that social media sites put participants in a lower mood than normal websites did. Social media sites were also more likely to make people want to change how they look, especially those prone to comparing their appearance with others.

These studies highlight that social media affects a person's body image just as much as normal media does.

Health problems and sleep disturbance

Excessive social media usage is known to affect a person's physical health and sleeping patterns, both of which are factors in mental illness, both directly and indirectly.

Those who use social media for extended periods of time tend to do this while sitting at a computer screen or staying sedentary while browsing on a mobile phone. This is problematic as being slumped at a computer for extended periods can cause back problems and vision issues. Often people will skip meals or exercise less too, as a result. This is problematic as it is known that a healthy diet and regular exercise are key to good mental health.

Sleep problems have received some attention in the research field as it is feared that teenagers and young adults are damaging their sleep patterns through overuse of social media. This is particularly concerning considering that sleep is crucial to an adolescent's cognitive development. It is estimated that teenagers are getting two hours less sleep per night on average than is required, and as a result are more likely to become depressed or agitated. Adolescents often have a fear of missing out on something if they're not online, or feel a need to be constantly available. Others have reported disturbed sleep patterns due to anxiety about missing updates, and others are often woken in the middle of the night by social media alerts.

Another problem is that many handheld devices such as smartphones (which are commonly used for late night social media access) emit fluorescent light. This can inhibit natural chemicals used to regulate sleep, such as melatonin, from being released. It is also advised that screens and devices should not be used immediately before bed, because doing this can result in less REM sleep and grogginess the following day.



Social comparisons

In all areas of life, people make social comparisons for a variety of reasons, such as measuring successes and failures. In many cases, social comparisons can be harmless, or even beneficial. But when somebody makes social comparisons to somebody they feel is doing better than them, this can cause cognitive processes that lead to negative feelings.

Whilst this is again completely normal, the problem arises when people compare themselves to unrealistic images or ideals, which results in them feeling low and self-conscious. This happens frequently on social media. It is easy to forget when using social media that you are only seeing the aspects of a person's life that they want you to see, and they are painting a narrative that suits them, rather than one which reflects true reality. As a result, people begin to compare their own lives to this unrealistic ideal.

Obviously, it is almost impossible to achieve the levels of "perfection" that is so often portrayed on social media. As a result, social media can arouse negative emotions within the user, which can lead to depression, envy and resentment. Studies have also found a correlation between the length of time a person spends thinking about depictions of the "ideal" on social media and the likelihood of depression developing.

It also appears that "passive following" or "surveillance" on social media – whereby a person looks at others' social media content without interacting with the person or the content – is more detrimental to self-esteem, and more likely to encourage comparison, than active social media use. This kind of behaviour is also more likely to cause jealousy and resentment towards others.

Social media offers validation to the user, with many people experiencing a rush of dopamine if their post or picture is 'liked'

Social media addiction

Whilst research in this area is not as developed as for other well-known addictions, findings do suggest that internet addiction does exist and leads to a number of neurological, psychological and social disturbances and problems. Even though social media can cause people to feel negatively about themselves, they still continue to use it. Researchers have found that excessive use of one social media site was correlated with elements of addiction, as well as neuroticism. Social media addiction is quite common; with approximately 4 out of 10 adolescents (41.9%) report having an addiction to the social media platform, Facebook (Seabrook et al., 2016). Social media offers validation to the user, with many people experiencing a rush of dopamine if their post or picture is 'liked'. It is no wonder, then, that many people develop an addiction.



External validation

In many areas of life people rely on external validation and recognition for a positive emotional reaction. Social media usage is no different. There are a number of different ways people can show approval on various platforms, including likes, shares, retweets and comments. Desire for acceptance and validation is normal, but there is growing evidence that a constant need for external validation is negatively affecting people's mental health. Active users are filtering or editing their content to make their lives appear more appealing and adventurous, in order to gain the approval of others. This content then carries great psychological and emotional value to the uploader. If these posts do not receive the desired response from the audience, such as a certain amount of likes or comments, then this can be psychologically damaging to the uploader's self-esteem. This can lead to extreme questioning and some unhealthy approaches to body image and lifestyle choices, as the user makes changes to try and extract more positive responses from their audience, despite the personal cost.



Impacts on communication

This may seem like a strange topic to have as a negative of social media. After all, social media can be a great communication tool, allowing us to keep in contact with people with whom we might otherwise lose touch.

However, increased social media usage has been shown to change the way we seek help and may be impacting our ability to engage in face-to-face social situations. Evidence suggests that young people, especially girls, are more likely to turn to social media for advice than they are to talk to their parents. Increased social media can impact upon other types of relationships too, especially if a person pays more attention to social media than the person who is currently with them in person. A prime example of this is people using social media while they are out for a meal.

Communication over social media is limited in that it removes many non-verbal cues and behaviours that are crucial to human interaction. Humans use facial expressions, gestures and verbal inflexions to help conversations move forward and to explain points, but these are practically non-existent on social media. Emojis attempt to bridge this gap, but they are generally deemed a poor substitute. In many cases social media is anonymous and so the ability to tailor language to the audience is also lost. A sustained lack of exposure to social cues through excessive social media use can negatively affect people's social skills, limiting their understanding and ability to use social cues in face-to-face interactions.

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What is important to remember is that there are both positive and negative outcomes of using social media and this brochure is not designed to tell you to stop using it. Instead it is intended to highlight some areas of concern that users, and parents of young users, should be aware of.

If you do feel that you or your child are experiencing negative mental health effects due to social media, then we encourage you to discuss your concerns with a mental health professional.

**If you would like more tips about living with mental illness then please visit our website:
www.shawmind.org**



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