

The Effect of Social Media on Mental Health

There is growing evidence that social media, when used to excess, can have far reaching Mental Health outcomes

Humans Are Social Beings and need to belong and feel valued

Professor Matthew Lieberman is a Social Cognitive Neuroscientist at UCLA. In his book *Social – Why our brains are wired to connect*, he explains that this need is as fundamental as our need for food and water ¹. He writes, *we are wired to be social. We are driven by deep motivations to stay connected with friends and family. We are naturally curious about what is going on in the minds of other people. And our identities are formed by the values lent to us from the groups we call our own...*

In theory, social media should provide an opportunity to fulfil those needs in an efficient and pleasurable way. Unfortunately, psychologists are discovering that the wrong kind of [social media use can lead to a host of unintended problems that are prevalent across society](#)...and in your workplace.

Social Media Addiction

Many studies have uncovered powerful causal evidence between regular social media usage and an increased risk to emotional wellbeing. Here are some statistics. ²

- Estimates suggest that more than 210 million people worldwide suffer from addiction to social media and the internet
- Symptoms of depression are twice as likely to appear in people who spend more than 5 hours a day on their smartphones
- Not being on social media causes the fear of missing out (aka FOMO) in 34% of young adults

But you don't have to be addicted to struggle.

Part 1 - Low status challenges

Feelings of inadequacy

The brain can play strange tricks on us. Even though we know that online images and depictions of lifestyles are often carefully curated distortions of reality, they can still make us feel dissatisfied with our own lives. Often people don't realise that unconsciously they are comparing themselves to the seemingly attractive, wonderfully happy and apparently, hugely successful people they're viewing. This

¹ *Social – Why our brains are wired to connect* by Mathew D. Lieberman. Pub. Oxford University Press 2013

² <https://truelist.co/blog/social-media-addiction-statistics/>

feeling is reinforced and likely made worse by social media and the constant and ever-changing messages you receive about what you need to do, to look like, and to act like in order to be accepted ³.

Of all the ways social media can be bad for you, one of the worst, according to science, is its ability to induce envy. You see your friends posting smiling selfies at exotic destinations and humblebragging about their professional and personal accomplishments, and you end up thinking your own life doesn't measure up ⁴. But is the grass truly that much greener? The evidence points to 'no'.

Feeling that they are missing out hooks people into a cycle of constantly checking their social media for validation and the all-important dopamine hit they receive when someone likes one of their posts. The correlation between heavy use of social media and low self-esteem is strong. Many studies (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013) confirm this.

Loneliness

One of the most interesting observations about social media is that overuse – where people use online activity as a substitute for real world relationships – is causing people to feel disconnected.

This and much more is explained by Social Scientist and Clinical Psychologist Sherry Turkle in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, "*Face-to-Face conversation is the most human – and humanising – thing we do...fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood... But these days we hide from conversation. We hide from each other even as we're constantly connected to each other*". ⁵

The cycle of heavy usage can lead to people feeling isolated. Humans need real contact with other humans to feel good, and electronic activity is a very poor substitute. Loneliness can lead to a reduction in self-confidence which when brought into work can affect wellbeing, interpersonal communication, and performance. The pandemic has brought this problem into sharp focus.

Depression and Anxiety

HelpGuide.org is a small, independent non-profit that runs one of the world's top 10 mental health websites. As such, this organisation is extremely well versed in how

³ [Does Social Media Feed Your Feelings of Unworthiness](#) by Dr Kelly Skeen PsyD and Dr Michelle Skeen, PsyD, authors of *Just As You Are*

⁴ Inc.com [The More Miserable You Are, the Happier Your Social Media Posts](#)

⁵ *Reclaiming the Conversation – The Power of Talk in the Digital Age* by Sherry Turkle. Pub. Penguin Books: 1st edition 6th Oct. 2015

social media can fuel feelings of anxiety, depression, isolation and Fear of Missing Out.

They write: *"While being socially connected can ease stress, anxiety and depression, social media can never be a replacement for real-world human connection. 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 make you feel lonelier and more isolated—and exacerbate mental health problems such as anxiety and depression".*⁶ It's crystal clear that face-to-face human connection is the antidote.

In the US, the National Center for Biotechnology Information concluded that: *Social Media use was significantly associated with increased depression. Given the proliferation of social media, identifying the mechanisms and direction of this association is critical for informing interventions that address social media use and depression.*⁷

Cyber Bullying

Whether it's Twitter, Facebook, message boards or chat rooms, the Internet seems to be a magnet for nasty comments – and few result in real-world consequences.

Merriam-Webster defines Cyberbullying as the electronic posting of mean-spirited messages about a person often done anonymously. According to their [National Bullying Survey](#) 91% of UK people who reported cyber bullying said that no action was taken. This can leave users feeling disbelieved and vulnerable. The literature on the subject suggests that cyberbullied victims generally manifest psychological problems such as depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and social anxiety (Greene, 2003; Juvonen et al., 2003; Akcil, 2018).⁸

Moreover, research findings have shown that cyberbullying causes emotional and physiological damage to defenceless victims (Akbulut and Eristi, 2011) as well as psychosocial difficulties including behaviour problems (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2007), drinking alcohol (Selkie et al., 2015), smoking, depression, and low commitment to work (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2007).

⁶ <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm#>

⁷ ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND DEPRESSION AMONG U.S. YOUNG ADULTS | National Library of Medicine – National Center for Biotechnology Information

⁸ Heliyon | Cyberbullying and its influence on academic, social, and emotional development of undergraduate students by Yehuda Peled

Part 2 - Problematic high-status behaviours

Self-absorption

A 2018 University of Arizona study found that self-referential language, or what the researchers called "I-talk," was associated with depression. One of the study's authors Professor Matthias R. Mehl writes: *There are two predominant ways we share content on social media: The first is what I'll call idea-focused; or sharing articles, insights, stories, and images that can then be discussed, debated, or agreed upon by other people. The second is what I'll call me-focused; or sharing content that is all about me. What I ate or what I feel or what I think of this picture of me. These two ways of using social media apply to not just sharing content but also viewing it. You are either focusing on ideas or focusing on how your life compares to others – the irony being that 99 percent of the me-focused content on social media is performative to begin with...It's fair to hypothesize that the me-focused approach to using social media is not so great for your emotional health... it seems the more someone is posting about themselves, the less happy they are in real-life. Not all the time, but certainly a significant majority of the time... they're sharing stuff about themselves, and then evaluating their self-worth based on the "likes" or "comments" their stuff receives. Whoever thinks this is a good idea has a lot of work to do to convince me of their position.*⁹

People who display the above type of behaviour tend to have less empathy for others. This can create distance between those people and potential real-life relationships. It's also chronically distracting for the user who prioritises social media above their work and social commitments.

Anger

Unless you've been living on Mars, you will be keenly aware of the increased polarisation of societies across the world. Part of the reason for this is because humans are naturally drawn to negative, even extreme content. Across all platforms, negative news travels further than positive stories.

In 2016, highly acclaimed Turkish sociologist Zeynep Tufekci noticed that political videos on YouTube were always followed by videos that were slightly more extreme. These in turn were followed by even more extreme videos, And the same was true of other subjects – jogging videos led to films on ultra-marathons, videos on vegetarianism led to films on veganism. [Algorithms make no moral judgement on content](#). They just show you what other people watched after seeing the same videos as you. YouTube see that angry videos and posts are popular and they push them

⁹ <https://thegrowtheq.com/self-absorption-on-social-media-is-making-us-sick/>

into your feed. She writes: *YouTube promotes, recommends, and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes.*

The problem with all this is that gradually you find yourself in a feedback loop where you relate to the comments, feel the anger and express it online. You come to adopt rigid views on things, eventually listening only to those who think like you. This dilutes your world view; it erodes your understanding of others and destroys the empathy needed at work and in life.

Inauthenticity

One of the major problems of the internet and online world is inauthenticity. This is nowhere more prevalent than on social media where the versions people create of their lives are often knowingly inaccurate. This behaviour is a consequence of what the social scientists Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson call 'social evaluative threat'. This very modern problem is a consequence of a sociological need to elevate one's status compared to others

A study of 10,560 Facebook users at Columbia Business School users found that those users who share authentic accounts of their life, benefit psychologically and lead overall happier lives¹⁰.

Delusional Thinking

The internet is awash with other people's delusions, whether that be magical cures or conspiracy theories. Examples such as QAnon or the Antivax Movement can have real world consequences. Underpinning conspiracy theories are often feelings of resentment, outrage and disenchantment about the world¹¹ - states of mind that have been exacerbated by extreme online activity.

In the Journal of Individual Differences associate professor of psychology Joshua Hart suggests that people with certain personality traits and cognitive styles are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. In that Journal he writes: These people tend to be more suspicious, untrusting, eccentric, needing to feel special, with a tendency to regard the world as an inherently dangerous place. They are also more likely to detect meaningful patterns where they might not exist. People who are reluctant to believe in conspiracy theories tend to have the opposite qualities...

Conspiracy theorists are often intelligent and articulate but they tend to employ confirmation bias and use circular arguments, so when you point out that their theory does not stand up to science, they say things like: "I've done my research, you need to

¹⁰ Nature Communications article by Professor by David W. Zalaznick Associate Professor of Business at Columbia Business School, Sandra C. Matz; Erica R. Bailey; Wu Youyou and Sheena S. Iyengar

¹¹ The British Psychological Society | [Research Digest](#) by Emily Reynolds July 6th, 2021

educate yourself". Unfortunately, you can't reason someone out of a thought that they didn't reason themselves into.

These are all solvable problems. To find out more I'd be delighted to arrange a Zoom call. I can be reached at: info@commcrunch.com