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# THE DANGERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH





# IT'S NO LONGER JUST A CLICHÉ: WE REALLY ARE ALL CONNECTED, 24/7, NO MATTER WHERE IN THE WORLD

**When was the last time you liked a post on Facebook? Tweeted an opinion? "Hearted" a picture on Instagram? Instant messaged? Shapchatted? Watched a YouTube video, hopped into a Role Playing Game (RPG) for some downtime or "fact-checked" a detail on Wikipedia?**

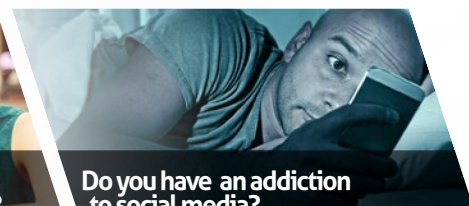
Was it five minutes ago? An hour? Sometime today?

If you're anything like the majority of the internet-connected population, you've probably engaged in at least one of the above social media platforms very recently and will likely do so again very soon.

It's no longer just a cliché: We really are all connected, 24/7, no matter where in the world, we're a mere click (or retinally-connected blink) away from our families, co-workers, classmates, idols, mentors, neighbours, and even strangers.

While social media has given rise to elaborate virtual communities, has brought awareness to important social movements and has supported fundraising for many worthwhile causes, it has also served as a platform and source for less beneficial and sometimes troubling occurrences at both individual and societal levels.

**Here are this Supplement's themes:**





# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS IMPACTING US

**With technology evolving every minute, it's only natural that social media – and how we use it – is constantly changing. Basic instant messaging has evolved into a dizzying array of ways to create, share and engage with one another. It starts with content that comes at us from the moment we grab our cell phones in the morning, throughout the work day, and long into the evening on computers, tablets and laptops. It's completely changed the way we communicate, interact and even how we feel about ourselves and others.**

Without a doubt, there are upsides to social media, such as a feeling of community and being able to reach out to others almost anywhere at any time. Social media has provided access to opinions and information that can expand our minds and points of view. Some research even suggests that certain platforms may have a positive impact on mental health by providing opportunities for connections that may otherwise not happen; others suggest social media behaviour and posts can be useful identifiers or predictors of depression.

There's a darker side to how social media can affect us, however. According to researchers, the more time you spend on social media, the more likely you are to suffer from mental health issues.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true in children and teens, however, prolonged and excessive use presents dangers that have become more evident in adults as well. Multiple studies have begun to focus on the disturbing association between online social networking and a variety of negative feelings and psychiatric disorders.

## **The most pronounced concerns lie in:**

- Decreased self-esteem (which often works hand in hand with eating disorders and body dysmorphia)
- Anxiety
- Depression/depressive symptoms
- A feeling of a lack of connection
- Feelings of inferiority
- Deterioration in concentration and other symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Addiction to social media

**Source:** <sup>1</sup> Dube, Dabi-Elle. "Internet, social media addiction linked to mental health risks: study." Health. Global News, 9 Sept. 2016. Web. 20 Jan. 2017. <<http://globalnews.ca/news/2948555/internet-social-media-addiction-linked-to-mental-health-risks-study/>>.



# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS IMPACTING US



Of course, all of the above are complex and are often exacerbated by or intertwined with the other indicators. Social media's negative impact occurs mostly as the result of the upward social comparisons we engage in while using it. We tend to make note of the contrasts between a perfectly presented life and our own. Comparisons tend to lower self-esteem, which in turn increases the risk and severity of depressive symptoms, anxiety and a host of other unhealthy feelings and behaviours.

Though common sense tells us what we're seeing is often "glossed over", unrealistic or exaggerated versions of reality when scrolling through social feeds. Perceived perfection in body type, family composition, idealistic lifestyles and social preference, it's all too easy to feel inadequate about our own physical appearance, intelligence, success, lifestyle and even moral integrity.

The true relationship between the use of social media and mental health is a relatively new and complex area of study given the constantly changing technological landscape. While some studies point to the positive aspects and outcomes of our interactions online, a growing base of research seems to reinforce the opposite view. Regardless, the impact social media has on us as individuals, organizations and communities is something that can't – and shouldn't be – ignored.



# IS SOCIAL MEDIA NEGATIVELY IMPACTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?



**If you suspect social media is chipping away at your emotional wellness, you're not alone. Psychologists, psychiatrists and other healthcare professionals have seen a drastic uptake in patients who feel they're being adversely affected by their online social activity.**

**Here are some key indicators to be aware of:**

- Low or decreased self-esteem during or after using social media.
- Negatively comparing yourself to others via their social media content.
- Repetitively focusing on your own shortcomings or distress while viewing others' social media feeds.
- Frequently feeling envious of others while engaged with social media.
- Using social media as your prime leisure activity.
- Feeling disconnected from friends and family or not interacting with them in person as often as you normally would.
- Decrease in ability to concentrate.
- Increased or unusual social anxiety when interacting with people offline.
- Feeling a need to share everything you're doing offline on social media.
- Experiencing the negative emotional experience, "FOMO" (Fear of Missing Out) during or after viewing others' online activity.
- Consciously, consistently using social media as a distraction to avoid or suppress unpleasant emotions.
- Irregular or disordered sleeping patterns.
- Increase in fatigue and/or stress during or after using social media.

Be honest: How do you *really* feel before, during and after your forays onto your social media platforms? Are you left jealous, upset, unnerved and stressed? If you're finding that what you're getting out of your interactions online isn't conducive to feeling your best, it may be time to closely re-examine your use of social media.

# DO YOU HAVE AN ADDICTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA?



How and when does social media go from negatively impacting your mental health to full blown addiction? It's a fine line and can be a tricky one to navigate. According to Dr. Shannon M. Rauch at Benedictine University in Mesa, Arizona, when your online posts are rewarded with comments and "likes" it serves as reinforcement, which can quickly develop into a habit that's hard to break. That's just that sort of engagement most people are looking for when they sign up for a social media platform, making the distinction between what's healthy and normal and what's not even more ambiguous.

The study of social media addiction is relatively new, findings are mixed and with ever-expanding research, this will likely be the case for some time. Still, without question, social media interactions do stimulate the pleasure centres and dopamine production in the brain. The journal Psychological Science notes that "social media websites may be as addictive as alcohol or cigarettes".

**If you think you may be addicted to social media, take a moment to consider:**

1. Do you feel your social media use has become compulsive, that you "have to" use it?
2. Do you find it difficult not to engage in social media, even when you don't really want to?
3. Do you find your use or desire to use social media rapidly growing?
4. Do you become angry, irritated, negatively emotional or physically affected, when you cut back or aren't engaging in social media platforms?
5. Do you often find yourself preoccupied with social media, how you're going to use it or what's going on in the different social media platforms you use?
6. Are you neglecting other aspects of your life or have your offline relationships with your family and friends been negatively affected by your social media use?

If any of the above resonate with you, a re-evaluation of your social media use is likely in order. And while any formal diagnosis of addiction should be made by a professional, there are immediate, positive steps you can take to change your habits and begin to establish control over your use of social media and your mental health.





# HOW TO CURB SOCIAL MEDIA USE OR ADDICTION

**So you want to cut back on social media. It's not nearly as impossible as you might expect. Recognizing that excessive social media use is actually undermining your health and happiness is a huge first step.**

**Now that you've committed to making a change:**

**Reach out, offline:** Substitute your social media time with face-to-face activities with family and friends who support and care about you. Put down your phone and other devices when you're with others. Consider expanding your in-person social circles to include people with similar interests.

**Tune up your mind and body:** Get moving toward something better when you feel a need to hit social media. Exercise. Meditate. Going outside for some fresh air and activity can fire up your muscles and give your mood a positive boost. Find a new healthy hobby; learn a new skill or language. Of great importance, get some sleep. Chronic social media use wreaks havoc on the normal sleeping patterns which is crucial for good mental health.

**Unplug and erase:** Take some time away from the Internet as a whole to remove the temptation of logging onto your favourite social media platforms. Take social media off your radar by uninstalling apps, removing shortcuts from your home screens and bookmarks from your browsers. This makes getting to social media platforms longer and requires more effort. Sometimes, out of sight, out of mind really does ring true.

**Set firm boundaries.** If you must engage on social media, lay down clear limits in advance for how many times a day, and for how long you will spend online. Steer clear of content and platforms that bring you down or evoke negative responses. Set a timer to help stay on track and be accountable. You may also want to limit your online social interactions to one device.

**Get support:** Remember, you're not alone. Reach out to Homewood Health, friends, family, local and national organizations specializing in addiction and mental health. They're there to help!

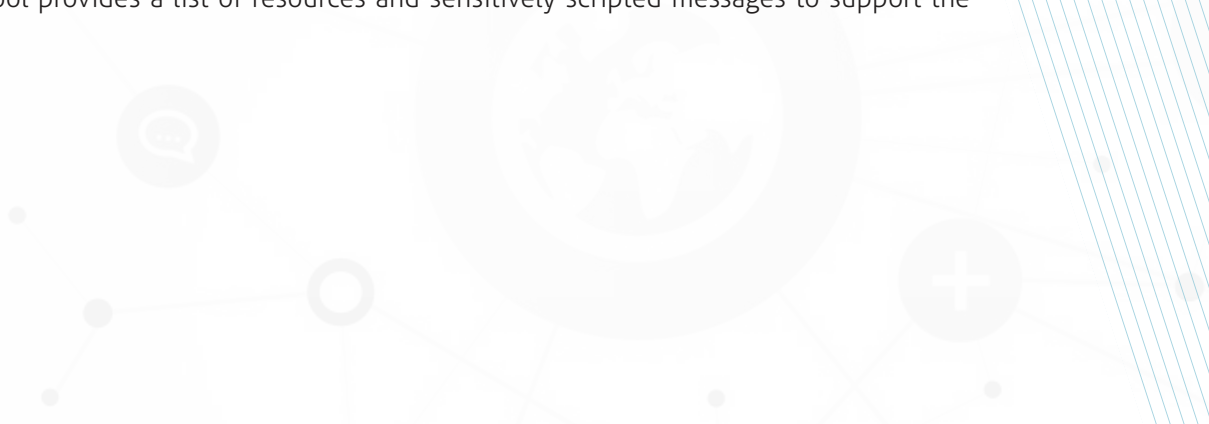
# SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHOSE MENTAL HEALTH IS SUFFERING DUE TO SOCIAL MEDIA



If you've noticed someone you care about is constantly engaged with social media, and their mental health is being negatively impacted by it, or their behaviours are reflective of a possible social media addiction, it's important to support them.

**Be there for them.** Letting them know they aren't alone as they change their habits is powerful. You can help by sharing the above-mentioned tips on how to curb their social media use and by offering to participate in the activities that will replace their time online. Be patient as they re-establish connections and navigate interacting more with others offline. Be available to listen to how they're feeling. You can also help hold them accountable by checking in regularly.

**Use external tools and connections.** If you're concerned about a friend or family member, ask others in mutual circles to reach out to help as well. If you're a co-worker, student, or educator, look into what tools, resources or mental health professionals are available through your organization or school. Social media networks themselves are also becoming more active in offering assistance to those with mental health issues. Facebook for example, recently announced plans to roll out expanded suicide prevention measures. These new features will let users flag a friend's post if they're concerned about self-harm (which may also result in Facebook's team reaching out with information that may help). The tool provides a list of resources and sensitively scripted messages to support the individual in distress.





# KEEPING KIDS INFORMED, AWARE AND SAFE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of social media use is how it can affect our children's emotional well-being and physical safety. It's well documented that those most profoundly and negatively affected by online interactions are children and young adults. Along with the serious mental health implications of social media use, kids must also contend with the threat of cyberbullying, and online stalking or harassment by peers and adults.

As a parent or guardian, you can help to ensure your kids stay safe in all of their social media dealings by:

1. **Discussing the risks and possible effects** of social media, so they can make more informed decisions when online. For guidance, resources such as The Door that's not Locked, created by Canadian Centre for Child Protection, helps parents educate their children on the risks of online sharing, and what they should be doing to protect themselves online.
2. **Having positive discussions with them** about self-acceptance and self-esteem. Explain the dangers of social comparison and approval-seeking both on and offline. For support, look at resources from Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy. Their website provides support to parents who are looking to discuss the potential effect social media can have on self-esteem and self-acceptance.
3. **Setting and enforcing boundaries** regarding the amount of time spent online, and what is acceptable information to post. Kids who use social media for over two hours a day are more likely to rate their mental health as "fair" or "poor" when compared to other users. Be sure your young ones unplug, switch off devices or password protect Internet access when the agreed upon time limits are up.
4. **Working in tandem with their school, administrators, local and national organizations** to draft or get support with age and curriculum-appropriate guidelines for the healthiest and safest types of platforms for social media interactions.
5. **Telling them exactly what course of action to take and who to tell** if they feel unsafe or threatened due to any online interaction.

Social media has become an integral part of our kids' relationships, lives and education; even very young students are often prompted to bring devices to school as part of new curriculums that frequently include online socializing. There's no avoiding it, so safeguarding children and educating them on what is considered a healthy use of social media is crucial.





# HEALTHY USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

For all the hazards associated with social media, it has opened up a world of increased connection, idea sharing, learning and an unprecedented opportunity to expand one's worldview.

When gauging what is the healthiest use of social media for you, look for things that expand your mind, world and feelings of clarity, compassion and happiness.







## Try using social media to:

- **Subscribe to and participate** in communities that are supportive, educational and provide insight into events or areas that interest you. Use these virtual neighbourhoods to help feel connected and to look for articles, research and resources you might use to improve your life offline.
- **Enhance and enrich** existing offline bonds and relationships through positive feedback, posts and comments.
- **Become an active citizen!** Get involved in the causes you believe in or share, advocate and start a movement of your own. Individuals and charities have raised millions of dollars and spread awareness using social media to get their messages out – you can be a part of that too.
- **Foster goodwill, empathy and support** for others by dropping positive, constructive and helpful comments.
- **Seek out information and insights** from trusted sources to learn more about yourself and the world around you.

There's no telling what shiny, new platform is on the horizon or what impact it will have, but one thing is certain: social media is here to stay and it's a life changer. The next time you use it to watch, generate, share, comment and engage, keep a close eye on how it's impacting your mental health. It's up to you – and completely possible – to avoid social media's pitfalls and use it to enrich your well-being and happiness.



**For more information, please contact our Client Services  
Representatives available 24 hours a day, seven days a week,  
in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.**

-  | 1.800.663.1142
-  | 1.866.398.9505 (Numéro sans frais - en français)
-  | 1.888.384.1152 (TTY)
-  | 604.689.1717 International (Call Collect)
-  | [homewoodhealth.com](http://homewoodhealth.com)
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