

SOCIAL MEDIA A CAUSE OF DEPRESSION?

BY PROFESSOR DR PHILIP GEORGE

It's obvious many are hooked on social media, and this trend is not going away anytime soon. Social media can be extremely beneficial in many ways, but where do you draw the line? What is it doing to our mental health?

- Overuse of social media can cause narcissistic tendencies in teens and anti-social behaviour in young adults. Studies found that excessive daily use of Facebook can make people more prone to depression, anxiety and other psychological disorders.
- Research finds that the more friends one has on Facebook, the less socially adjusted he or she is. Their social skills were poorer than those who had less Facebook friends.
- Facebook and other social media networks can have a negative impact on learning. Studies conducted on students from middle school through college revealed that frequent usage of social media results in lower grades.

The golden rule of moderation is one to be always kept in mind.

In 1998, Robert Kraut, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, found that the more people use the Web, the lonelier and more depressed they feel. Their sense of happiness and social connectedness dropped.

One experiment concluded that Facebook could cause problems in relationships, by increasing feelings of jealousy.

According to another group of researchers, envy increases with Facebook usage: the more time people spent browsing the site, as opposed to actively creating content and engaging with it, the more envious they felt.

The effect was a result of the well-known social-psychology phenomenon of social comparison. It was further exacerbated by a general similarity of people's social networks to themselves. The point of comparison is like-minded peers, learning about the achievements of others, hits even harder.

In a recent review of Facebook's effects, Psychologist Beth Anderson argues that using the network can quickly become addictive, which comes with a nagging sense of negativity which leads to resentment of the network for some of the same reasons we joined it to begin with.

We want to learn about other people and have others learn about us—but through that very learning process we may start to resent both others' lives and the image of ourselves that we feel we need to continuously maintain. "It may be the same thing that people find attractive is what they ultimately find repelling," said psychologist Samuel Gosling, whose research focuses on social-media use and the motivations behind social networking and sharing.

But, researcher Sebastián Valenzuela came to the opposite conclusion: using Facebook makes us happier. It increases social trust and engagement—and even encourages political participation. Social networks are a way to share, and the experience of successful sharing comes with a physiological rush that is often self-reinforcing. The prevalence of social media has, as a result, fundamentally changed the way we read and watch: we think about how we'll share something, and whom we'll share it with, as we consume it. The mere thought of successful sharing activates our reward-processing centres, even before we actually share a single thing.

A 2010 study from Carnegie Mellon found that, when people engaged in direct interaction with others, posting on walls, messaging, or "liking", their feelings of bonding and general social capital increased, while their sense

of loneliness decreased. But when participants simply consumed a lot of content passively, Facebook had the opposite effect, lowering their feelings of connection and increasing their sense of loneliness.

People spent, on average, far more time passively scrolling through newsfeeds than they did actively engaging with content. Demands on our attention lead us to use Facebook more passively than actively, and passive experiences, no matter what the medium is, translate to feelings of disconnection and boredom.

Finally, here are a few ways to treat social media depression:

- Take the time to unplug from technology and social media accounts every day. Consider doing even a week off social media.
- When faced with social media-induced self-loathing, confront your negative thoughts and question their origin and validity.
- If you're drawn to social media during times of boredom, ensure you have something to distract yourself, such as a book or fun phone app.
- Avoid using social media as a platform to express your negative emotions – an impulsive remark or statement remains for eternity sometimes.



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