

The Effects of Social Media on Mental Health



1 in 5 youth have a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral health disorder (National Alliance on Mental Illness). While some experiences or activities can promote mental health and well-being, others have the potential to hinder our wellness. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, social media has the potential to negatively affect the mental well-being of young kids and teens. Adolescence is an important period of growth and development. There is no doubt that technology plays a major role in the lives of our youth. As such, it is important that we pay attention to how technology affects them.

Modern teens are learning to do most of their communication online or via text messaging. When we learn to do most of our communication looking at a screen instead of another person, we miss out on very critical social skills, such as the art of talking, relating to people face to face (reading body language) and navigating social negotiations. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, virtual interactions come with less risk for some teens, resulting in increased anxiety during real-life social interactions.

Some of the adverse risks associated with social media use include cyberbullying, depression, high levels of anxiety, low levels of self-esteem and FOMO (fear of missing out). Social media's filtered sense of reality can lead to critically comparing and moments of envy, leading to lower self-esteem and depression. Additionally, excessive monitoring of friends online behaviors can lead to feelings of exclusion and turn into increased social anxiety.

It is important to note that there are some benefits associated with social media. Because of the individual nature of kids and teens, we can't assume that all youth respond in the same way to social networking. How teens use social media matters. One of the best ways adults can ensure that kids are engaging in healthy online experiences is to have conversations with young people about their socially networked life. Ask them:

- Why do you use social media?
- How does it make you feel?
- Who are your "friends" that you follow or communicate with online?
- What do you like best?
- What isn't so great?

Other tips:

- **Face-to-Face time is key to youth mental health.** While social media can provide a sense of support and belonging and strengthen existing friendships, it isn't a replacement for "real life" social experiences.
- **Encourage youth to get involved.** Finding an interest, hobby, volunteer project or enjoyable activity to engage in not only can open doors for more face-face interaction, but can also help build self-esteem and confidence.
- **Create "Screen Free" Time.** Set aside meal times, car rides or other times of the day to connect without screens.
- **Lights Off, Screens Off.** Sleep deprivation greatly impacts young people's mental health. Make sure kids/teens unplug before bed.
- **Set a good example as adults.** It's up to parents to set a good example of what healthy "device" usage looks like. Be "fully present" when interacting and communicating with youth. Kids need to see our faces, not our heads bent over screens.

References: American Academy of Pediatrics; Child Mind Institute; Psychology Today; National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).