

Social Media and Body Dysmorphia

Social media websites have been a common topic of conversation in mental health spaces for several years. At their advent, they served as methods of connecting students in college with one another. They now function to connect the entire population with everyone else. While we once relied on these websites solely for socialization and entertainment, the scope is much wider now. One study found that nineteen percent of people get their news from social media feeds. Furthermore, these people tend to consider the news found on social media as more reliable than traditional newsprint or news networks. Viral marketing and social media have become integral to operating a small business, especially for up-and-coming small businesses. While the ability for social media to provide these functions can dramatically improve people's lives, its ubiquity in most everyone's lives has many consequences. While anxiety and depression are both linked to high social media use, one concern that tends to be overlooked is the tie between social media and body dysmorphia disorder.

Those using social media tend to engage in a high rate of social comparison. Particularly on websites like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, people are encouraged to constantly see photos and videos of their friends' lives. This leads people into feeling immense pressure to put up a constant façade of perfection on their social media pages. Editing and curation of all photos on their page becomes mandatory in order to ensure they appear their best. Consequently, those visiting their friends' pages see the false perfection on display and feel that they must also only show their best face online. A feedback loop forms from this, where many people using these platforms habitually feel an intense need to compete with one another. For many young people, who are still in the process of exploring their own identity and self-worth, this can cause extremely detrimental mental health concerns.

In one study, teens were questioned about their social media use, and then evaluated for symptoms of body dysmorphia disorder (BDD). This study found that for those who use image-based social media (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram), symptoms of BDD were 16% more prevalent. These symptoms can include:

- Extreme Preoccupation with perceived flaws in one's appearance
- Persistent skin-picking and self-checking
- Strong belief that one is being perceived as ugly
- Hiding and masking behaviors for the perceived flaw, such as hiding parts of the body with scarves, clothing, or make-up
- Avoidance of photos and mirrors
- Unwillingness to attend social situations
- Feelings of anxiety and depression
- Thoughts of suicide

Body dysmorphia can cause people to take on extremely unhealthy habits. For many it can start as simply being particular about photos taken of them. However, as symptoms grow stronger, BDD can lead to maladaptive habits like those listed above. For those who are preoccupied with their weight, eating disorders may develop. One study found that one third of those who have BDD

develop an eating disorder at some point in their life. The inverse holds true as well, with many of those with anorexia and bulimia developing BDD. Additionally, the focuses of concern tend to be different based on gender. While concerns related to acne and facial features appear across the board, young women tend to focus on body shape, figure, and skin. Meanwhile, young men tend to focus on muscle size and tone, overall body size, and thickness of hair.

If you are concerned that your child may be developing Body Dysmorphia Disorder, the first step is to speak to a healthcare provider or mental health professional. As one ages with the condition, symptoms tend to worsen. For those who are struggling with comparing themselves on social media, taking a “social media vacation” can be the first step in improving their self-image. It could even be beneficial to simply move away from the image-based websites and focus on text-based social media, such as Reddit or Threads. It could help to schedule out the day to prevent mindless scrolling, while also promoting healthy decisions like screen-free time, exercise, socializing, and reading.

For more information on the link between social media and BDD, please visit the following resources:

<https://health.clevelandclinic.org/social-media-and-body-image>

<https://www.ktblegal.com/blog/2023/september/how-social-media-use-can-cause-body-dysmorphia/>

<https://damorementalhealth.com/social-media-and-body-dysmorphia/>

<https://www.rush.edu/news/combating-social-media-dysmorphia>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10471190/>

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/body-dysmorphic-disorder>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353938>

<https://bdd.iocdf.org/expert-opinions/the-body-as-a-prison-eating-disorders-and-body-dysmorphic-disorder/#:~:text=Yes.,areas%20other%20than%20their%20weight.>

<https://emilyprogram.com/blog/the-relationship-between-eating-disorders-and-social-media/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5003636/>