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SOCIAL MEDIA: PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ONLINE - AND OFF

It's well known that too much exposure to social media can be mentally and even physically harmful. But reducing our usage of this ever-present part of today's society is easier said than done.

Here are some tips to help safeguard your kids - and yourself - from too much social media



Social Media: Protecting Your Mental Health Online—and Off

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Kids and adults spend hours each day on social media.
- Higher usage can lead to anxiety and depression, while even a short break can help restore better mental health.
- Set usage limits—for yourself and your loved ones—and think critically about the quality of information you encounter on social media.

Social media has reshaped the world and our lives in numerous ways over the past 20-plus years. Some of those shifts have created major benefits, of course. Unfortunately, others have left millions of people—maybe you or someone you care about—regularly feeling anxious, lethargic or even depressed.

Indeed, the more the relatively new phenomenon of social media is studied, the more it's becoming clear that a range of health problems may be associated with our use of Facebook, TikTok, X—formerly known as Twitter—and other outlets.

Given that—and because social media is here to stay—it's imperative for individuals and families to interact with these various online worlds in ways that give them the benefits social media offers while minimizing the potentially negative effects.

With that in mind, here's a look at some key concepts to keep in mind as you—and your kids or grandkids—navigate social media that could help you be happier and healthier in body and mind.

Taking the good with the bad

First, the good stuff. For many of us, social media has long been a great way to keep up with family members and friends, share important moments in our lives, reconnect with people from our past, and find new communities of like-minded folks. It's also sometimes a useful

tool in emergencies when more traditional forms of communication are down. For example, officials regularly use social media during hurricanes and earthquakes to alert the public about where help is located. And of course, it's a great place to watch cats and dogs acting crazy!

But as you're likely aware, the explosive growth of social media has also created noxious online environments where sensationalism, misinformation, social division and extremism can run rampant. Both kids and adults can find a steady stream of poisonous anger and images that can warp our impressions of ourselves, our neighbors and the world at large.

There's a reason why that matters: We spend a staggering amount of our time on social media taking in that information. Consider some facts:

- Worldwide, adults spend an average of almost 2.5 hours a day on social media, according to the Global Web Index.
- Tweens and teens are online even more, clocking more than five and eight hours (respectively) each day, reports *The New York Times*.
- Recent research shows that 95% of teens have smartphone access, and the number who say they're "online almost constantly" has doubled since 2015, according to the Pew Research Center.
- Meanwhile, many adults are "doomscrolling," with one study finding that noxious politics and world crises had more than 27% of those surveyed reporting "problematic" levels of news consumption, according to research published in the journal *Health Communication*.

Real-world effects of social media usage

If you think all that exposure to social media poses some problems, you're right. Research has shown that social media usage can often lead to depression and anxiety—and not just in impressionable teens.

Multiple studies have shown that social media users of all ages are susceptible to letting too much time online adversely affect their moods and mental health. Social media usage can disturb sleep patterns and cause irritability, even irrational anger. It can lead to users to interpret and experience the world in ways that are wildly out of step with reality—whether that's comparing your own boring life to your neighbors' a-bit-too-smiley Instagram feed, allowing TikTok influencers to shape your bodily self-image or taking actions that are based on lies.

On the other hand, getting off social media can have almost-immediate mental health benefits. One example: A study published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social*

Networking of people ages 18 to 72 who used social media every day were told to either stop using all social media for a week or continue using it as usual. Those who took a break for a mere seven days had significant improvements in well-being, depression and anxiety compared with those who continued to use social media.

Smarter ways to social

So how can you use social media responsibly, in a way that keeps you sane? And how can you help family members—be they TikTok-obsessed teens or Truth Social grandparents—rein it in, reconnect with reality, and stay physically and mentally healthy?

Consider these strategies:

1. Set limits and stick to them

Think of social media a bit like junk food. Chances are, you don't mindlessly eat chips from a bag for hours at a time—instead, you put a portion of them in a bowl. Similarly, allocate a limited window or two of time each day when you check in on your social media accounts.

Yes, you'll need willpower to stay within those self-imposed limits, just as you do when you wait until after dinner but before 10:00 p.m. to reach for the ice cream. But you can also get some help here, thanks to a wide array of apps and browser extensions that block or limit access to social media sites according to parameters that you can personalize. (Better yet, have someone else set up those parameters so you can't change them on a whim.) You can also silence notifications from whatever platforms you visit most often, to remove the constant intrusion of tempting new alerts. Finally, leave the cellphone downstairs when you go to bed so it's not the first thing you reach for in the morning.

2. Slow down and think critically about what you see on the screen

It's easy—and fun—to rapidly scroll through news headlines and other information online and simply take it all in as facts. But given how much disinformation there is today, it's crucial to be skeptical and take what you see with a big chunk of salt. Certainly that goes for politically focused content or hot-button social issues—two areas where bad actors spread lies. But it's also important to keep a healthy perspective on *anything* you see on the web—such as those pics of the deliriously happy-looking family next door enjoying yet another island vacation, or your kids' high school classmates looking absolutely perfect. Remember that people often curate their online image—presenting only the amazing moments and never even mentioning the struggles they (like all of us) have.

3. Cultivate your offline best self

One of the biggest benefits of social media has been to help people who enjoy niche hobbies connect with others like them. You know where else you can do that? In the real

world! If you think you're spending too much time online, try getting out there and making a concerted effort to meet up with people IRL. Music enthusiasts can meet up for listening parties, gamers can hold living room tournaments and so on.

When you're not spending time online, weave in some movement or activities that are tangible and tactile. The American Cancer Society followed 140,000 older adults and reported that those who walked a mere six hours *per week* had a lower risk of dying from cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and cancer than those who were not active.

4. Keep an eye out for friends and family members

It might be important to help others in your friend and family orbit manage their online habits. This is especially true if you've got kids or grandkids. It should be part of your job to monitor the device usage of your children, set limitations and pay close attention to the feeds they follow as well as the content they consume or create.

Studies have shown that young women are especially vulnerable to unhealthy messaging about body image and other social factors. But as recent news reports have shown, teen boys too can be drawn from innocuous video game forums, say, into toxic feedback loops of misogyny and violent imagery.

Vigilance is key. Get set up to be able to review kids' daily log of online activity. Ask your kids to show you the social media outlets they like, and talk with other parents about the sites their kids are going to regularly so you check them out yourself. Implement rules limiting when, where and how much social media usage is allowed under your roof—for example, shutting down phones 45 minutes before bedtime. Keep in mind you'll want to follow these rules yourself, in order to "walk your talk." And share information about links between social media usage and mental health challenges. Expect pushback and eye-rolling from your kids, but stick with it and some of your efforts will likely take root.

5. Get help if you need it

Breaking social media addiction can be a big challenge—and not just for kids. If you've tried some of the strategies discussed here and still fear your time spent on social media feeds is having a deleterious effect on your health, seek out some professional help. A new cottage industry of therapists and counselors has sprung up in recent years specializing in helping patients manage the mental health aspects of social media overuse and the adverse effects it can cause.

Ultimately, Pandora's box is open and can't be closed. It's pretty much guaranteed that we'll be living with social media in some form or another for the rest of our lives. But how you interact with it, and how it benefits or damages your health, is largely in your control.

VFO Inner Circle Special Report

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