

EAP Newsletter – July 2025

Tips for Managing Social Media Use

If you find yourself often scrolling through social media or subconsciously checking your phone numerous times throughout the day, you are not alone. In 2016, Apple reported the average iPhone user unlocks their phone 80 times per day. That number has gone up to 150 times per day in 2021 (Internet Trends). Tech use in general, and especially social media use, has increased considerably in the past few years—one major reason being the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now more than ever, many people rely on social media platforms to stay in touch with friends and family. However, this convenient way of staying connected can come at a price. According to a 2020 systematic review, social media use can increase levels of anxiety, depression, and stress in some users (Karim et al.). It may be a good idea to implement the following strategies to help maintain balance in your life and limit screen time.

Curate a Positive Experience

You only have so many hours in each day, so consider what is the best use of your time and mental energy. Try to make your social media experience a positive one. Follow users who you find inspiring, or accounts related to specific subjects you find valuable. By curating your experience, you can avoid being overwhelmed with information that you can't apply to your life.



Declutter Your Accounts

In the 2021 documentary *The Minimalists: Less Is Now*, Joshua Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus show the benefits of decluttering one's living space and living a minimalist lifestyle: freedom, happiness, and an increased sense of what really matters in life.

Apply this principle to your social media sphere by unfollowing accounts that don't serve you or cause unnecessary stress. If you notice there are certain users whose posts tend to cause anxiety, mute them for 30 days or unfriend them. This can, in turn, help declutter your mind. You are not required to stay connected to anyone on social media, especially people you haven't had a relationship with since high school.

Engage Selectively

Many polarizing discussions take place on social media. You don't need to engage with or respond to every post you disagree with. Most of the time, you won't change someone's mind anyway. Often, it's best to just keep scrolling or better yet, stop scrolling. Engaging in hot topic discussions can quickly turn into arguments. Consider the real-world ramifications of doing so, such as losing a job, not getting hired in the first place, or having a falling out with a family member or friend.

Find Ways to Decompress and Unplug

If you are in the habit of checking social media each night before bed to decompress, consider if this is truly helping you to relax. Could you replace the habit with something else? Instead, try reading a book, taking a bath, or watching a movie. If it helps, leave your phone in another room to avoid the temptation.

Take a Break

You could also take breaks from social media use periodically—whether it be for a day, a week, or a longer period of time. In a 2019 Stanford study, researchers found that people who gave up social media platforms for just four weeks improved their overall mental health and wellbeing. If you aren't ready to commit to a full four-week break, start by avoiding social media one to two hours before bedtime. Numerous researchers have shown that blue light exposure and overstimulation from screen use decrease the quantity and quality of sleep.

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Social Media Tied to Higher Risk of Depression

The latest in a spate of studies investigating links between the use of social media and depression suggests the two go hand in hand.

"The relationship between social media and mental health has been the subject of a lot of debate," said Dr. Roy Perlis, lead author of the new study. He's director of the Center for Experimental Drugs and Diagnostics at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

On one hand, social media is a way for people to stay connected to a larger community and get information about things that interest them, Perlis noted. On the other, even before widespread misinformation on these platforms was recognized, there was a sense that young people might be negatively affected.

The new study follows a yearlong look at social media use and onset of depression among nearly 5,400 adults. None reported even mild depression at the start.

But in multiple surveys over 12 months, depression status had worsened in some respondents, the study found. The risk rose with the use of three hugely popular social media sites: Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok.

As to whether social media actually causes depression, Perlis said it's unclear which is the chicken and which is the egg.

"One possible explanation for our results," he noted, "is that people who are at risk for depression, even if they're not currently depressed, are more likely to use social media. Another is that social media actually contributes to that increased risk." But this study wasn't designed to distinguish between the two, he said.

To explore adult vulnerability, Perlis' team focused on social media users 18 and up (average age: nearly 56). About two-thirds were women, and more than three-quarters were white people.

All completed an initial survey about their use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, and/or YouTube.

Participants were also asked about news consumption habits and access to social support when they felt sad or depressed.

None showed any signs of depression at the first survey. But after completing at least one similar follow-up, nearly 9% showed a "significant" increase in scores for depression risk.

Increased risk was seen in users of TikTok or Snapchat who were 35 years old and up, but not among younger users. The reverse dynamic played out with Facebook users: Depression risk went up among those under 35, but not among older users.

Given that specific cause and effect aren't clear, Perlis said the takeaway for now is that researchers need to understand the relationship between social media and mental health better.

"Even if social media use is only telling us about underlying risk rather than causing it, can we understand why? Might we be able to intervene to prevent depression and anxiety?" Perlis asked.

He hopes his work will lead to some answers.

"We hope that our work will inform both mental health researchers and policymakers in thinking about how to study and potentially act on this relationship," Perlis said.

One such researcher commended the new research for doing just that.

"The findings of the current study are consistent with other studies investigating the relationship between depressive symptoms and social media use," said Amanda Giordano, an associate professor of counseling and human development services at the University of Georgia.

Giordano also echoed the need for caution in examining what's causing what and offered a number of theories.

"One hypothesis for the association between social media use and depressive symptoms is the act of comparing one's imperfect life to the enhanced, edited and seemingly perfect images of others' lives," she said. "This alone may not be the cause of depressive symptoms, but in individuals with other risk factors and predispositions, social media use could contribute to the development of symptoms."

Another theory is that online social connections don't adequately replace the depth and quality of offline friendships, Giordano said. As a result, even individuals with thousands of social media connections can still feel lonely, unknown, and unsupported, she explained.

"Simply put, virtual connections may fail to meet our basic needs of belonging and attachment, which may contribute to depressive feelings in some individuals," Giordano said.

SOURCES: Roy Perlis, MD, MSc, professor, psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, and director, Center for Experimental Drugs and Diagnostics, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston; Amanda Giordano, PhD, associate professor, counseling and human development services, University of Georgia, Athens; JAMA Network Open, Nov. 23, 2021