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The Impact of Social Media on Body Image & Mental Health

Believe it or not, modern social media is still relatively young. We can trace its ancestry to the early blogging and bulletin board systems in the late 90s. Recognizable forms similar to today's platforms first emerged in the 2000s, with the now-defunct Six Degrees and Friendster. Undoubtedly, social media is a part of humankind, with billions of people using it daily. But as with any form of transformative technology, it has both positives and negatives. After a couple of decades of weaving social media into our social and cultural fabric, we've come to recognize the alarming effect it has on people's mental health. We see harmful effects such as individuals developing negative body images because they compare themselves to what they are observing and experiencing through social media.

In this article, we'll take some time to unpack some of the complicated issues around social media use and the connections to body image and mental health. We'll discuss some of the unrealistic expectations social media serves and examine some of the most problematic behaviours observed. Then, we'll look at how social media affects how kids, youth, and adults view themselves. Finally, we'll focus on what you can do to help guide someone struggling with social media use. We'll end with some tips and strategies you may adopt to turn social media activities into more positively focused experiences.

What do we mean by body image?

We all have a body image. It's personal, but can be heavily influenced by other people, ideas, and surroundings. Essentially,

it's how someone views their body physically, **plus** the positive or negative thoughts and feelings they experience as they look at themselves.¹

Body image has four aspects to consider:

- **Perceptual** – The way you see yourself “is not always a correct representation of what you actually look like.”²
- **Affective** – What you like or dislike about the way your body looks. It's a focus on “appearance, weight, shape and body parts.”³
- **Cognitive** – The way you think about yourself which ties to what you believe about yourself.⁴
- **Behavioural** – Actions that you take or things you do that are directly related to your appearance.⁵

How are body image and mental health related?

A person's body image can be positive or negative and can fluctuate based on environmental factors. Body image also influences self-esteem, self-acceptance, and someone's general outlook on life: three important mental health indicators, which can also impact positive or negative viewpoints.

Positivity supports healthy self-esteem levels. It generally means that you feel good and enjoy being social. You may describe yourself as feeling happy and fulfilled with your life. With a positive body image, you are also more likely to be comfortable in your own skin.

You also aren't as vulnerable to conforming to influences that suggest how you should look to feel accepted. For example, you likely choose what to eat and when/how to move your body because these activities make you feel good. You're not trying to fit into an unrealistic mould of someone else's idealized body image.

When someone's body image takes on more negative perceptions, they are more likely to be influenced by their environment. They may base their self-esteem on comments or judgements made by friends, family, and social media. It can also begin to affect their mental health. Diminished self-acceptance could find them conflicted, looking for constant validation to counteract how they are feeling about their:

- Age
- Body type or size
- Appearance
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation

What are some warning signs that someone may be relying too heavily on social media for emotional fulfillment?

When someone is using social media so frequently that they begin to experience negative outcomes that are affecting their mental health, they may:

- **Have trouble sleeping, which could be tied to screen exposure.** In a 2018 survey, a group of people aged 15-64 were asked about their Internet usage. Nearly 1/5, or 19% of respondents said that they had lost sleep in the previous year due to social media use. This data was collected before a global pandemic and coincidentally with the worldwide launch of the social media platform TikTok near the end of 2018. Today, TikTok has 1 million users.^{6,7}
Consider that electronics emit blue light wavelengths that "are beneficial during daylight hours because they boost attention, reaction times and mood."⁸ Using devices that expose our eyes to blue light in the dark can affect our body's "biological clock – the circadian rhythm...[so that] sleep suffers."⁹ Researchers are also concerned that this disruption can lead to cancer and conditions like "diabetes and heart disease [...]."¹⁰
- **Have difficulty concentrating and focusing.** That same survey showed 18% of respondents struggled with concentrating and focusing on tasks.¹¹
- **Reduce how physically active they are.** Almost a quarter said that they had "done less physical activity than normal."¹²
- **Have developed feelings of anxiousness, depression, being envious of other's lives, and or felt angry or frustrated.** 12-14% of respondents reported negative emotional experiences.¹³

- **Become more isolated from in-person socialization with friends and family and lose track of time.** While experts haven't yet agreed that social media addiction is an official diagnosis, "overuse is increasingly commonplace" and creates problems.¹⁴ Social media affects the brain by releasing dopamine, a neurotransmission chemical that ties to our sense of motivation and rewards. We keep going back to our favourite social media platforms. We can get lost in the scrolling because when dopamine is released, it makes us feel great. Other forms of addiction leverage dopamine similarly, whether related to drugs, gambling, or even shopping. Interestingly, over time, people may need to consume more of what causes the dopamine release because the smaller amounts they once triggered are no longer enough to provide the reward.

What has social media done to affect body image and mental health?

Unfortunately, social media is yet another form of harmful messaging that continues patterns within our society that convey unrealistic expectations around body image standards. Tabloids, advertising campaigns, magazines, and other forms of media have always tried to influence what the ideal or preferred body looks like. It's a deadly form of stereotyping that people aspire to that seriously affects someone's mental health.

With repeated exposure, our thinking can perceive "exaggerated or imagined flaws" in how we look, resulting in Body Dysmorphic Disorder.¹⁵ Social media often objectifies bodies and can shape people's relationships with food, fashion, and fitness under the guise of inspiration. Hashtags such as #fitspiration are filled with images that people use to compare themselves, not even realizing the amount of retouching and photo-editing that happens before these pictures are ever posted to social media accounts.¹⁶ Even seemingly well-intended "movements" that appear periodically, such as people posting images of their "healthy" meals, have an undercurrent of toxicity and diet culture as they lack context and people are too ready to copy this kind of consumption without considering whether or not these foods being presented are part of fad diets, or have a basis in proper nutrition and eating habits.¹⁷

These posts can be damaging to body image, self-esteem, and self-worth so severely that it could potentially increase their vulnerability for the development of eating disorders. Orthorexia Nervosa is an eating disorder often tied to social media's 'healthy eating' movement based on extremism. With it, people become obsessed with eating what the images reveal as 'healthy' foods to the point of expelling any 'bad' foods. It's a dangerous cycle that can see people develop malnutrition because there is not enough diversity within someone's diet.¹⁸

Other troubling behaviours observed in people who use social media extensively

Neuroscientists continue to study social media's influence on people's behaviours. We've compiled a shortlist of things to examine, develop an awareness of, and potentially address.

- **Being obsessed** with the number of likes, views, and followers someone has on their social media accounts can be a warning sign. Suppose a person is constantly checking social media during the day and seems always to be scrolling. In that case, it may be an indication that they are having difficulty disconnecting. They can develop a Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO) mindset that compels them to stay connected constantly.
- **Consuming vast amounts of micro-content** in the form of reels (short videos or posts) can overload our brains. It can even lead to something called phantom vibration syndrome "that can make you feel like your phone is buzzing even if it's not."¹⁹ The constant barrage of content produces immediate rewards in the form of dopamine.
- **Drawing comparisons to influencers and creating a highly curated account of your life** is another red flag. One UK-based study revealed that close to 90% of women compare themselves to other social media content producers. More than ½ of the comparisons result in a negative self-image. The same study indicated that 65% of men draw comparisons with close to 40% of these being negative perceptions of themselves.²⁰ People develop insecurities with how they live their lives compared to influencers and content creators who boast about making vast incomes and receiving sponsorships and product endorsement opportunities regularly. Highly curated content intended to make someone seem exceptionally successful is another toxic behaviour. It glamorizes inauthentic lifestyles.
- **Obsession or voyeuristic tendencies for looking at other people's lives** can influence behaviour. People can become fixated on finding out about private topics that would seldom be discussed in public. Paparazzi are culpable in this by producing images that contribute to malicious and harmful content about celebrities which leads to some people relishing in their apparent misfortune. A tableau that exposes people's mental health struggles publicly questions our ability to operate with compassion and empathy and respect privacy. It's vastly different than an awareness-based campaign to reduce stigma. These things can quickly lead down the path of cyberbullying and cyberstalking, where comments on posts are laden with cruel intentions and exhibit potential danger to someone's safety. Laws are not yet well defined in this area, and people may be surprised to find out that limited action can be taken in these kinds of situations.
- **Portraying oneself in social media using photo modifications and filters** creates a distorted sense of self. This does more harm than good to a person's body image. Again, people

believe that they must maintain expectations of how they look, dress, and behave with their social media personas. There are inherent dangers to this beyond the psychological aspects. Hackers improve their deepfakes using content that social media users generate to overlay and create something completely artificial. Revealing too much personal information through social media channels is also dangerous. It can be collected and sold on the dark web to create false identities to impersonate someone, gain access to their finances, or steal their identity. Finally, many people don't understand that releasing images via social media platforms means that the picture's data is forever on the Internet. People can experience significant distress and trauma knowing that there may be private photos circulating that they cannot remove or control.

How does social media affect a person's body image over time?

Information about children's use of social media is hard to come by. There is a phenomenon where parents post content with their children, hoping it could go viral and make them famous. These children don't choose whether they wish to have their images or likenesses shared online. It's an early start down a path that normalizes social media usage and creates the associate that a person's value can be defined by how much engagement a post generates.

By far, teens and young adults are the most avid users of social media. Between ages 15 and 34, an average of 93% regularly use social media platforms. From 35-49, that drops to 83% and from 50-64, to 68%. Only ½ of people over the age of 65 regularly engage on social media.²¹

While there is hope that someone's use of social media might diminish over time, as new platforms and technologies are released, that remains to be seen. Whistleblowers from inside these organizations are starting to reveal alarming details that expose how these companies go to great lengths to increase engagement. Instead, they should evaluate their influence and strive to become part of the solution to reducing harm.

Is social media all bad?

We should note that social media platforms can deliver mixed results for LGBT2Q+, BIPOC and people with both visible and invisible disabilities. They are generally viewed as unsafe because of the prevalence of hateful messages and harassment. Still, youth express how social media can be liberating to find people who are positive influences.

Parents need to thoughtfully address this topic with their kids and teens to understand how to recognize and exit from the harmful and toxic situations that social media serves instead of escalating them. Having an appreciation that for some people, social media does provide opportunities to develop other aspects of self-worth and find affinity in people who they can relate to.

A checklist of tips that can help

If you are trying to guide someone towards responsible social media use to develop and maintain positive mental health, you may want to think about these tips:

- ☐ Establish boundaries that include conscious decisions about what to read and look at online.
- ☐ Investigate how to leverage built-in controls within technology such as phone settings, parental controls, and activating usage statistics that reveal how much time is spent online by application.
- ☐ Find inclusive and body-positive social media presences to follow and share this content with people you are trying to help. It will appear in their feeds and may help them think twice about engaging and recognize more valuable and realistic sources of productive and positive content.
- ☐ Be open to discussing different aspects of social media to share your thoughts and develop listening skills that help inspire positive critical thinking and challenge convention.
- ☐ Set goals to be more focused on overall physical and mental health rather than appearance.
- ☐ Model daily self-acceptance and positivity.
- ☐ Most importantly, institute social media breaks. Moderation is vital, and self-imposed retreats can help if there are particularly strong reactions to upsetting situations or content.
- ☐ Consider how much content is shared daily and whether you need to contribute. For example, there are 500 hours of YouTube content uploaded each minute worldwide. Instagram has 95 million photos and videos shared daily. Is it necessary? What could go wrong?

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403-236-9430 | 877-236-9430
info@healthrisk.ca
www.healthrisk.ca



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