

Depressed or Delighted? Adolescent Mental Health and Social Media



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As young people spend increasing amounts of time online, questions about the impact of these activities on their social-emotional and mental health abound. Many adults fear that social media is a cause of anxiety or sadness while young people are often quick to defend their socially networked lives. News headlines reinforce fears with top stories including, "How Facebook Makes Us Unhappy"¹ and, "Docs Warn Teens about 'Facebook Depression.'"² To make things confusing, however, these headlines also gained traction: "Being on Facebook Can Actually Make Us Happier"³ and "Facebook Isn't Addictive, It Just Makes People Happy."⁴

Albeit sensational, these headlines reflect the divergent outcomes of the research itself. A recent study of Australian teenagers showed that the heaviest social media users experience the greatest amount of anxiety related to FOMO (fear of missing out).⁵ A University of Michigan study found that the more college students used Facebook the worse they felt,⁶ reflecting a similar association found among high school age students.⁷ In contrast, a more recent study found no association at all among older adolescents⁸ while another found that when college students interacted with others on Facebook their "bonding capital" actually increased and feelings of loneliness actually decreased.⁹ Of course it is difficult to draw comparisons across studies given methodological differences as well as the possibility that different age groups (i.e., high school vs. college-age students) may react differently to their experiences on social networks. In addition, most studies provide correlative data. There are plausible reasons why social media might *cause* anxiety or depressive symptoms and equally plausible reasons that young people feeling anxious or depressed might be drawn to social networking.

That said, young people themselves report a fairly ambivalent relationship with social media. While the majority report that social media helps them feel more connected to their friends and provides critical support during difficult times, one out of five teens still discloses feeling worse about their own life because of what they see on social media.¹⁰ A definitive study on whether social media are "good" or "bad" for teens' mental health isn't likely. Instead, we will probably learn more about the nuances of our relationship with technology that young people themselves report when you ask them: "It's complicated."

That's not to say that we can't glean important insights from the research that has been done so far. Here are some of the consistent findings:

How teens use social media matters.

The divergent outcomes of the research are likely in part due to differences in *how* young people spend their time on social media. Not all social networking practices are created equal. It seems that when youth use social networks largely to communicate with family and friends, the resulting social support actually benefits young people's mental health. Conversely, extensive use of social networking with "weak ties" outside of close relationship circles can

increase feelings of loneliness and anxiety.¹¹ In other words, passively scanning the profiles of happy acquaintances could be the depressing equivalent of sitting alone at a party where everyone else seems to be having the time of their lives.

- You can help “extend” supportive offline relationships into the online world by giving young people opportunities to collaborate and connect with each other (and your organization) online.
- Facilitate a discussion about “Fear of Missing Out” and explore ways to counteract these feelings as a group.

Each young person is unique

Not all youth respond in the same way to social networking and not all teens use the same tools and sites. Facebook is the focus of most current research yet many teens are quickly adopting new platforms. The best thing youth workers and parents can do is to observe, stay connected, and ask questions. Some young people may be feeling sad and turn to the Internet for much needed support. Others may find that the Internet increases feelings of sadness or loneliness. Some may feel creative and inspired while others become angry and irritable. These signs are more important than any study.

Be in conversation with youth about their socially networked lives. Ask them,

- Why do you use social media? How does it make you feel?
- Who do you hang out with? How do they make you feel?
- What do you like best? What isn't so great?

Face-to-face time matters.

Regardless of whether or not social media is lifting your teen up or holding them down, there is strong initial evidence that face-to-face time with peers is key to their mental health.¹² Social media can provide much needed support, strengthen existing friendships, and offer a sense of belonging for some teens. But if it becomes a tool to avoid the messy and important work of learning how to navigate relationships, it robs them of critical practice right when they need it most. Make sure that face time isn't just an app on a young person's phone.

If a young person is expressing concern or anxiety about being "always connected," there are some protective factors that benefit all young people in the digital age:

- **Carve out screen-free time.** It is more and more difficult to manage screen time by counting minutes. Instead, focus on carving out consistent times to connect without screens. Define which parts of youth programming are “phone free” and which integrate technology.
- **Lights off, screens off.** Sleep deprivation has a clear and detrimental impact on young people's mental health. Talk to teens about unplugging before bed if technology is getting in the way of rest.¹³
- **Build bridges.** Encourage young people to build bridges between their online and offline lives. If they are deep into an online community, look for ways to integrate that into face-to-face programming and vice versa.

Resources & Notes:

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4. Magid, L. (2012, February 10). Facebook isn't addictive – It just makes people happy. *Forbes*. Access at: <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/>
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10. Lenhart, A. (2015). Teens, Technology, and Friendships. *Pew Research Center*. Access at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/08/06/teens-technology-and-friendships/>
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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovative research emerging from the field of youth development. The briefs are intended to inform parents, professionals, and volunteers in education, youth development, and related fields; and to contribute to a heightened national awareness of youth development practice.