**Social Media Addiction**

Checking and scrolling through social media has become an increasingly popular activity over the last decade. Although the majority of peoples’ use of social media is non-problematic, there is a small percentage of users that become addicted to social networking sites and engage in excessive or compulsive use. In fact, psychologists estimate that as many as 5 to 10% of Americans meet the criteria for social media addiction today. Social media addiction is a [behavioral addiction](http://www.addictioncenter.com/community/behavioral-addictions/) that is characterized as being overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable urge to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas.



Addictive social media use will look much like that of any other substance use disorder, including mood modification (i.e., engagement in social media leads to a favorable change in emotional states), salience (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and emotional preoccupation with social media), tolerance (i.e., ever increasing use of social media over time), withdrawal symptoms (i.e., experiencing unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms when social media use is restricted or stopped), conflict (i.e., interpersonal problems ensue because of social media usage), and relapse (i.e., addicted individuals quickly revert back to their excessive social media usage after an abstinence period).

The phenomena of social media addiction can largely be contributed to the dopamine-inducing social environments that social networking sites provide. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram produce the same neural circuitry that is caused by [gambling](http://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/gambling-addiction/) and recreational drugs to keep consumers using their products as much as possible. Studies have shown that the constant stream of retweets, likes, and shares from these sites have affected the brain’s reward area to trigger the same kind of chemical reaction as other drugs, such as [cocaine](http://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/cocaine/). In fact, neuroscientists have compared social media interaction to a syringe of dopamine being injected straight into the system.

**How Social Media Affects the Brain**

Due to the effect that it has on the [brain](http://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/addiction-brain/), social media is addictive both physically and psychologically. According to a new study by Harvard University, self-disclosure on social networking sites lights up the same part of the brain that also ignites when taking an addictive substance. The reward area in the brain and its chemical messenger pathways affect decisions and sensations. When someone experiences something rewarding, or uses an addictive substance, neurons in the principal dopamine-producing areas in the brain are activated, causing dopamine levels to rise. Therefore, the brain receives a “reward” and associates the drug or activity with positive reinforcement.

This is observable in social media usage; when an individual gets a notification, such as a like or mention, the brain receives a rush of dopamine and sends it along reward pathways, causing him or her to feel pleasure. Social media provides an endless amount of immediate rewards in the form of attention from others for relatively minimal effort. Therefore, the brain rewires itself through this positive reinforcement, making people desire likes, retweets, and emoticon reactions.

Another perpetuating factor of social media addiction is the fact that the reward centers of the brain are most active when people are talking about themselves. In real life, it’s estimated that people talk about themselves around 30 to 40% of the time; however, social media is all about showing off one’s life and accomplishments, so people talk about themselves a staggering 80% of the time. When a person posts a picture and gets positive social feedback, it stimulates the brain to release dopamine, which again rewards that behavior and perpetuates the social media habit.

Social media use becomes problematic when someone views social networking sites as an important coping mechanism to relieve stress, loneliness, or depression. For these people, social media use provides continuous rewards that they’re not receiving in real life, and end up engaging in the activity more and more. This continuous use eventually leads to multiple interpersonal problems, such as ignoring real life relationships, work or school responsibilities, and physical health, which may then exacerbate an individual’s undesirable moods. This then causes people to engage in the social networking behavior even more as a way of relieving dysphoric mood states. Consequently, when social network users repeat this cyclical pattern of relieving undesirable moods with social media use, the level of psychological dependency on social media increases.

**Recognizing a Social Media Addiction**

Although many people habitually use social media, very few are genuinely addicted. If you’re worried that someone may be at risk of developing an addiction to social media, ask yourself these six questions:

* Does he/she spend a lot of time thinking about social media or planning to use social media?
* Does he/she feel urges to use social media more and more?
* Does he/she use social media to forget about personal problems?
* Does he/she often try to reduce use of social media without success?
* Does he/she become restless or troubled if unable to use social media?
* Does he/she use social media so much that it has had a negative impact on his/her job or studies?

If you answered “yes” to a more than three of these questions, then you may have or be developing a social media addiction.

As a precaution, that person should engage in a digital detox; a period of time during which someone significantly reduces the time spent or abstains from using electronic devices such a smartphones or computers. This can include simple steps, such as turning off sound notifications and only checking social media sites once an hour. Other changes can include having periods in the day where there is self-imposed non-screen time, such as during meal times, or leaving the phone in a separate room at night so as not to disturb sleep. This allows for a restored focus on social interaction in the physical world and reduces dependency on networking sites.

**Social Media and Mental Health**

Research has shown that there is an undeniable link between social media use, [negative mental health](http://www.addictioncenter.com/programs/mental-health/), and low self-esteem. While social media platforms have their benefits, using them too frequently can make people feel increasingly unhappy and isolated. These negative emotional reactions are not only produced due to the social pressure of sharing things with others, but also the comparison of material things and lifestyles that these sites promote.

On Instagram and Facebook, users see curated content – advertisements and posts that are specifically designed to appeal to you based on your interests. While scrolling through this curated content, people may see a post by an individual that has a great job, excellent partner, or beautiful home and feel happy or inspired by this person. Others, however, may see these pictures and feel jealous, depressed, or even feel suicidal due to the fact that their own life is not as “perfect” as those that they see on Facebook or Instagram.

Recent studies have found that frequent social network users believe that other users are happier and more successful than they are, especially when they do not know them very well in real life. Social media facilitates an environment in which people are comparing their realistic offline selves to the flawless, filtered, and edited online versions of others, which can be detrimental to mental well-being and perception of self. Excessive social media use can not only cause unhappiness and a general dissatisfaction with life in users, but also increase the risk of developing mental health issues such as [anxiety](http://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/generalized-anxiety-disorder-addiction/) and [depression](http://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/depression-and-addiction/). Constantly comparing oneself to others can lead to feelings of self-consciousness or a need for perfectionism and order, which often manifests itself into social anxiety disorder.

Another aspect of social anxiety triggered by online media use is the fear of missing out (FOMO); the extreme fear of not being included or missing a social event. For example, someone may see pictures of a party where he or she was not invited, or of a fun outing that they were unable to attend because of work or school obligations, and experience anxiety that no one misses them as a result or that they will be forgotten since they’re not there. FOMO can take a toll on self-esteem and lead to compulsive checking of social media platforms to ensure that an individual isn’t missing out on anything, which can cause problems at the work place and in the classroom. In a 2017 study conducted by Harvard University, researchers found that social media has a significant detrimental effect on the emotional well-being of chronic users and their lives, negatively impacting their real life relationships and academic achievement among those still in an educational setting.

**At-Risk Youth**

An estimated 27% of children who spend 3 or more hours a day on social media exhibit symptoms of poor mental health. Overuse of social networking sites is much more problematic in children and young adults because their brains and social skills are still developing. Research has shown that adolescents who habitually use social media from a young age have severely stunted social interaction skills. Despite the fact that users are interacting with each other on these platforms, many of them don’t necessarily translate to the real world. Studies have found that these individuals have worsened social anxiety in groups, higher rates of depression, negative body-image, and lowered levels of empathy and compassion towards others when surveyed.

A study performed by California State University found that individuals that visited any social media site at least 58 times per week were 3 times more likely to feel socially isolated and depressed compared to those who used social media fewer than 9 times per week.

The constant barrage of perfectly filtered photos that appear on social network sites can also cause low self-esteem and [disordered eating](http://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/eating-disorders/) in young adults. Though many teens know that their peers share only their best pictures and moments on social media, it’s very difficult to avoid making comparisons. The ongoing exposure to unrealistic beauty standards through social networking sites can affect how teenagers perceive their own bodies. One study from the University of Pittsburgh found a correlation between time spent scrolling through social media apps and negative body image feedback. Those who had spent more time on social media had 2.2 times the risk of reporting eating and body image concerns, compared to their peers who spent less time on social media. Everything from physical appearance to life circumstances to perceived successes are scrutinized and processed by users. The need to gain likes on social media can cause teens to not only alter their appearance, but make choices they would otherwise not make, including accepting risky social media challenges and engaging in negative behaviors.

The competition for attention and likes can even lead to online bullying. Name-calling, rumor-spreading, and harassment among adolescents has always happened, but social media presents young users more opportunities to do so than ever before. Teenage girls are at particular risk for cyberbullying through use of social media; however, boys are not immune. In addition to the implemented techniques of face-to-face bullying, the spreading and posting of non-consensual explicit pictures is a form of cyberbullying that has gained popularity within recent years. One-quarter of teens say they have been sent explicit images they didn’t ask for, while 7% say someone has shared explicit images of them without their consent. This type of abuse, along with other forms of cyberbullying, has led to increased [suicide rates](http://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/addiction-and-suicide/) among young adults. Additionally, these factors have also contributed to the development of increased levels of anxiety in teens and adolescents.

**Find Treatment Today**

While many people are able to use social media on a daily basis with no problem, those suffering from a social media addiction are consumed by their need to use and engage on social networking sites. Luckily, the condition is very treatable and many have successfully recovered. One of the best ways to break an addiction to social media is to set boundaries and reduce screen-time; however, if the addiction is too severe you may require professional help.

If you have a hard time controlling your social media use and think you may be addicted, contact a dedicated treatment provider. They can help you find the rehabilitation program that’s best-suited for your needs and get you started on the path towards recovery today.