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How Social Media Affects Mental Health

Social media is exponentially increasing in popularity. In fact, “Approximately 88% of adults aged 18-29 in the United States use at least one social media platform on a regular basis” (Vargas). I, as well as many others, use social media a lot... maybe too much. I am currently at a 1hr 30min daily average on Instagram for this week, which is very low for me. Normally, my weekly average is between 2-3 hours a day on Instagram alone; however, due to this paper I have been actively trying to cut my social media intake for the sake of my mental health. Social media can impact the mental health of its users with effects such as depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem.

The severity of the impacts on mental health may vary; however, no matter how large the effect may be, social media should not be a factor in depression, low self-esteem, addiction, or lack of sleep, as it currently is. It is so easy to get caught up in social media, and users must be self aware of their intake if they want to maintain a healthy relationship with it. As Russell Viner, author of the article “Social media use ‘disrupting teen sleep and exercise’”, mentions, users of social media “should worry about how much physical activity and sleep they’re getting” and not obsess about how many likes their latest post got. Some people may have issues in their life that are due to their social media use but they do not know that it is the source of the problem. If, however, users find themselves or someone else stuck in a situation where they are affected by

social media; later in this paper I will discuss the many things that users can do. Users should be aware of ways to fix their addiction to social media in case it ends up poorly affecting their mental health.

Many users of social media are addicted, and on top of that, they do not even know they are addicted. Think about the last time you entered a room. It is very probable that no one was talking to each other and the majority of the people in that room were on their phones. This is especially true in schools. Nearly every single student is on their phone and on social media before class; no one even considers sparking a conversation with anyone. Avinash, author of “Marginalization and Social Media” writes, “Often people are busy with their phones and they won’t talk to each other, but they stare at their phones,” which, if you take a step back, makes you realize how addicted we are. In today’s world, this lack of conversation is considered the “norm” and most people feel too uncomfortable to start a conversation, so they pull out their phone and go on social media like everyone else. People, especially adolescents, aren’t fully aware as to how much this tendency of gravitating to social media affects them. The effects, however, do not necessarily show up until their access to the internet and social media has been cut off. In a research discussed in the article “Online Social Networking and Mental Health” by Pantic, they discovered that, “sudden cessation of online social networking may cause signs and symptoms that partially resemble the ones seen during drug/alcohol/nicotine abstinence syndrome,” Implying that social media abstinence can lead to severe withdrawals in some extreme cases.

Along with withdrawal-like symptoms, those who are addicted to social media are prone to mental health issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. To demonstrate, Louise

H. Graham points out in her article that, “Social media activity is somewhat positively connected with fear of missing out and alienation, and in addition with overexcitement/recklessness, nervousness, and depression.” Inferably, there are a lot of mental health issues that can derive from excessive use of social media. On a similar note, Caroline Miller is able to sum up multiple authors' ideas by saying that the self esteem of adolescents is manipulated greatly by friends, famous celebrities, and others projecting a “perfect life” on social media. In general, “kids spend so much time on social media trying to post what they think the world will think is a perfect life. Look at how happy I am! Look how beautiful I am! Without that they’re worried that their friends won’t accept them. They’re afraid of being rejected” (Miller). This fear of being rejected is extraordinarily powerful and it influences kids to do just about anything to prove they’re worthy of being accepted. They will risk anything for the rush of getting hundreds of likes on their posts. Every user on social media has felt this feeling at least once. Users post a picture and stare at the likes, watching the number increase every second. They feel accepted. The dopamine rushes to their brain and it makes them want more. Certain users, especially impressionable children, see other people posting pictures of themselves with more likes, so they must be more attractive; or they have more followers, so they are more popular, therefore these users feel “less” than them. Kids are extremely susceptible to this and these are the thoughts that go through their minds as they scroll through social media. Issues like these don’t only affect users short-term while they’re staring at their screen; they have the potential to affect users' everyday life.

There is an overwhelming amount of research supporting how social media use negatively affects sleep patterns. Research published in BMJ Open found that teens who were

very high social-media users (spending five hours or more on social media per day) were about 70 per cent more likely to fall asleep after 11pm on school nights and wake up later (Scott). The majority of high schoolers and middle schoolers suffer from this. Being able to consistently get enough sleep is near impossible with how much time these students are on their phones. Using social media excessively is not the only way it disrupts sleep patterns. Miller, author for the Child Mind Institute, analyzes that, “60 percent of adolescents are looking at their phones in the last hour before sleep, and that they get on average an hour less sleep than their peers who don’t use their phones before bed.” In addition, the quality of sleep is much better. To prove this, I decided to not use my phone for an hour before bed for a week and I noticed a significant difference in how I felt when I woke up along with my ability to get out of bed. Now that you are aware of the symbols and ways social media affects mental health, what are the steps you can take to help yourself or someone in need?

There are many ways to help yourself out of social media addiction. Some, however, are just ideas that people are working towards and will not be available until the future. According to a research in Lindsay Dewa’s paper, “Young patients are at risk of significant deterioration in mental state, hospitalization or self-harm due to the lack of, or delay in, accessing mental health services.” This is significant because this means there are people suffering from mental health problems due to social media that aren’t getting the help that they need. Dewa suggests that great way to fix this would be, “A future technological intervention, such as a wearable or mobile app, to detect deteriorating mental health in young people.” To explain this piece of technology, “The intervention should be developed to detect worsening sleep, lack of activity and/or low mood in these patient groups which could be a viable first step because most participants identified these

as signs of deterioration” (Dewa). This is huge. Although this idea does not prevent mental health deterioration, it does supply those in need with medical diagnosis and aid. If you find that you or someone you know is in need of help, you may want to consider the 30 day social media detox. This 30 day detox aims to slowly break users free of their social media addiction by limiting their usage more and more each day. Evidently Vargas acknowledges that, “A 2017 study showed a staggering 71% monthly trend increase over the previous year number of searches and mentions of “social media detox/breaks” in the United States,” so this is a very relevant and growing solution. There are always ways to help your situation, whether it be simply talking to someone you know, or participating in activities like the 30 day social media detox.

Social media is not changing. If you find that you or someone you know has an unhealthy relationship with social media and has any of the aforementioned symptoms, you must take action. There are many solutions to look forward to in the future such as the previously mentioned technology that monitors tell-tale signs of mental health deterioration. I realized that my relationship with social media was unhealthy so I have limited myself over the past two weeks to no more than 2 hours, which is a very small amount of time for me. Overall, social media is much safer to use as long as users are aware of the options to seek help.

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