

# The Effect of Social Media on Teenagers



March 8, 2019



Reading Time: 6 minutes

Like technology in general, social media has both an upside and a downside. And when it comes to the effect of social media on teenagers, those pros and cons are particularly significant.

On the plus side, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat can be lifesavers for teens who feel isolated or marginalized. These groups include LGBTQ teens and teenagers struggling with mental health issues. In addition, researchers have found many positive effects of social media on friendships.

But frequent use of social media among teenagers and young adults has many less positive consequences. These include cyberbullying, negative self-image and body image, social media addiction, and less time spent doing healthy, real-world activities.

# The Effect of Social Media on Teenagers

Does social media make teens more anxious and depressed? This has become one of the more controversial questions regarding teen use of technology, with studies showing varied results.

Many experts believe that the constant overstimulation of social networking shifts the nervous system into fight-or-flight mode. As a result, this makes disorders such as ADHD, teen depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and **teen anxiety** worse.

This is borne out by a large body of **research** linking teenagers' use of social media with increased **teen depression**. These studies show that the frequency of a teen's use of social media has a clear correlation to their mental health. For example, in a **2018 study**, 14- to 17-year-olds who used social media seven hours per day were more than twice as likely to have been diagnosed with depression, treated by a mental health professional, or taken medication for a psychological or behavioral issue during the last year. This was compared to those who used screens only about an hour a day.

## Increased Teen Depression Linked to Technology Use

Additional surveys of US adolescents show that teen depressive symptoms and suicide rates **increased between 2010 and 2015**, especially among females. Researchers noted that the increase in social media and overall screen use between those years could account for these changes.

Moreover, these surveys showed that adolescents who spent more time on social media were more likely to report mental health issues. Meanwhile, teens who spent more time on non-screen activities, such as in-person social interaction, sports, exercise, homework, and print media, were less likely to report these issues.

In addition, a **CNN study** of 13-year-old teenagers and social media found that participants who checked Facebook or other networking sites between 50 and 100 times a day were 37 percent more distressed than those who checked just a few times a day. Those who checked more than 100 times a day were 47 percent more distressed on average.



## New Research on the Screen-Depression Link

However, new research counteracts these findings. A [recent study](#) found that adolescent well-being does go down with digital technology use, but by only .4 percent at most.

Furthermore, some research shows that the causality goes the other way: When teens are depressed, they look at social media more often. For example, another [new study](#) looked at social media use among 594 adolescents over two years, and 1,132 undergraduate students over six years. Researchers found that social media use did not predict depressive symptoms among adolescents or undergraduates. Rather, greater depressive symptoms predicted more social media use over time, but only among adolescent girls.

Moreover, the Internet also offers the potential to help teens with mental health challenges, notes Jamison Monroe, Founder and CEO of Newport Academy.

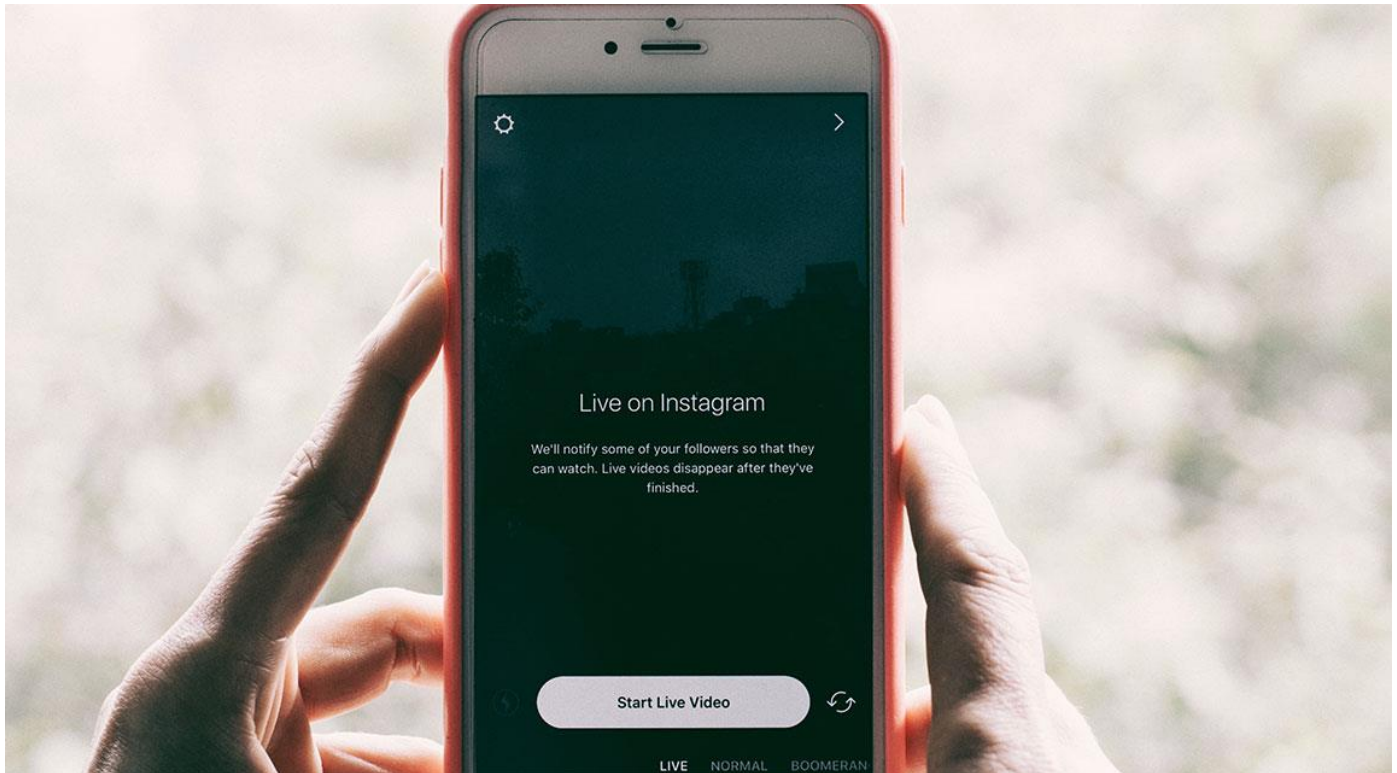
“I’m excited about the ability to provide therapy and education to people who would not seek it in person, cannot afford it, or don’t live in a geographic area where they have access to it,” Jamison says. “Technology is going to bring us into a new era of mental health treatment.”

# Social Media and Social Comparison

One way in which social media undermines teen mental health is through social comparison. Teenagers on social media spend much of their time observing the lives and images of their peers. Therefore, this leads to constant comparisons. And this can damage self-esteem and body image. Moreover, it can lead to depression. Online **social comparison is associated with depressive symptoms** among adolescents, particularly teen girls.

As with other types of social comparison, teens report lower self-esteem and self-evaluation when looking at peers on Facebook and other social media sites. For example, this includes looking at profiles on which peers post about their healthy habits, fun social events, or accomplishments. And teens felt better about themselves when they make so-called “downward comparisons”—looking at profiles of peers with fewer friends and achievements.

According to the **most recent Pew Research Center** report on the effect of social media on teenagers, 43 percent of teenagers say they feel pressure to only post content on social media that makes them look good to others. Furthermore, 26 percent of teens say these sites make them feel worse about their own life.



Read [“Teen Mental Health and the Theory of Social Comparison.”](#)

## Health Hazard or Healthy Inspiration?

Social media also provides forums in which teens can encourage each other in unhealthy and dangerous behaviors. Hence, teens with eating disorders or teens who self-harm can connect with others to talk about their self-destructive routines. In these online forums, obsessive calorie counting, fasting, or other exercising are accepted and encouraged. As a result, teens may learn ways to hide or increase the behavior, putting them at greater risk.

In addition, the very act of using social media has unhealthy results. For one, **social media use negatively affects sleep** because the artificial blue light given off by smartphones activates arousing neurons in the brain. Hence, these chemicals disrupt the body's ability to produce melatonin, a sleep-inducing hormone.

However, a teen social network can also inspire teenagers to develop healthy habits. Thus, seeing peers eating healthy food, doing something creative, or getting outside in nature can encourage other teens to do the same. Hence, the effect of social media on teenagers might even result in more unplugged time.

# The Effect of Social Media on Teenagers' Identity Formation

The effect of social media on teenagers extends to an important part of adolescent development: formation of one's unique identity. Hence, social media provides a forum for teens to practice skills related to identity development. These include self-presentation and self-disclosure—sharing their opinions, beliefs, and preferences.

In a longitudinal survey of 219 freshmen at a state university, researchers found that teens who expressed their opinions on social media experienced increased well-being. In addition, another study found that adolescents who communicated more online had greater "self-concept clarity." In other words, they had a clearer idea of who they were in terms of identity. Therefore, this self-awareness supports mental health.

## Social Media Effects on Friendships

During adolescence, friendship and peer approval are critical. As a result, social media supports the drive to connect with peers, with both positive and negative results.

The Pew Research Center report looked at 743 teens, ages 13 to 17, during two months in 2018. And the report's findings regarding social media and friendships include both good and bad news.

Around 81 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 say social media makes them feel more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives. In addition, two-thirds of teens say these platforms make them feel as if they have people who will support them through tough times.

The survey shows a difference in social media friends vs. real friends. Thus, 60 percent of teens say they spend time with their friends online on a daily or nearly daily basis. But only 24 percent spend time with their friends that often in person, outside of school.

In addition, some 45 percent of teens say they feel overwhelmed by all the drama on social media. And about the same number say that they often or sometimes unfriend or unfollow others on social media. In fact, 52 percent say that **cyberbullying** directed at them or others was their reason for unfriending. Such online bullying is a significant negative effect of social media on teenagers.



## The Addictive Quality of Social Media for Teens

Addiction can be an effect of social media on teenagers. Scientists have found that teen social media overuse of social media creates a stimulation pattern similar to the pattern created by other addictive behaviors. Hence, the brain responds to social media the same way it responds to other “rewards”— with a release of dopamine. These dopamine rushes are catalyzed when a teen posts something online and is met with likes, shares, and positive comments from their peers.

*“Each ‘like’ increases dopamine, just as cocaine and other drugs do. In adolescents, the brain is rapidly developing and the pleasure centers are all coming on board. Thus, when teens derive addictive pleasure from social media, it can be a recipe for ignoring real-world pleasures, such as building true person-to-person relationships.”*

**—Jamison Monroe, CEO and Founder of Newport Academy**

Jamison notes that teen social media addiction is often the result of underlying issues, such as chronic stress, anxiety, or childhood trauma. Hence, treatment at Newport Academy includes unplugging from phones and social media.

“At first, kids literally don’t know what to do with themselves without the phone,” he says. But after several days, they begin to reawaken to their IRL (“in real life”) environment. Hence, they form strong friendships. And they reconnect with nature and with the satisfaction of creative offline activities.

Finally, research finds that the influence of parents can lessen the effect of social media on teenagers. Therefore, positive IRL connections make the biggest difference in a teenager’s life.

Photos by Newport Academy, Hans Vivek, and Gian Cescon from Unsplash.

Sources:

*Nature Human Behaviour*. 2019(3):173–182.

*Clinical Psychological Science*, 2019.

*Clinical Psychological Science*, 2017.

*Prev Med Rep*. 2018 Oct 18;12:271–283.

*Comput Human Behav*. 2015;52:49–58.

*Psychiatr Danub*. 2012 Mar;24(1):90–3.