

There is greater access to the Internet today than there ever was. There is also a greater number of ways to communicate with others than ever before. People can connect from anywhere in the world through personal devices to a rapidly growing number of social media platforms. Young people, particularly, are embracing these networking sites as a way to communicate with friends and classmates. As social media becomes an increasingly important part of young people's daily routines, we must consider the negative impact this has on their emotional and mental health.

One of the primary ways social media can negatively impact teenagers' mental health is by eroding self-worth and instilling feelings of inadequacy. Feelings of inadequacy lie at the heart of depression, disordered eating, isolation and social anxiety. There are many ways social media can do this, and I'd like to discuss a few in turn.

The first thing a user must do when joining a social media network is create a profile. A profile, made up of biographical information, likes and dislikes, or followers, can define a person's online identity. This task can cause some stress and anxiety for teens particularly, as they are just figuring out who they are and how they want the world to see them and because of social pressure to be seen as 'cool.'

Young people may compare their network of online friends to the networks of others. Users may be concerned with the number of friends they have or with those friends in the real world who may choose not to connect with them online. Young people may feel inadequate when they see that other friends have connections outside of certain communities, for example a user that has many connections outside of their school friends may seem more popular.

When young people begin to navigate through social media, they are presented with mostly positive content such as parties, vacations, and certain successes. These positive posts depict vibrant social lives, wealth, and happiness. It is easy to forget that a person's profile and posts are only a portion of that user's life which is intended for an audience. Young people see posts from their entire network and can then feel inadequate because they compare their offline life to the online lives of each of their connections.

When young people feel that they do not stack up to their online peers mental health issues like depression, disordered eating, stress, and anxiety can be triggered. Various factors that cause mental health issues are unique to individuals and are rarely triggered by one element. The feeling of inadequacy can be exacerbated by some of the above-mentioned aspects of social media, and may be a component that impacts one's mental health.

Social networking can leave users without a sense of control as they only have the ability to manage their profile and communication with others to a limited extent. Social media relies on its users posting content. Young people can share as much or as little information as they want online but they cannot be sure of how people will react to their profile or posts.

Once posted, online information is present for all to see, even if a young person deletes something he or she posted, another user could have saved that information. A sense of anxiety can result in knowing that other users will judge

the content one posts and that the information can be passed throughout the virtual world.

Online bullying can lead to depression and the Internet can be turned into unsafe space for someone being bullied. A young person being bullied online may not feel that there is any safe space when bullied because harassment can occur at all times and for all to see.

Bullying on social networks can include ostracising a user, for example, where a peer group chooses to not to connect with a classmate or peer or disconnect from him or her. Taken to the extreme, bullied teens can be provoked or even encouraged to self-harm. Amanda Todd was asked repeatedly for a year to share a topless photo of herself with a stranger she met online. After being blackmailed by that stranger, Todd's photo circulated online and led to bullying that forced her to move homes and cities various times. The bullying led Todd to self-harm and take her life. Although social networking sites have security features, little education around what might trigger mental health issues exists. Further, schools do not have the ability or resources to police online networks, especially where posting does not occur on school grounds.

The Internet can be harmful when users associate with each other in ways that lead to the promotion of physical, mental, or emotional harm. Cases where users make suicide pacts, false or honest, have been seen and recently William Francis Melchert-Dinkel escaped conviction for two separate charges of counseling suicide of both a Canadian and British person.

Pro-anorexia websites are similarly harmful to both the mental and physical health of teens. Various blogs and online forums enable users to discuss their disordered eating with others, while getting encouragement from others to keep their habits secret from parents and friends. On Twitter, 'thinspiration' is a controversial tag that is used to share images promoting extreme dieting and over-exercising.

It can be hard for young people to differentiate between supportive friends and online connections within their social media networks. Young people have the ability to be up to date with the information that those on their networks post, but it isn't always followed up with further communication. A false sense of friendship is created because social networks allow people to be privy to information that otherwise would not be shared.

Feelings of isolation and social anxiety can become present for young people through the frequent use of technology and communication on social media sites. Young people are now less accustomed to talking face-to-face and thus social situations, like parties or spending time with friends outside of school hours, can become stressful. Young people tend to turn to their technology, such as cell phones, to seem important and social, which then continues a cycle of becoming less comfortable communicating in person.

Some schools are choosing to be cell phone-free zones during class hours, whereas others are embracing technology and social networking. But, little education around proper online etiquette is taught in schools. Young people must begin to view the Internet as an extension of their offline worlds in which consequences exist. Advocates must be as present online as they are offline in

order to support proper use of technology. Through educating users on healthy practices for using social networking sites, the Internet can be a safer place.

Those managing social media must also be advocates and ensure that their sites do not allow for mental health issues to be triggered. Instagram chose to ban the tag 'thinspiration' in 2012 and a year later re-examined the promotion of disordered eating on their site and then banned a group of pro-anorexia terms. Even though this is a step in the right direction, there is no education around why certain elements of the social media are harmful to young people's mental health.

Identifying how social networks affect people emotionally and mentally encourages users to think critically about their own use. Social networking is only possible with active participation from users and thus if the online community chooses to evaluate and change the way they engage online, positive changes can occur.

Counsellors and mental health professionals should be aware of the ways that social networking affects the mental health of young people so that they can be ready to talk about social media with their clients. Opening up a conversation will allow young people to discuss the way that they feel social media affects their lives emotionally and mentally and, in turn, strategies to cope with these feelings can be put into place.

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