social media & mental health

by Helen Townsend

Three billion people, around 40% of the world's population, use online social media – and we're spending an average of two hours every day sharing, liking, tweeting and updating on these platforms, according to some reports. That breaks down to around half a million Tweets and Snapchat photos shared every minute.

With social media playing such a big part in our lives, could we be sacrificing our mental health and well-being as well as our time? As with most things in life, there are positive and negative sides to social media. My ultimate belief is that when used in moderation, with checks and balances on how we are using it, social media are neither good or evil. Instead, its somewhere in between.

Since social media is relatively new to us, conclusive findings are limited. The research that does exist mainly relies on self-reporting, which can often be flawed, and most studies focus on Facebook.

With social media booming many people have taken notes of the flawed parts of it and created a bad reputation for social media and its users. Just like anything else, social media has negatives, but it also encompasses many positive attributes that people tend to overlook.

"Early studies suggest that social media usage is associated with depression, anxiety and loneliness in SOME people."

Connection, Community and Support

Yes, this one is obvious, but people overlook it all the time. How brilliant is that when a friend or family member goes on holiday, they can post pictures for you to see while they are still there enjoying their time? Or if you have family or friends living abroad and it's not super easy to call them due to time differences and work schedules, you can check up on them and see if they have made any recent updates so you can still be in the loop!

Some people may say this takes away from human connection but I think it can advance connections by having topics to talk about and specific questions to ask when you come into contact with someone you haven't seen in a long time.

Our time is being stretched thinner and thinner by work and family commitments. Social media offers a chance to communicate in a speedy and efficient manner. One of the reasons many people dislike making phone calls is the unnecessary banter that can occur. You can't just say what you want to say and then hang up. Instead, you have to swap pleasantries before saying what you want to say, and then swap more pleasantries before the conversation comes to a natural conclusion.

Sometimes when something happens in your community, you may not know about it due to not watching the news that day or checking the newspaper but with social media and the great thing is that you can see people's varying opinions on certain situations/topics that you wouldn't have otherwise.

Small businesses can get great revenue by posting things on social media and getting traffic on their websites. Also, there are some companies that are online based and rely on social media to grow and connect with other people. Just like Artful Academy!

Relationships

One of the biggest positives of social media is that it has never been easier to make friends. Just a few decades ago it was pretty tough to connect with people. Unless you were the overly outgoing type able to make conversation with anyone and everyone at a party or were able to write an interesting account of your life in a letter it could be hard to 'stay in touch'.

It seems weird to make friends with people you haven't met but social media gives us the opportunity to branch out and talk to new people (while being safe of course).

Social media can foster empathy. In general friends on social media do care and will tell you so. They will listen to what you have to say, and help you deal with any problems you may be facing. If this isn't the case, then you may want to find new friends.

The point is that by all of us sharing our experiences, both good and bad, on social media we're able to empathise with each other. A friend may have gone through a similar ordeal that you are currently going through, and they will be able to help you get through it.

It isn't just your inner circle of close friends and even closer family members that social media allow you to communicate with easily and effectively. One of the good things about social media is its power to open the world up to you, making it a smaller place than it has ever been before. Social media mean someone's physical location has become a lot less important.

As someone who moved half way across the UK as a young person, I have used social media to stay in touch with friends I grew up with and have helped many a person, whom life as thrown them a curveball and have also received the same in return.

There is no doubting that having social media in our lives can lead to relationships breaking up too. But there is another side to the story, which is that people are moving onto other, perhaps better, relationships. Social media can put you (back) in touch with people who you have lots in common with, and that common ground is often the starting point for long-lasting relationships.

As painful as breakups can be, they can sometimes be the right thing for all concerned. What's to say that the new relationship, founded on the steps of Facebook for example, isn't the one that will last? Even if it doesn't turn into a spectacular coupling, it could be the friendship that is needed at the time. Which has to be a positive thing.

As previously mentioned, social media can help you find people you share interests with. This makes it much easier to find common ground with other users, making connections with like-minded individuals much easier than it would be offline.

This does require the sharing of information and giving up a certain amount of privacy. Which is enough for some people to reject social media outright. Keeping key personal information private is necessary, but sharing your likes and dislikes and interests and obsessions can actually contribute to an open society.

Balance

Balance is so important. How long we spend on social media can have a big impact on our mental health. Sleep for example - we are now surrounded by artificial lighting all day and night and research has found that this can inhibit the body's production of the hormone melatonin, which facilitates sleep. Blue light, which is emitted by smartphones and laptop screens, is said to be the worst culprit. In other words, if you lie on the pillow at night checking your social media, you're headed for restless slumber. Its proven, the more time you spend off social media, before bed away, the easier it is to sleep!
To provide some much-needed balance, I've looked at the pros and cons of social media. If they resonate with your personal experience of online media, consider using these tips to spend less time on social media.

Take a day off from social media
While other ideas on this list will be about finding specific means to limit social media use, the best tip is often to take a day off social media. Whether once a week or once a month, putting aside time where you don't even check social media helps keep you from becoming dependent.

Few strategies work as well as time off, as your need for constant interaction and gratification will wane. And if you're feeling a bit daring, even try daily downtime after a certain hour.

Do your hobbies
If you find your eyes are glued to your phone for hours on end, perhaps add time for your hobbies to your daily routine. Each activity is time away from your phone. There is nothing more exciting than finding a new passion or indulging one you already enjoy.

Track your social media time
One of the best recent features in iOS 12 for iPhone is Screen Time. Found under the Settings app, Screen Time has two major social media usages: Tracking and Limiting.
Each day (or week), you can get notifications that give you an average on the amount of time you've spent on your screen. This is great for those who aren't looking for total social media limitations but instead want to see how much time they are spending as a whole.

On the other side, the App Limits feature is a blessing for those who aren't able to put down social media. Each day you allot how much time you want to spend on social media or other apps. After that time is reached, it's game over. Be strong with yourself and try not to spend too much time scrolling and unfollow anyone who makes me feel bad about yourself.

Follow light-hearted content
Tired of seeing everyone around you living a life you wanted? A healthy alternative is to find content that is both enjoyable and uplifting. We see enough chaos in the world around us, wouldn't a few more light-hearted accounts be a better follow?

Great examples of enjoyable content would be funny and cute images, such as the cutest animals on Instagram. Sometimes the best medicine is a smile that gets you away from the stress of how "perfect" everyone looks on social media. Content that fulfils is more beneficial than content that teaches us to envy.

Follow honest content
Following enjoyable and honest content is much healthier for your brain. If your off time is spent doing something you find yourself coming back to, why not make it a positive experience? Follow artists who are honest about their journey and their mistakes. Follow humble people who talk about their struggles and hopes equally.By allowing our social media feed to be lightened and full of honest individuals who enjoy life, you allow yourself to be part of an honest experience.

Ignore likes and follows

It is ridiculously easy to get trapped into wanting the most activity on your social media. Getting someone to like or comment on your photo releases endorphins through your brain. We get excited at the thought of someone else liking or following us. It becomes a drug.

A solution to that is to either turn off notifications or better yet, stop caring about the numbers. The number of friends or followers on your account should never be more important than your actual life—once you realise this and run away from the instant gratification, you're a step towards better social media usage.

Wellbeing

In a study from 2013, researchers texted 79 participants five times a day for 14 days, asking them how they felt and how much they'd used Facebook since the last text. The more time people spent on the site, the worse they felt later on, and the more their life satisfaction declined over time.

But other research has found, that for some people, social media can help boost their well-being. Marketing researchers Jonah Berger and Eva Buechel found that people who are emotionally unstable are more likely to post about their emotions, which can help them receive support and bounce back after negative experiences.

It's clear that in many areas, not enough is known yet to draw many strong conclusions. However, the evidence does point one way: social media affects people differently, depending on pre-existing conditions and personality traits.

As with food, gambling and many other temptations of the modern age, excessive use for some individuals is probably inadvisable. But at the same time, it would be wrong to say social media is a universally bad thing, because clearly it brings a myriad of benefits to our lives.

Social media can...

- Allow people to connect with others experiencing the same or similar struggles;
- Help people to communicate their story and learn from others who maybe going through similar things;
- Aid a feeling of being within a community;
- Facilitate people feeling they can be themselves without being judged;
- Offer support via information and also by others helping each other;
- Help some people connect with far reaching people who without it, would not ever-cross paths.
- Help with a need to escape when life is too much;
- Aid awareness of not being alone;
- Help to feel connected when feeling alone.