

COVID-19 – Social Media and Mental Health

During the uncertainty and lockdown restrictions as a result of COVID-19, many people are spending more time outside of their normal routine with social media being a common go to for many to 'pass the time'. This article will explore some considerations around social media use for you to be mindful of to ensure it does not impact our physical or mental wellbeing adversely.

Why is social media such an important platform to talk about? Well, many data sources suggest that 3.5 billion people around the world are using social media daily, which equates to roughly 45% of the world's population. Facebook is the leading social media platform with approximately 68% of all social media users having an account. It is also reported that 90% of millennial's use social media and on average we spend 3 hours a day on social media or messaging platforms. And to show how much social media has grown rapidly in recent years, there has been a rise from 150 million daily Instagram stories posted in 2017 to 500 million daily stories posted in 2019.

During times like the current situation we find ourselves in now as a result of COVID-19, our average use is likely to increase dramatically so it is going to be really helpful to recognise that and be mindful of how we can maintain positive mental and physical wellbeing at this time.

Before we look at the potential adverse impacts social media, or shall we say, overuse of social media, let's look at the many positives. Social media can be a useful tool to:

- Stay connected to friends and family
- Easily arrange group events (virtual events during COVID-19)
- Share memories
- Access information and resources that you would never have been able to access years ago
- Networking
- Re-connect with old friends or distant family members

Though there are many positive to social media, there can be downsides if we use social media too much or use it for the wrong reasons. Overuse of social media can be linked too:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Physical health problems
- Eating disorders
- Loneliness and social isolation
- Bullying and trolling

Here are some ways that social media use can have an adverse impact on our wellbeing:

- **“Facebook envy”** – A study at the University of Copenhagen found that users who avoided using Facebook cited better life satisfaction. Excessive Facebook use and monitoring others posts, photos and relationships was detrimental to their own satisfaction and increased self-doubt.
- **“FOMO”** – Seeing posts of others at events or with other people can give us that fear of missing out which can lead to loneliness or anxiety.
- **Memory** – Trying to get that perfect picture of a moment can often mean that we forget to actually live in that moment and savour it.
- **Sleep** – Using your phone too close to going to sleep can cause sleep problems. Our brain remains on high alert so we can become worked up or anxious about things.
- **Loneliness** – Studies suggest that by using social media up to 2 hours each day can increase loneliness and social isolation.
- **Body dissatisfaction** - Images could be a potential factor in leading people to develop poor body image perspective

What can we do to stay on top of our social media use and our mental and physical wellbeing?

- Try setting a rule that you don’t check your phone 40 minutes before bed
- Try video calling a friend or group video call some friends or colleagues rather than sending a message or voice note to stay connected
- Try playing brain training games rather than just using social media on your phone
- Be aware of these social media issues or traits and if you recognise a symptom in the future give yourself a break from social media.
- Try engaging in content in different ways. For example reading a book, doing an online course or watching an informative documentary
- Block or report any unwanted posts or comments you receive from trolls or bullies

Here are a few suggested websites for you to seek out more social media and mental health support and information:

www.internetmatters.org

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/tags/social-media>

www.mind.org.uk

