

Social Media Does Not Have to be Depressing

21 March 2018

By Joshua Doucet

Like, share, comment, tweet, snap, subscribe, friend, and unfriend are all verbs that are associated with social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. These sites have invaded our lives, and they will continue to have a strong presence in the foreseeable future. Social media companies and their platforms are building a more connected world, but, at what price? There is no doubt that these websites have plenty of benefits to individuals and societies, but there are darker consequences of social media use as well. In the study titled "Social Media Use and Depression and Anxiety Symptoms: A Cluster Analysis," Ariel Shensa et al draws connections between social media use and mental illness, while acknowledging that "Each year, approximately 7% and 18% of adults in the United States (US) are affected by depression and anxiety, respectively" (116). Clearly, it is nonsensical to assume that every instance of depression and anxiety in the US is a byproduct of social media use, but it is not farfetched to state that social media may attribute partially to the epidemic. Thankfully, the negative effects associated with the use of social media can be mitigated as Kristen B Fuller explains in her article "Are We Allowing Social Media to Dictate Our Happiness?" Individuals can reduce the likelihood that these social media platforms will have a negative impact on their mental wellbeing by monitoring the frequency of use, and understanding the pitfalls of destructive behavior on these sites.

Prior to accepting a solution, one must understand the problem at hand. In the United States depression and anxiety are the most common mental illness among individuals (Shensa et al 116). These mental health issues are serious, and should be treated as so. Those who experience depression feel inadequate, lonely, and worthless at times. Furthermore, individuals who suffer from anxiety experience feelings of being overwhelmed, uneasy, fearful, and lack the ability to focus. Teenagers and adults alike who are experiencing anxiety and depression are more susceptible to poor work/academic performance, substance abuse, and suicide (Shensa et al 116). Suicide accounts for more than 1% of deaths in the US, while being the second leading cause of death among the age group ranging from 15-24 years old (Mental health America). So, what are the contributing factors to mental illness?

The case study by Shensa et al has sought out to study individuals who use social media to determine if popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter could be attributed to a higher likelihood of developing depression or anxiety. In October 2014 the study surveyed 1730 adults in the United States from the ages of 19-32. The participants completed an online survey that inquiries about their volume of social media use, as well as their level of anxiety and depression. To determine the extent of use, the study considers five factors, length of time, frequency, number of platforms used, problematic or addictive habits regarding social media, and the intensity or emotional connection to social media (Shensa et al 118). Beyond the usage questionnaire, the survey also asked participant to evaluate their levels of mental unrest. Regarding depression, participants were asked to evaluate how frequently they felt hopeless, worthless, or depressed in the previous seven days. Additionally, the participants evaluated their level of anxiety by the statements "I felt fearful," "I felt it was hard to focus on anything other than my anxiety," "My worries over-whelmed me," and "I felt uneasy" (Shensa et al 119). The

authors of the study found evidence linking social media use to mental illness by combing all parts of the survey,

Each participant was placed in one of the five groups “wired,” “connected,” “diffuse dabbler,” “concentrated dabbler,” and “unplugged.” The groups “wired” and “connected” consist of individuals who interact the most with social media, whereas the other three groups consist of individuals with moderate or minimal use. Those who fall into the groups with higher use typically spend more than 60 minutes a day using social media, and are associated with having lower satisfaction levels with life (Shensa et al 118). Also, these groups are more likely to have troubles with depression and anxiety. On the contrary, the groups consisting of minimal users could use social media to benefit their lives by using it as “a tool for maintaining and building relationships without replacing the in-person counterpart” (Shensa et al 125).

It is worth noting that conflicting research shows that the volume of social media interaction may not lead to depression or anxiety (Shensa et al 117). This is where the effects of social media meet some grey area. The effect of depression due to social media is partially determined on what the user is experiencing while online. Everyone’s experience in the social space is drastically different, and can produce varying effects on the mind. Hence, social media is not all about depression and anxiety. Many individuals can grow a valuable network of people, and obtain an increased life satisfaction from these tools. So where is the line drawn between benefit and harm, and why is it so easy to become dependent on social media?

Fuller explains in her article that we use social media to brag and obtain the most likes, follows, and comments. In other words, we are attention hungry. Social media provides positive reinforcement when our friends like our posts. As Fuller states, “Let’s face it, positive reinforcement is difficult to resist and can lead people to become addicted to Facebook or other social media sites.” What happens when nobody is feeding an individual’s addiction with likes and comments? First, the individual may experience withdrawal. Then, the individual will browse social media and consciously or subconsciously compare themselves with others. Such behavior can lead to negative feelings such as jealousy and low self-esteem (Fuller). So, what can be done about the mental unrest associated with social media?

The solution is to get some perspective. Social media platforms typically do not exist for the sake of enjoyment. They are products, and the existence of these product is reliant on continued use of them. Social media sites are designed to keep individuals hooked and hungry for more, but social media does not have to control the individual. The individual must take control of social media. Often, “We don’t take a moment to unwind, take a deep breath, and disconnect from the world” (Fuller). It is important to keep in mind that real-world connections and lasting relationships are far more gratifying than any short-lived thrills associated with social media interaction. Those who are extensively using social media should find a way to disconnect, or more reasonably reduce their time connected. As Fuller suggests, “Maybe even only go on social media via a desktop or laptop and delete the apps from your phone. There are so many ways to prevent the ‘social media blues’; you just have to create boundaries if you truly want to find happiness.”

Overall, mental illness is a serious problem, and affects approximately 1 out of 6 individuals in the United States (Shensa et al 116). Depression and anxiety develop under many circumstances, but evidence suggests that social media sites such as Facebook, and others, are in some ways contributing to the problem at hand. The solution is not to banish social media,

because these tools have many benefits to societies. Instead, it is important to understand that social media platforms are designed to be addictive, and that it is imperative to set boundaries. Take a step back, and don't forget to connect in the real-world.

Works Cited

Fuller, Kristen. "Are We Allowing Social Media to Dictate Our Happiness?" Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, 7 Dec. 2017, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-is-state-mind/201712/are-we-allowing-social-media-dictate-our-happiness.2.11.

Shensa, Ariel, et al. "Social Media Use and Depression and Anxiety Symptoms: A Cluster Analysis." American Journal of Health Behavior, vol. 42, no. 2, Mar/Apr2018, pp. 116-128. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5993/AJHB.42.

Mental Health America. "Suicide." Mental Health America, 7 Sept. 2017, www.mentalhealthamerica.net/suicide.