

# Under Pressure: Are the Stresses of Social Media Too Much for Teens and Young Adults?

For teens and young adults, social media plays a defining role in forming an identity. But the pressures of portraying the 'perfect' life on social media can lead to depression and other serious mental health issues.



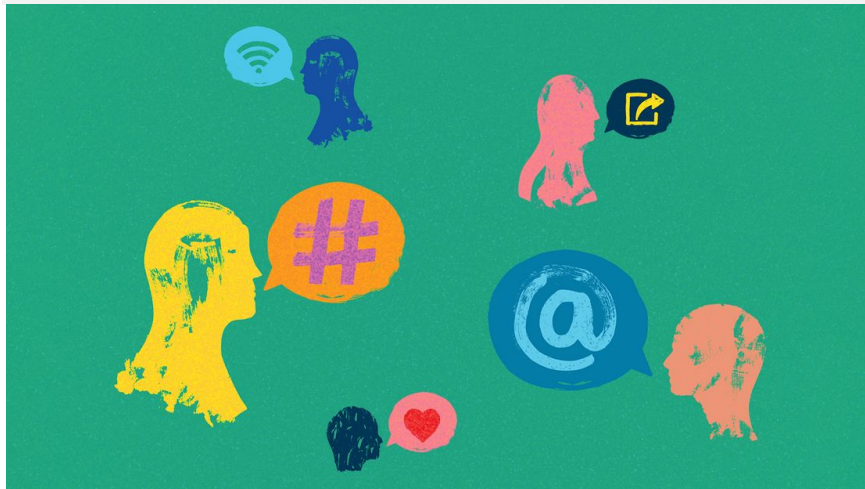
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Research shows concerning associations between social media use and depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem, and sleep issues among young people. [Stocksy](#)

How has social media changed the lives of teens and young adults?

It's popular. If you're in this age group, you and your friends are likely using it. According to data published in April 2021 by Pew Research Center, 84 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds are active on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, or another social media site. That's more than adults of other ages, and up from just 7 percent of teens and young adults in this age group reporting using social media in 2005.

In 2018, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reported survey results show up to 90 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 have used social media.

For some, these virtual platforms can boost social support and connectedness, says Carol Vidal, MD, MPH, an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, who has conducted research on the impact of social media on mental health among adolescents.

### **How Is Social Media Stress Affecting Today's Teens and Young Adults?**

While Tik Tok, Instagram, and other social media sites can help young people connect, they can also become toxic spaces that perpetuate distorted images of perfection, cyberbullying, and other harmful messages and interactions. Here's how to help.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example — particularly while shelter-in-place and lockdown orders were in effect — social media has offered another way for people to connect with family and friends, says psychiatrist Patrice Harris, MD, medical editor in chief at large of Everyday Health and a former president of the American Medical Association.

But at a younger age, it can be difficult to step back and recognize that most things posted to social media are only the highlights of others' lives — and don't include everything that happens behind the scenes, Dr. Harris adds. That can affect teens' and young adults' sense of identity, self-worth, and belonging. "It certainly can add to the worry and feelings of insecurity as they figure out who they are," she explains.

There's still a lot we don't know about how social media use will affect the lives of teens and young adults in the long term, but some emerging research suggests it may pose harms to their mental health and well-being. And mental health experts say they are concerned about some of the unique pressures social media poses to this age group.

## **The Evidence: Social Media Use May Be Harming Mental Health for Some Teens and Young Adults**

The findings of a review article published in July 2020 in the journal *International Review of Psychiatry*, which Dr. Vidal coauthored, indicate that social media has many positives to offer, including friendships with people from diverse backgrounds or who have different points of view. But the data also shows rates of depression and suicidal behavior among teens have risen over the past two decades, and these rising rates have coincided with the advent of social media. The review analyzed data from 42 studies that included thousands of adolescents and teens ages 10 to 18.

Although experts don't yet know whether or how much social media is to blame for these rising rates of mental health concerns, some aspects of its use do appear to have an impact on depression, says Vidal. "We found that passive use [simply scrolling

through social media without actively posting or engaging with other users] was more associated with depressive symptoms in adolescents.”

This finding is consistent with other research that’s looked at how social media use is affecting adults.

Vidal’s research also revealed that young people with preexisting depression are more likely to use social media more frequently or in ways that may not be constructive, such as passive use, she says.

A review article published in January 2020 in *Computers in Human Behavior*, which specifically focused on young adults ages 18 to 29, suggested that social media use is associated with mental health issues in this age group too — and that young adults turn to social media to help cope with stress, even though it doesn’t actually help them manage it.

In another study of 467 Scottish adolescents, published in August 2016 in the *Journal of Adolescence*, researchers found that using social media at nighttime was associated with poor sleep quality, low self-esteem, and high levels of depression and anxiety among young people.

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### **Under Pressure: Mental Health in Teens and Young Adults**

In an era of expanding sexual norms, legalization of marijuana, and omnipresent social media — all amidst a global pandemic — today’s younger generations are facing a new set of stressors and life questions compared to previous generations.

## **What Makes Social Media Spaces Different for Teens and Young Adults?**

Research is still ongoing when it comes to social media use and mental health outcomes. And it’s impossible to quantify so far how it affects teens and young adults differently from older adults, explains Candice Biernesser, PhD, a licensed clinical social worker, post-doctoral scholar in the psychiatry department at the University of

Pittsburgh's Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security in Pennsylvania, and media advisor for the Hope for Depression Foundation.

But it's important to consider the unique factors that make social media different for teens and young adults. "These ages represent a vulnerable point during the life course, when mental health disorders often first emerge and an age in which suicide rates are rising — currently the second leading cause of death among youth," Dr. Biernesser says.

Some of these factors are:

## **Teens and Young Adults Are Still Figuring Out Who They Are**

Feeling a sense of belonging with and validation from their peers is important for teens and young adults, says Brian Wind, PhD, an adjunct professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and chief clinical officer at JourneyPure, an addiction treatment organization.

"More than any other age group, they're actively forming their identities," Biernesser says. "Social media offers them a venue to experiment with identity, considering different versions of themselves and inviting peers to offer feedback."

But this experimentation can open the door to negative peer influence that encourages risky behaviors and feeds self-criticism, which older adults (who may have a more established sense of self) may be less susceptible to, she adds.

"All of us enjoy being affirmed. But the key is remembering that getting a thousand 'likes' does not make you a better person," Harris explains. For adolescents and young adults, because they are likely seeking more of that outside validation, it may be more difficult not to attach feelings of happiness and sense of self-worth to the feedback they're getting on social media, she adds.

## **Teens and Young Adults May Have a Tougher Time Separating Perception From Reality**

Teens and young adults in the United States are living in an age of ramped-up stress and anxiety — and social media can add to the many pressures young people face, Harris says.

"On social media, young people see many of their peers and "influencers" having seemingly 'perfect' lives, 'perfect' parties, 'perfect' attire, and 'perfect' grades," Harris explains. So not only are they trying to keep up with the demands of school, extracurricular activities, work, their futures, and their in-person social lives, they may

also be trying to keep up with the “perfect” lives of others they see on social media platforms, she says.

## **There’s Pressure to Have a College- and Job-Appropriate Social Media Presence**

In a July 2017 survey administered by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (PDF), nearly three-quarters of college admissions staff reported monitoring applicants’ social media as part of their decision-making — and among these, 11 percent have denied admission based on applicants’ social media posts, and 7 percent have rescinded an admissions offer due to social media posts.

And 57 percent of hiring managers have found social media content posted by a job candidate that caused them not to hire that candidate, according to an April–May 2018 CareerBuilder survey.

“Past posts or identities can stay on the internet forever and affect employment chances,” Dr. Wind says — and that can be a significant source of stress.

## **Teens and Young Adults May Be More Susceptible to Harmful Messages About Body Image**

One study, published in September 2016 in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, showed that, among nearly 1,800 randomly selected young adults between the ages of 19 to 32, the risk of having eating concerns increased with higher volume and frequency of social media use.

In a study published in May 2020 in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, researchers found that among nearly 2,500 undergraduate college students, posting edited photos was consistently and directly associated with risk factors for eating disorders.

“People may be comparing themselves to the edited photos they see on social media and perceive their appearance to be inferior,” says Wind, who was not affiliated with either study. “Social media users may also feel that they have to painstakingly edit their photos to get more attention on social media.” That can cause a disconnect between their social media persona and what users really feel about themselves, he says

If teens and young adults are editing images of themselves because they’re worried, embarrassed, or ashamed of who they are or what they look like, that can certainly have negative mental health implications, adds Harris.

## **Social Media Can Fuel Cyberbullying and Harassment**

Of all bullying issues affecting American adolescent students, 15 percent are cyberbullying, taking place online or via text message, according to StopBullying.gov. In a review article published in April 2018 in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* that included 33 studies of children and young people, cyberbullying was associated with a higher risk of self-harm and suicidal behaviors.

Cyberbullying can be uniquely harmful because of its reach. Unlike in the past, when bullying often ended at the end of the school day, the age of social media has essentially enabled bullies to follow people into their homes, says Harris.

Additionally, the anonymity of virtual spaces can provide may make it easier for some bullies to bully others, Wind says. “People can be anonymous by creating fake profiles and post hurtful comments so many times people might not even know who is harassing them.”

## Is There Any Hope of Making Virtual Spaces Less Toxic for Teens and Young Adults?

Setting boundaries for social media use is important for making sure its effects are constructive and not harmful to mental health, Harris says. For teens and young adults, that means having conversations about social media use early on with the entire family, and setting ground rules.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends parents of teens set consistent limits both on how much time they spend using media per day and the types of media they use.

Harris suggests parents have their teens help develop the rules. “Talk about the ‘why’ behind the rules, and talk about why family time is important,” she says.

And for teens and young adults no longer living under their parents’ roof, taking steps to ensure healthy social media use is equally important, advises Vidal. For people of all ages trying to moderate your own social media use, here are a few steps to take:

- **Take a social media break.** Deleting apps from your phone without deleting your account can allow you to refocus on school, work, or in-person relationships.
- **Remember that what others post doesn’t always reflect reality.** “Many people just post the good things that happen in their lives,” Vidal says. Pay attention to times when you find yourself comparing your life with what you see in others’ posts and remind yourself that’s only a snapshot of that person’s life; that person likely has other day-to-day struggles that they’re not sharing on social media, too.
- **Invest time in offline social relationships, too.** Work on balancing your in-person and online lives so that more of your time goes toward face-to-face

relationships than digital ones. To do this, Vidal suggests investing more of your time in social interactions that aren't internet-based. Schedule a coffee date, go for a walk with a friend, or plan on meeting up for a weekly (or more frequent) workout with someone you want to spend more time with.

- **Avoid using social media at night.** One study Vidal and her colleagues assessed in their review article suggested that nighttime social media use has a worse impact on mental health — it can raise depressive and anxious symptoms and affect your sleep quality. Plus, using social media before bedtime is more likely to be passive (known to be more harmful to mental health) rather than active (which is less so linked with health risks), says Vidal.
- **Delete social media completely.** No one says you must use social media if you don't want to. If it's doing you more harm than good, consider deleting all of your social media apps and accounts, says Vidal.