Why Are We Addicted to the Internet?

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Understanding Social Media Addiction

Social media and internet addiction involves spending too much on social media sites to the point it affects other aspects of a person's daily life.

While social media addiction is not an official medical diagnosis, it is used to describe the cluster of behaviors related to the addictive behavior of social media.

Defining Social Media Addiction

The term "social media addiction" has not been medically defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). However, it is often used in news headlines and by television media, and is acknowledged by addiction treatment centers and mental health therapists as an actual, life-altering problem.

The APA defines addiction as a complex "brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequence". People who suffer from addiction intensely focus on the addictive behavior to the point takes over their life.

Signs of addiction may be:

- Behaviors that bring some physical sensation to the addict
- Behavior that weakens the individual's restraint
- Withdrawal symptoms once the addiction has stopped, and stopping that is often unsuccessful
- Behavior that affects family, work and social obligations
- Overall negative behavior

Much like other addictions, some people are unable to able to handle social media appropriately and in healthy ways. The more the internet and social media dominate our lives, the worse of a problem this is becoming.

Signs of a Social Media Addiction

With most addictions, people are motivated to certain behaviors, and these become more important than their relationships and daily obligations, including school and work.

Social media could be considered an addiction if a person ignores important aspects of their life to spend significant time on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other various social media sites.

It is hard to tell if someone has an addiction to social media or if they simply enjoy spending some time on social media sites. When exactly does the time spent to become a harmful addiction? Is it a question of how much time is spent or is it a question of behaviors when they are unable to get access to social media?

Research studies have tried to answer these questions and find social media is even more addictive than alcohol or cigarettes. Other studies have shown social media sites can make people feel worse about themselves, and even contribute to the development of depression and anxiety disorders.

Addiction to Social Media Signs

Here are some signs someone may have a social media addiction:

- Spending hours a day on social media
- Checking social media sites whenever possible
- Oversharing including very private information on social media sites to gain approval from peers
- Hearing from loved ones that you are spending too much on social media sites
- Interference with work, school and offline social life
- Being more comfortable with online social sites than socializing in real life
- Getting anxious and stressed when having to cut down social media time
- Having obsessive thoughts about online friends and other social media features, such as deciding what to post, updating pages and responding to online friends.
- Constantly reporting online about ordinary, everyday things
- Looking for new online friends competitively
- Using social media to escape from real-life situations
- Losing sleep at night to spend time on social media

While the APA has no formal definition of social media addiction, it may be considered an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Regardless of how we define it, social media has become a problem for too many people, affecting relationships and even contributing to job losses.

Why Is Social Media so Addictive?

Researchers from Hungary, Norway and the U.K. recently collaborated in a study to determine how social media affected teenagers. What they found was 4.5% of youth belonged to an at-risk group reporting “low self-esteem, high level of depression symptoms and elevated social media use.” The researchers concluded that teenagers could benefit from school-based prevention and intervention to address problematic social media use. But teens are not the only ones affected by this ever-growing problem.

A 2016 analysis in the medical journal, *Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health*, reported Facebook addiction ranges from 8.6% to 41.9%. But there is little research on how Facebook can become an addiction.

Other studies reported by the 2016 analysis find social media addiction behavior is like substance abuse behavior in that people experience similar symptoms. It is speculated social media misuse occurs because some people rely on it for coping with stress, depression and loneliness.

A Swedish study out of the Gothenburg Research Institute showed 85% of Facebook users login at least once daily and another 70% admitted to logging in whenever they started their computer.

Additional Social Media Addiction Research

A German study from the same year found that among 205 Facebook and Twitter users between ages 18 and 35, many people forgo sleep and rest to spend time on the popular social media sites.

The German study also found women spend more time on the Facebook than men by an average of 15 to 20 minutes. They further reported people who are less educated were more likely to become addicted to Facebook. It's concluded social media addiction was more harmful to people than smoking and drug addictions because social media was cheaper and more accessible.

Also, it's been found that college students who spent more time on Facebook felt worse about their lives.

Similarly, a 2016 study from the University of Pittsburgh finds the more time young adults spend on social media sites, the more likely they are to be depressed.

Risk Factors

There are certain risk factors that increase the chance of someone being addicted to social media. The biggest risk factor for social media addiction is the state of someone's mental health. In fact, people with low self-esteem, depression and anxiety are at the highest risk of developing a dependence on social media, especially teenagers.

People who struggle with these risk factors will use social media sites as a distraction from dealing with real-life issues:

- Relationship difficulties
- Money worries
- Job and life stress

Next page: Learn more about how social media impacts personal and in real life relationships, its link to different addictions and treatment options.

Social Media and Relationships

Social media may ruin real-life connections. One study even finds the urge to check social media is stronger than the urge for sex. People spend so much time on social media sharing important stuff, such as humor, joy and moments. When you share online, you disconnect from the people and reality of the real world.

Another study reported in *Scientific American* finds the presence of a cellphone when two people are connecting interferes with closeness, trust and empathy - all things vital in relationships.

Family Ties

Technology, in general, breaks down family time. There have even been studies where children reported their parents are addicted to their cellphones and computers, preferring this over quality time with their children. It's been shown that children are immersed in their cellphones and other electronic devices to the point where they ignore their parents. Moreover, children who spend a lot of time on social media sites tend to feel less supported by their parents.

Romantic Connections

Social media has also been detrimental in romantic relationships. One 2017 study finds high levels of Facebook use resulted in negative relationship outcomes, including cheating and breakups.

Ex-partners also use Facebook to stalk former partners, or a current partner who constantly monitors another due to jealous feelings. These types of behaviors show Facebook can interrupt daily lives and cause relationship dissatisfaction.

It is very sad that the impulse to share our lives to a worldwide audience is making us miss out on the important relationships in our lives and cause dysfunction in those relationships. This reality is turning into a big problem for some people who may end up needing treatment to sort out reality from social media. After all, it is only a small glimpse of peoples' lives and not a true indicator of their happiness.

Effect on Workplaces

Many employers have banned social media sites from their offices because employees are spending too much time on these sites. Social media interferes with productivity and it could also lead to a job loss.

People can also lose their jobs for something they posted on social media. Prospective employers also check social media on interested candidates and what you say on social media might cost you a pretty good job.

Link to Other Addictions

There has been plenty of research confirming that social media addiction is a real thing. One study from the University of Albany, New York, finds heavy social media use can also contribute to other types of addiction, including alcohol and internet addictions. This is because social media addiction might be an indicator of lack of impulse control in some people.

The researchers surveyed 253 undergraduate students about their social media and internet use, alcohol use and how well they could regulate their emotions. They found that at least 10% of the students exhibited signs of a social media addiction.

Many of the questions asked were modified questions used in diagnosing alcoholism. They asked questions such as, “How does using Facebook make you feel?” and “Do you check Facebook when you first wake up?” The students that appeared to demonstrate characteristics of a social media addiction were more likely to report other addictions, including internet and alcohol.

Based on these findings, researchers believe further studies could result in social media addiction being officially considered and categorized as a medical disorder.

Is It Different Than Internet Addiction?

Some people think excessive social media use is a just a form of internet addiction. Internet addiction was a subject researchers started looking into in the 1990s when the internet became increasingly popular. Even then, researchers predicted the internet would affect relationships and peoples' experiences on the job and in school settings.

Internet addiction is still not listed a formal medical diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM offers a common language and standard diagnostic criteria for diagnosing mental disorders.

Here we are years later and there is still no official diagnosis for internet and social media use that is compulsive enough to be a medical disorder.

How to Treat Social Media Addiction

Many addiction centers have recognized social media as an addiction, and treatment for this addiction requires behavior changes. But first, similarly to other addictions, the addict must admit that they have a problem.

For treatment to work, they must also turn off all social media notifications and carefully limit social media use. Once the dependence on social media has improved, the addict needs to learn alternate ways to communicate, especially in person.

Additional communication and connection behaviors need to be established, including making phone calls and spending time with friends and family instead of using social media.

How to Quit Social Media

Social media addiction is a real problem and it can cause a lot of damage to peoples' lives, including in their personal lives and careers. For most people, we allow social media to pull us in and waste too much of our time.

The best way to limit your habit of checking in to social media is to limit your use to once per day and for a small

increment of time, say 15 minutes. Once you can limit your time, you will find that quitting social media altogether is much easier.

If you cannot stick to checking in a once a day, it is possible you may have a bigger problem, and you should try to find other ways to fill your time throughout your day. If you are spending too much time obsessing over social media and ignoring basic needs and responsibilities, seek out help from family, friends, or even a professional. Don’t let social media destroy your life and your very important relationships.