

The Common Ground Between Social Media And The Mental Health Of Teenagers– Good or Bad?



In the modern era, social media has become a part of the majority of teenagers' daily lives. The advancement of technology and development of many new social networking sites allow those from around the globe to access and be accessible via many sources online. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines social media as websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone (1). Social media has its pros and cons in relation to mental health of teenagers. While it may lead to negative consequences such as addiction, it also helps those suffering from mental health issues (2). A survey showed that 90% of teenagers aged 13 years to 17 years use social media (3). 75% have at least one active social media page and 51% visits at least one social media site daily. According to the same study, two thirds of teenagers who participated also have at least one device with internet accessibility. In 2019, YouTube was the social application that was most used among teenagers. Instagram came in second and Snapchat came in third (4). Some famous gaming sites online where teenagers meet and chat are World of Warcraft, League of Legends and The Sims.

Social media has positive impacts on the mental health of teenagers. They are able to create their identities online and form communications with other people around the world. They build their social network in this way and gain valuable support. Social media platforms break down geographic barriers and expose teenagers to current global events and this educates them about a variety of topics including health behaviour. They can connect with extended family and friends online especially in times where pandemic lockdown measures are implemented. Social media also cultivates a teen's creative life. It is how they explore identities and share interests like games, hobbies and music.

Teenagers who face their own personal problems such as exclusion or bullying can use social media to express themselves or share their experiences to form support groups and to help others in need. This also creates awareness among society of the problems faced by teenagers. Besides that, many teenagers with disabilities or chronic illnesses are more comfortable with self-expression on social media platforms where they can remain anonymous. Those who identify as LGBTQI for example and are not ready to come out in public, they can learn about and share their hidden problems with those who are experiencing the same. Teenagers from particular cultural backgrounds who also face discrimination can come together on social media to express themselves and empower each other.

Social media helps teenagers prevent mental health issues like depression by creating a platform that is humorous and provides a meaningful connection among peers (5). They also can join global online communities where they can feel a sense of connection and belonging. Many platforms exist to help those who feel like they cannot cope with their mental health and this is very important. One exception to the negative impacts of mental health cause by social media is for teenagers who still have a good interaction in person as they do online. Then there are some who are not able to mingle or connect offline, either due to being geographically isolated or feel a seclusion by peers in schools or communities. In this case, social media connection can be helpful and lifesaving to an extent. However social media can also negatively affect the mental health of teenagers. Teenagers spend a lot more of their time today doing online interactions that they are shown a reality that is biased. The filtered lives of a person shown on social media affects how teenagers critically examine information and this will lead to a biased perspective of the world. Social media creates an environment where there are unrealistic views of other people's lives. This in turn creates a self-expectation and peer pressure that could be too much to handle.

Over usage of digital media can distract teenagers and disrupt activities including their sleep. When their sleep cycle is affected, this will lead to a disruption of activities of daily living and finally lead to mental health problems. At a young age, teenagers are more likely not able to moderate their use of social media. They could go to the extent of having to check their social media account every few hours to avoid feeling anxious. This is known as Social Media Anxiety Disorder, by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) (6). Some symptoms include withdrawals from the surrounding, checking social media in the middle of a conversation with other people as well as neglecting school work, family gatherings, exercise and other activities.

Teenagers feel a huge need to share their lives on social media that exposes them to danger of privacy invasion and cyberbullying. Being personally targeted can cause one to have anxiety, low self-esteem and depression (7). They could also be exposed to harmful or inappropriate content relating to violence and drugs. They may freely expose themselves to dangerous people without realising it by sharing personal information like phone numbers or location. This will all lead to negative consequences and may cause a change in their behaviour for instance they may distance themselves from society due to fear and embarrassment.

Teenagers also have an impulsive nature and sometimes over share personal information or intimate stories without thinking about consequences. As a result, they could be harassed, threatened and blackmailed. This will also negatively impact their mental health by causing a lot of stress and worry. Teenagers who are unable to take control of the overwhelming situation may resort to suicide.

Facebook depression happens when teenagers exhibit symptoms of depression when they spend too much time on social media as a result of the intense digital world. The sharing of images by other people can make them feel worse about themselves or even undergo body shaming. They are also exposed too much to targeted advertising and marketing. Some of the other effects of excessive use of social media include impulsive disorder, disruption of proper mental functions, paranoia and feeling alone.

(8)

The risk of social media on a teenager's mental health is often overlooked by themselves, parents or teachers. Teenagers need to be educated and supported in order to be able to develop skills to manage their daily activities especially social media use.

Communication is very important to be able to explain to teenagers about consequences of misusing digital platforms. Parents should empower teenagers to make healthy decisions by engaging in open and honest communication about social media use. They should also spend time to listen to the social needs of their teenage children. Teenagers these days are busy and live pressure filled lives focusing on keeping up and meeting expectations. Parents should encourage discussion about mental health and remind their children of the importance of their emotional health. They can include on how depression and anxiety can affect teenagers and empower them to build coping skills and focus on self-care.

Discussing also enables parents to help their children by encouraging only positive comments to be made on another person's page. They should advise their children that embarrassing photos can be uploaded by friends or anyone else and they may be tagged but should not be ashamed or affected by it if they want to continue using social media. Teenagers should be encouraged to seek consent from others before posting pictures online too. Parents can also follow their children's social media account and form an agreement whether they can or cannot respond to their posts.

Healthy family boundaries should also be created, for example, no screen time during dinner or no use of social media until homework is completed. This allows parents to limit the time spent online thus allowing their children to participate in other activities. The iPhones now have screen time limits that can be set. Instagram and Facebook also have similar functions to help teenagers stop scrolling and start living. Parents should make use of these functions to help with their teenagers' limit of social media use. Parents should also constantly check that there is limited access to personal information and having location services disabled all the time.

It is the responsibility of adults to enlighten teenagers at home and in school about the dangers and negative consequences of sharing personal details full names, phone numbers and addresses to strangers on social media. Parents should keep up to date with the social media site their child uses. Platforms are always changing with new features. Parents should have constant check on their children's activities and have contacts of their friends.

Schools should have a lesson for all teenagers on the good and the bad of social media. They should educate teenagers on what to expect while using social media and how to use it wisely. Some topics could cover on privacy settings and privacy breach. They should be taught on how to navigate risk by not sharing more personal information on top of pictures uploaded. Topics on the importance of logging out of public computers and disabling certain multi-sharing features should be brought to attention to all teenagers in school. Teenagers

should also be able to identify what to do if abusive comments or attacks are directed at them. They could block or report people who are offensive and show dangerous behaviour. They should also be told not to click on pop ups because some that seem safe may lead to inappropriate adult sites.

Many social media sites like Facebook and Instagram have a minimum age limit of 13 years old. However, this is not enforced on many other sites. Social media platforms should increase this age limit to when teenagers are older. Besides that, they should also provide videos and educational content on the dangers of social media to the teenagers who sign up for social media sites. In this case, parents can negotiate with their children to begin with a more friendly social media site such as YouTube Kids before progressing on to the wider social media range. Parents must limit their children's access to age appropriate sites.

Neighbourhood members of parliament should organize talks for teenagers on weekends when they are off school. They can invite counsellors or psychiatrist to share on the negative behaviours caused by social media. This will allow teenagers to understand more about mental health and the importance of keeping themselves safe. It is very important that the community aim to de-stigmatize mental health discussions among teenagers. They should also organize outdoor activities that will stimulate interest among teenagers. Some examples are neighbourhood sports competition or fundraisers by teenagers to buy new equipment for their extra-curricular societies in schools. This will encourage teenagers to spend more time outside of the digital world. Most importantly, there should be programs on digital media literacy available. This will teach teenagers to explore and experiment on social media while building knowledge and skills to participate and enjoy online activities at the same time, avoid any risk. Parents, teachers or the community who notice any risky behaviours of teenagers should immediately meet a health professional.

Social media is becoming more used and famous among teenagers by the day be it in websites or learning environments. Therefore, completely banning the use of social media will not help. Teenagers may have a higher urge to check social media in other ways unknown to their parents and this defeats the purpose of teaching them to navigate social media risk and behave respectfully towards others on social media platforms. Everyone should come together to focus on the well-being of teenagers as they are the future of our world.

1952 words

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