

Major Depression Resource Center

Depression and Social Media

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Tweets, Facebook status updates, and Instagram photos may keep you in the loop, but beware: Too much social media can have negative effects if you have depression.



Social media deserves a big thumbs up for helping people network for jobs and stay connected to friends and family. But did you know that it can also feed into the unhappy feelings that haunt you when you're dealing with [depression](#)?

Becoming wrapped up in social media can create a negative cycle, says Stephanie Mihalas, PhD, a psychologist and a clinical instructor in the department of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the David

Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. Some people may spend time surfing Facebook to try and escape their [depressive symptoms](#). However, social media can actually become a root of unhealthy emotions.

That negative cycle begins when you spend long periods of time on social media, time taken away from other activities that might encourage better emotional health, like exercising, meeting up with friends, and engaging in other activities that provide pleasure. In fact, according to the [2010 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems](#), social media users who consume the highest amounts of content report a decrease in social bonding and an increase in [loneliness](#).

Dr. Mihalas points out several possible negative outcomes from a dependence on social media:

- It furthers the vicious cycle of sitting at home by yourself and being remote.
- You become a victim of your own thoughts as you become less attuned to the outside world around you.
- You might get steered into chat rooms with people who prompt negative thoughts, feelings, and emotions instead of engaging with people who are living a more positive, healthier lifestyle.

Additionally, an element of depression is that it can lead you to process information with a negative bias and have dysfunctional beliefs, says Natascha M. Santos, PsyD, a psychologist and an adjunct assistant professor at NYU and SUNY Old Westbury. Participating in social media through the lens of depression can enable this type of negative thinking and validate faulty beliefs. For instance, you might process photos, Tweets, and posts in a way that glamorizes the lives of others, which may or may not be what they seem, she says. This negative bias can lead you to minimize the positives of your own [relationships](#) when held up in comparison to relationships presented to you through a set of photos and carefully crafted status updates.

A Loss of Face-to-Face Interactions

A [study](#) published in the journal Computers in Human Behavior in 2011 tested the impact of both face-to-face and computer-mediated social support. While both types of support were found to be beneficial, face-to-face support showed a greater impact on buffering life's disruptions. When you're battling depression, Dr. Santos says, in-person interaction is especially important. Real-world, non-digital settings provide the environment in which faulty beliefs can be countered with evidence that proves them wrong, she says.

"When you're socially withdrawn, there's a greater tendency to ruminate about what's wrong," Mihalas says. "When you're with other people, you have a chance to talk about what's right, or at least what's going on with them. Your brain's stress response decreases when you're able to talk about other things rather than focus on your problems."

Plus, face-to-face interactions present opportunities for physical touch — a proven mood booster, she says. According to a [study](#) in the Journal of Family and Children Studies in 2010, interpersonal touch is an important human need.

Redefining Healthy Boundaries

Think about the cost versus benefit of using social media, Santos says. What do you get out of it and how do you feel when you use it? Evaluate why you're on specific websites and ask yourself if you could be using them in a more productive way.

"Try to limit the noise of social media," she says. "Let it serve an appropriate function — networking on professional websites, keeping in touch with distant relatives, or staying on top of current events. If you find that you tend to log in when you're bored or feeling particularly unhappy and you end up feeling worse afterwards, then it's not serving a positive function for you."

Also be mindful of who you reach out to through social media. "Often people who are depressed or anxious set themselves up to feel worse by falling prey to their self-fulfilling prophecies that they're worthless or not liked," Mihalas says. "The habit of contacting too many people can cause this circular dynamic to dovetail an anxiety attack or depressive episode." Instead, connect just with people you consider to be actual friends, she says.

For some people, social media serves as an important support system, so suddenly removing it could be detrimental, Mihalas says. But if you feel you're using social media to escape from reality or to avoid interactions with people who are trying to help you, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional about the function of social media in your life. Together you can come up with a plan to use it more effectively as a healthy tool to help you manage depression.



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