

Finding the right balance with social media

Social media has not only transformed the way we communicate, but also the way we develop and maintain relationships. Just a decade ago, we talked face-to-face with family and friends. But today, most of us also have dozens of virtual friends – people we know only through online social media sites. They can be professional contacts on LinkedIn, followers on Twitter or those with similar interests on Pinterest. In fact, 1.2 billion people worldwide spend hours on Facebook sharing their lives, commenting on issues, offering advice, playing games, and posting jokes and amusing videos. Is this growing dependence on social media good or bad for our mental health? Is it bolstering our self-esteem or is it causing anxiety? The answer is “yes” to both.

Social media – the good

Social media can be good for our mental health because it allows us to:

- **Maintain family and cultural ties.** Many of us have family members across the country or even across the globe. This can increase feelings of alienation and loneliness. But social media lets us post pictures of the kids or updates on events so grandparents in India and cousins in Calgary can feel part of our daily lives. Viewing their posts can help us stay connected to our culture and roots.
- **Find old friends and make new ones.** Even the shyest person can meet new people online. One of the key elements for good mental health is having supportive friends.
- **Improve our self-esteem.** Don't we all feel good when our posts receive several “likes”, “re-tweets” or positive comments or when our complaints receive sympathy?
- **Have company at any time, in any place.** We never have to feel lonely or bored.

Social media – the bad

“We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have.”

– Frederick Keonig

With more and more people choosing screen-to-screen relationships over face-to-face relationships, they're finding the complexities and nuances of real life interactions increasingly stressful and confusing. This is especially true for young people who text rather than talk, play in virtual worlds, communicate with emoticons rather than words and find the nuances of body language completely baffling.

This can cause extreme stress when they land in the workplace and are suddenly expected to articulate their thoughts, interact with co-workers of all ages and backgrounds and understand subtle personal interactions.

Social media usage can also lead to:

- **Insecurity and inferiority.** While some people share both the good and bad of their day-to-day lives online, others present edited or idealized versions by only posting positive news or what they want people

to know. This can make us feel inadequate because our jobs don't seem as interesting, our spouses and children not as wonderful, our homes not as beautiful and our vacations not as frequent or exotic.

- **Jealousy and resentment.** Constant postings of other people's holidays, nights out, parties and other social events can make us feel like we're missing out on life.
- **Anxiety.** Many people feel anxious if they can't log onto their social media profile several times a day. The positive reinforcement and attention they receive for their posts can actually lead to issues such as Facebook addiction.
- **Bullying.** Bullying through social media sites is mostly, but not exclusively, experienced by school age children and youth. In fact, 9 out of 10 teens online report witnessing cruel behavior on social media sites. 15 percent of social media-using teens said they had been the target of online bullying.

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

– Eleanor Roosevelt

If being on social media is causing negative feelings, try to:

- Reduce the number of posts and comments you make.
- Limit your time online.
- Expand your real-life social network. Real-life relationships are harder but can also be deeper, more meaningful and long-lasting – and no one is perfect.

Avoid comparing yourself to others. Remember that people's lives might sound better than yours, but the reality is that they too have problems – they just don't mention them on social media.

The psychological effects of being unfriended online

As much as our online relationships enrich our lives, they can also cause emotional pain when we're unceremoniously "unfriended". If you've felt upset or insulted when someone has unfriended you on a social media site, you're not alone. A recent study found that the most common responses to being unfriended were:

1. I was surprised
2. It bothered me
3. I was amused
4. I felt sad

Overcoming being unfriended

Regardless if it's online or in the real world, rejection hurts. In real life you usually know why a relationship has ended but on social media the reasons are sometimes difficult to understand.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program can help through a variety of resources. Call your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program at **1 866 468-9461** or visit shepellfgi.com.

Being unfriended is usually just bewildering if the individual is an online friend only, but if that person is a real life friend or acquaintance or, worse still, a family member, you can be left feeling extremely hurt and angry. How can you overcome the experience?

- **Ask yourself if the person who unfriended you is really a friend.** Are you more upset about being unfriended than about losing this person from your life? If the thought of spending time with certain friends increasingly feels like an obligation, it could be time to end that friendship.
- **Don't take things too personally.** You can't force people to like you. The fact is you may have been unfriended by someone with 1,000 online friends who simply feels things are out of control and wants to scale back. Keep in mind that if one person has unfriended you, someone else might soon be sending you a friend request.
- **Examine your online behavior.** Is your online behavior behind the unframing? If so, you may want to change your ways to avoid more unframing. One study found the number one reason for unframing someone has to do with the types of things people post. Do you post dozens of updates about your life? This might include what you're eating for breakfast to what the weather is like today. Your mom may be amused, but others may simply find this annoying.

Why was I unfriended?

- **Do you post controversial comments about religion or politics?** Remember that not everyone will share your views and may find your opinions offensive.
- **Do you constantly brag about your life?** Posting news is one thing but endless boasting can alienate people – as do endless postings of “selfies.” Constant updates on your child's exploits will be loved by close friends and family but, again, can be irritating to others.
- **Do you post offensive material?** Off-color cartoons or gory news footage can be extremely disturbing to many people.
- **Do you play Facebook games and publicly broadcast your scores?** Those who don't play these games find it annoying to have their home page cluttered with how your virtual crops are growing or that you've expanded your kingdom. They also may not appreciate receiving endless invitations to join you on your gaming adventures.

Social media is a great way to keep in touch with family and friends at home and abroad, and can provide hours of entertainment. It's also a good vehicle to connect with people around the world who share our hobbies and interests. Social media should be used in balance and in a reasonable manner; remember not to take online relationships too seriously, and keep other people's posts in perspective.

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