



Employee Assistance Program  
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## The Conflicting Science of Social Media and Mental Health

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**As of 2023, there are almost 250 million social media users in the United States. That number climbs to almost 5 billion people around the world and is expected to approach 6 billion by 2027.**

The average person spends an astonishing two and half hours of their time on social media each day. To put that into perspective, if you started using social media at age 10 and continued till age 80, you'd have spent over seven years of your life on these apps.

With statistics like these, we all need to be asking about the long-term risks to our health, including our mental health. But what does science actually tell us about the links between mental health and social media use?

Google "social media" and "mental health," and you're sure to get a lot of hits. Prominent themes in news stories include higher rates of depression, anxiety and stress especially in younger people. Yet the actual scientific research tends to be more split on the topic.

### A look at the links between social media use and mental health published in the last few years.

- Problematic social media use in youth is linked to higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress (2022 systematic review and meta-analysis)

- Problematic social media use is correlated with worse well-being and higher distress, as well as more loneliness and depression (2020 meta-analysis)
- Screen time does not appear to be linked to worse mental health outcomes including smartphones and social media time (2022 meta-analysis)
- Social media can create community, but when used excessively, it's linked to depression and other mental health disorders (2022 meta-analysis of countries across the world)
- Social media use correlations with worse mental health in youth are described by some studies as "small to moderate," while others looking at the same data reported the associations as "serious, substantial or detrimental," suggesting disagreement in interpretation of the data (2022 umbrella review of data)
- Young adults with higher social media use may feel more socially isolated (observational data, 2017)
- Older adults who use social media may experience "enhanced communication with family and friends, greater independence and self-efficacy, creation of online communities, positive associations with well-being and life satisfaction and decreased depressive symptoms." (2021 scoping review)

Even the most comprehensive journal articles on this topic have rather conflicting messages. Yet there are some key stable themes that we can extract from all this work that can help guide us towards safer social media use for our brain health.

Our digital devices, especially our smartphones, are packed with technology and apps designed to capture

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our attention. Companies behind these products are largely incentivized to keep us looking at the screen, not necessarily happy.

- Children and youth may be at higher risk for negative mental health outcomes from social media use than adults.
- Problematic (unhealthy) social media use is emerging as a clear risk factor for worse mental health, but the definition of this term is unclear. Usually, it's something similar to characteristics of addiction (e.g., preoccupation, compulsion, withdrawal).
- Social comparison that occurs due to social media exposure may increase risk for worse mental health outcomes, and this may be more of an issue for young women.
- Social media can provide meaningful connections to people who might not have access to strong in-person networks specific to their interests or needs.

### What Does This Mean For How We Might Approach Social Media Use?

With most people on Earth participating in at least one social media platform, it's unlikely that the social media genie is headed back into the bottle anytime soon. Some have argued for large-scale restrictions on social media use for children and adolescents while others propose an outright ban. How and when a person engages with social media will always be unique to the individual, but when looking at a personal approach to use, most will benefit from asking if their use passes the test of T.I.M.E. (adapted from Brain Wash).

#### **T: Time-restricted**

Is your time spent on social media time restricted? If not, can you set a time limit that you feel comfortable dedicating to social media?

#### **I: Intentional**

Is your social media use intentional, or are you falling prey to doom scrolling, social comparison, or the plans of the app developer that's trying to steal your attention?

#### **M: Mindful**

Is your social media time mindful or mindless? Do you find yourself losing large chunks of your day to scrolling? If so, consider reevaluating your use.

#### **E: Enriching**

Does your social media use enrich your life? Does it educate you? Connect you with others? Provide an opportunity to grow your business? If it's hard to answer yes, it's likely that your apps are extracting more from you than you're getting in return.

#### **References:**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-modern-brain/202308/the-conflicting-science-of-social-media-and-mental-health>