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How to look after your mental health on social media

Social media is one of the most fascinating inventions of all time. We have so much knowledge at our fingertips and the opportunity to communicate with people on the other side of the world. However, there's a dark side, and the online world can damage our mental health if we don't look after it.

Research conducted by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) says social media has been described as more addictive than [cigarettes](#) and [alcohol](#). Rates of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) in young people have risen 70% in the past 25 years, as has [poor sleep](#). [Cyber bullying](#) is also a growing problem, with 7 in 10 young people saying they have experienced it.

So, with 91% of 16 to 24-year-olds using the internet for social networking, it's essential to practise self-care, both on and offline.

Jessi Gold is an assistant professor in a psychiatry department. She offers advice on how to protect your mental well-being when scrolling through Instagram and tweeting your every thought.

In what ways can social media impact our mental health?

"There are studies that suggest more time on [social media](#) leads to worsened mental health. It has some correlations to depression, anxiety, impaired concentration, and a change in sleeping patterns," says Gold.

"There is also evidence to suggest social media usage leads to [body dissatisfaction](#) and [low self-esteem](#), as well as heightened social comparison. It can be an echo chamber of triggers. This means if you go looking for things like pro [eating disorder](#) posts or [self-harm](#) posts, they exist, and that can affect mental health or trigger symptoms."

But what about the positives?

"Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, social media can minimise [isolation](#)," highlights Gold.

"Especially for people with a [mental illness](#), the internet provides a forum to easily share experiences and normalise them. This can sometimes promote help-seeking or [challenge stigma](#)."

This was certainly the case during the [pandemic](#) as the country was in and out of lockdowns. With little opportunity for face-to-face social interaction, many of us turned to [social media](#) to stay connected.

When our familiar ways of communication were shut down, we used virtual quiz nights, scrolling endlessly through memes and binge watching TV series for a [serotonin boost](#).

Not only that, social media allowed us to remain informed and in the loop with the latest COVID-19 regulations. When people felt apprehensive about lockdowns or what the future might look like beyond the pandemic, social media sometimes provided reassurance and clarity.

Given these mixed data, Gold would say that social media is not inherently all good or all bad.

"Like many things in life, it has pros and cons, so limits, as well as an awareness of how it is making you feel, are crucial."

What practical steps can someone take on social media to protect their mental health?

"I think one of the first things it is important to do with social media is actually check in with yourself about it," shares Gold.

Ask yourself these questions:

- How do I feel when I am using social media?
- Does it make me angry, happy, sad, or anxious?
- Am I grinding my teeth and struggling to sleep?
- Does what I see on social media influence my mood?
- Is my social media usage interfering with my day-to-day life?

If your relationship with social media impacts your mood or ability to perform daily activities, Gold says it's important to set limits with yourself.

"Time limits can be helpful. Most of the apps can actually alert you to time limits and you can set them, but you can also just try to manage it independently. A big place to start would be not having your phone be the first thing you reach for in the morning and the last thing you use at night. Try to wind down for sleep without looking at a screen. You might even want to move your phone out of your room and get a real alarm clock again!"

The [blue light emitted by electronic screens](#) can interfere with sleep, so removing your phone completely from your bedroom can bring extra advantages if you're struggling with insomnia.

She says it can also help to limit the sources you are reading to only a few, as venturing down rabbit holes is not beneficial.

"Obsessing over things that make you angry or reading news sources you know will agitate you is not good for your mental health. Have a few trusted sources and stop there."

It's also a good idea to utilise the mute and block functions. They are there to protect you. You can even mute specific words, which can be helpful when you know certain content is triggering to you.

What are some coping mechanisms for when you encounter triggering content online?

One of the first things to do when you encounter upsetting or triggering content, if possible, is to get up from the screen or stop looking at it.

Gold says this allows time for you to acknowledge what you are feeling and why, and name it. Suppressing your feelings will not help in the long run.

"Often when something is triggering, it takes you more into your physical body and a bit out of the screen. You notice your heart racing, you are [breathing faster](#), or you just can't concentrate. There are a few skills for this that can help, and people often pick which ones work for them."

Some coping mechanisms for these moments include:

- Having items on your desk like scents (mint and lavender are popular), stress putty, or something textured that can help bring you back to the present moment quickly.
- Going for a walk to feel your feet on the ground and bring yourself back into the real world.
- Looking around the room and naming five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can touch, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Do this until you feel a bit calmer.

What forms of self-care can be practised offline to protect your mental well-being?

Self-care can be treated like a hobby, and it's important to find methods that work for you. You will probably find different practices work to combat different stressors.

"You can do anything from [meditation](#) to journaling, from [running](#) to [yoga](#), or watching television. The best forms of self-care are what you feel good doing and what you know you will actually use," says Gold.

Having a structured [sleeping pattern](#) and ensuring you're getting enough sleep are also a big aspect of self-care.

When should you seek professional help if you're struggling?

It's important to talk to someone if social media is affecting your mental health. This can be a relative, a friend, or someone you are close to and trust. Be sure to pay attention to how social media is affecting other aspects of your life, such as [eating](#), [sleeping](#) and your concentration. If your low mood persists or your mental state worsens, consult a GP and they can help arrange the best course of care. This might be referring you for therapy.

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