

A group of four young adults are sitting together, smiling and looking at their smartphones. The image has a warm, golden-hour lighting. A dark blue semi-transparent banner is overlaid at the bottom, containing the title text.

SOCIAL MEDIA, DEPRESSION AND ADDICTION



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Social media has become a mainstay in our lives. Sites like Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Facebook have changed the way we communicate with others. Eight in ten Americans who are online use Facebook, the most popular social media platform with over a billion and a half users—and growing.¹

The average social media user spends nearly two hours on their chosen platforms each day. That number is expected to increase as these sites continue to develop. The large amount of time we spend on social media has led to more feelings of anxiety and depression, according to an article published in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.² It has also reduced the amount of time we spend interacting with family and our wider social circle.

Research into social media and how it impacts our lives and our mental health is still fairly new. But a number of studies have found an increase in mental health problems due to heavy social media use, especially among adolescents and young adults.



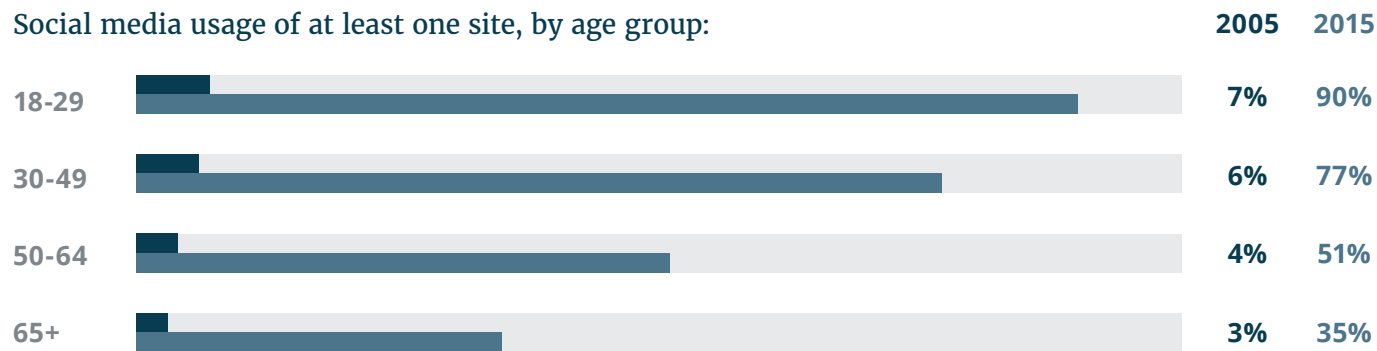
But that's not to say social media is bad. In fact, many studies have identified a range of benefits to using networking sites. These include reduced feelings of isolation, improved self-esteem and a higher number of positive relationships. It all boils down to how—and how much—you use social media.

This eBook examines the relationship between social media and depression. We'll look into the facts and myths behind social media addiction. Finally, we'll offer tips for using social media in ways that won't harm your mental health or reduce your quality of life.

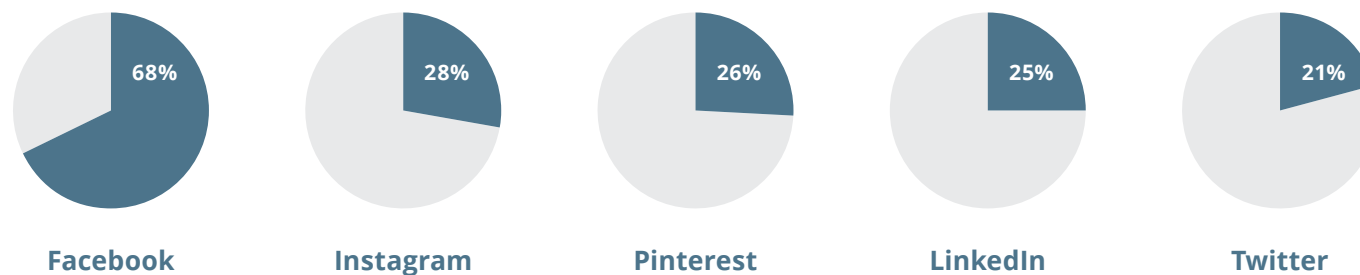


THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

People of all ages and from all walks of life use social media these days. When Pew Research Center started tracking social media use in 2005, only five percent of American adults used social media. By 2011, that number had risen to 50 percent, and today 69 percent of Americans over the age of 18 use at least one social media site.



Social media usage of American adults, by site:





THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEPRESSION



A recent study by the University of Pittsburgh found that the most active users of social media had three times the incidence of depression of those who use it the least.³ But the study's researchers stress that this doesn't necessarily mean that social media causes depression. Rather, it may be that people who are already depressed are turning to social networking to fill a void or to reduce feelings of isolation and sadness.

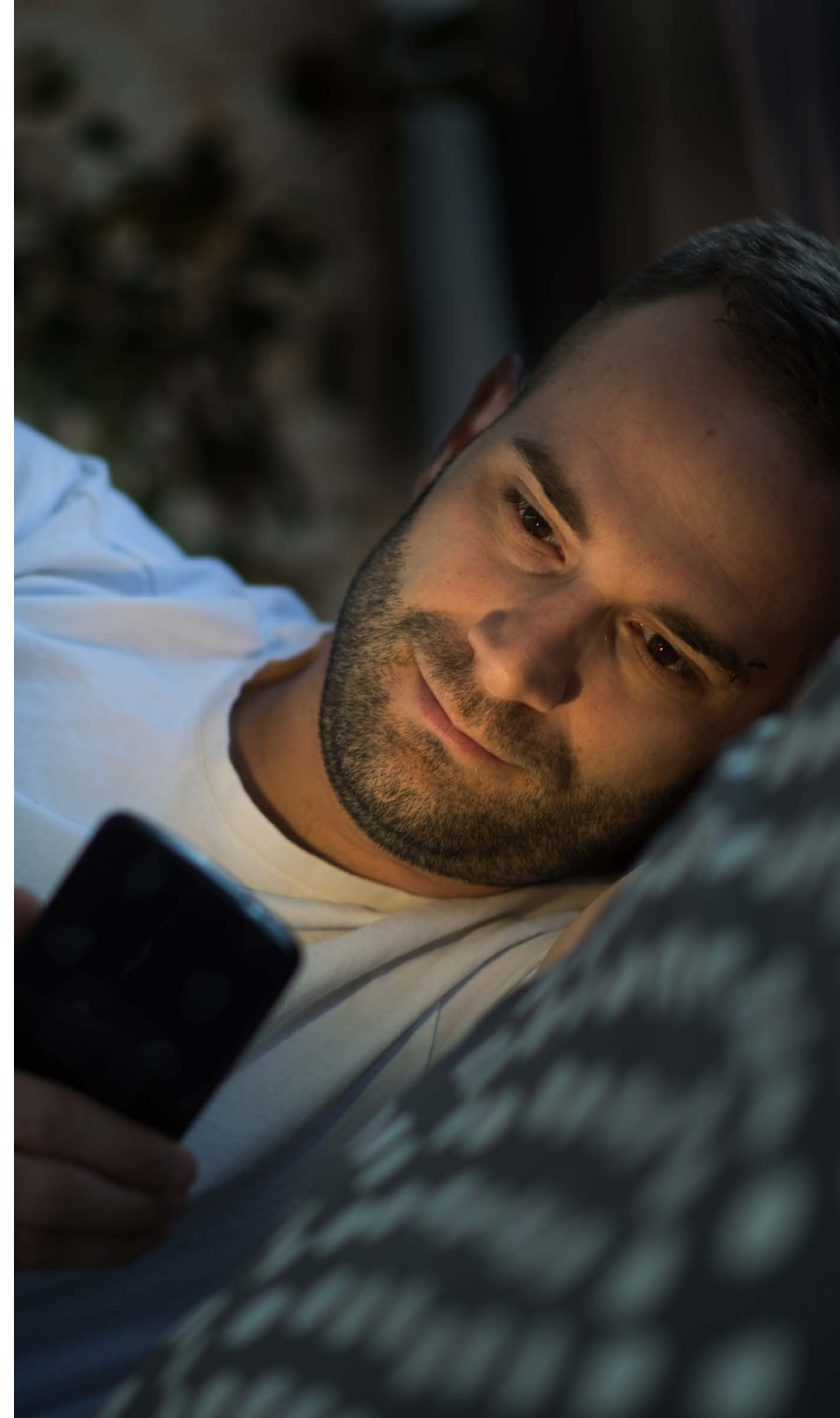
However, a substantial body of research points to a number of factors that could explain the correlation between social media use and depression. These include overuse, negative experiences, engaging in unhealthy online communities and cyberbullying.

Overuse

On the whole, Americans spend more time on social media than they do engaging in other daily activities, including eating, grooming and socializing in person. Overusing social media may have a number of negative effects:

- ◆ Engaging in meaningless activities on social media can lead to feelings of guilt and shame and a low mood from feeling like you've wasted your time.
- ◆ Heavy use can lead to social media addiction, which is associated with depression.
- ◆ More time spent on social networking sites increases your chances of being bullied or trolled.

Limiting the time you spend on social media can help protect your mental health. When your experience is no longer positive, enjoyable or productive, log out.



**NOBODY'S LIFE IS PERFECT,
BUT MOST PEOPLE DON'T
POST ABOUT THEIR DEEPER
PERSONAL PROBLEMS ON
SOCIAL MEDIA.**

Negative Feelings

Social media can produce a wide range of negative feelings.

A study by the University of Missouri found that feelings of envy are common in the realm of social media.⁴ Feelings of envy can leave you feeling dissatisfied with your life. They can make you feel resentful and inadequate, and they lead to feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. But it's important to remember that most people on social media put only their best face forward. They're selective about what they share, posting only things they want the world to see. Nobody's life is perfect, but most people don't post about their deeper personal problems on social media. This gives social media users the false impression that other people's lives are much better than their own.

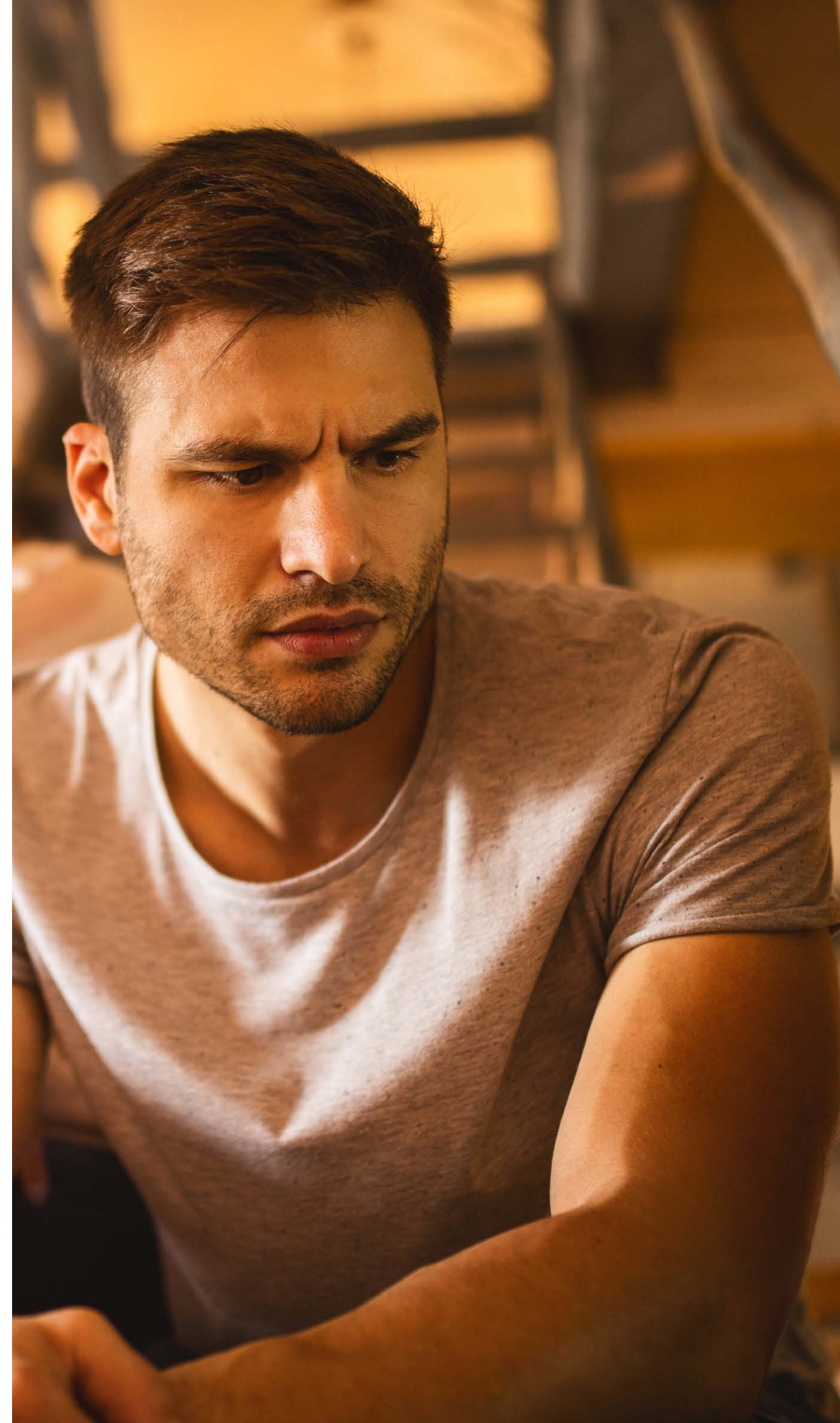
While envy is common among social network users, it's not the only negative emotion associated with social media. A study of college undergraduates' social media habits published by The University of Illinois found that 17 percent of participants who were active on social media experienced negative feelings like guilt, shame and embarrassment related to their usage.⁵

These feelings often come from neglecting other duties or "real-life" relationships in favor of spending time on social media. They may also result from negative interactions on social media, including arguments with others and posting things they later regret.

Unhealthy Online Communities

There's a dark underbelly on many social networking sites that has experts concerned. Groups often form around shared interests, but sometimes these shared interests are unhealthy or even dangerous. For example, Tumblr has a number of groups that revolve around eating disorders, self-harm behaviors and mental illnesses like depression. But rather than being a healthy place to get support, these groups glamorize mental illness. Participants post disturbing images, such as photos of their emaciated bodies, memes glamorizing self-harm behaviors and poetry that glorifies depression and suicide.

The problem is so widespread and troubling that Tumblr instituted a preventive measure to reach out to the users in these groups. Whenever someone searches certain terms, such as "depression" or "self-harm," a message pops up asking if everything's okay and directing searchers to resources where they can get help.



Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a serious problem online, especially among younger social media users. But it's not just young people who are cyberbullied. A review of survey data published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that between 2004 and 2010, 20 to 40 percent of U.S. adults reported being cyberbullied in their lifetime.⁶ As many as 20 percent of adults surveyed reported being an instigator of cyberbullying.

The review also found that victims of cyberbullying were almost two times more likely than non-victims to attempt suicide. Although researchers acknowledge that cyberbullying isn't a sole predictor of suicide, it can lead to serious depression and feelings of isolation and instability in people who already have emotional or psychological problems.

A number of high-profile cases of suicide related to online bullying have led concerned organizations to use social networking sites to fight against cyberbullying. Part of that effort is providing helpful resources for those contemplating suicide.

**CYBERBULLYING IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM
ONLINE, ESPECIALLY AMONG YOUNGER
SOCIAL MEDIA USERS.**

A woman with curly hair, wearing a yellow top, is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression, resting her chin on her hand. She is holding a smartphone in her other hand. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a window or glass door. A dark teal banner is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION



Addiction is a serious mental illness that can lead to depression. Conversely, someone with depression may be more likely to develop an addiction than someone who is not depressed. However, experts caution against throwing around the term "addiction" too loosely in terms of social media usage.

Addiction is characterized by engaging compulsively in a behavior even though that behavior causes problems in your life. While the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* doesn't include social media addiction in its list of mental health conditions, experts have developed a set of criteria to help diagnose real cases of internet addiction.

According to an article published in the journal *Current Psychiatry Reviews*, in order to be diagnosed, all five of the following criteria must be met:⁷

- ◆ Preoccupation with social media even when you're not online.
- ◆ Needing to use social media for increasing amounts of time in order to feel satisfied.
- ◆ Trying to cut down on social media use but finding you're unable to.
- ◆ Feelings of restlessness, irritability or depression when you try to reduce the time you spend on social media.
- ◆ Staying on social media for longer periods of time than you intended.

Additionally, a diagnosis of social media addiction requires the presence of at least one of these symptoms:

- ◆ Social media use has caused problems with your relationships, job, school or career.
- ◆ You use social media as a way to escape your problems or to relieve feelings of anxiety or depression.
- ◆ You have lied to family members, friends or a therapist about how much you use social media.

An addiction to social media can cause serious problems in your life. It often results in depression, anxiety, hostility and relationship troubles. It can worsen existing mental health problems as well as cause their onset.

Treating social media addiction requires intensive therapy with the goal of reducing problematic patterns of use. The goal of therapy is to help individuals find a healthy balance between real-world interactions and social media use.

Common treatment strategies for social media addiction include:

- ◆ Changing your social media schedule so you're not logging on at the same time each day
- ◆ Engaging in more "real-life" activities that require logging off
- ◆ Setting time goals for use
- ◆ Setting goals you want to accomplish off-line and listing actionable steps to achieve them
- ◆ Joining a self-help group for support, tips and resources to help you curb your use
- ◆ Addressing underlying causes of your excessive social media use, which may include stress, boredom, low self-esteem or mental illnesses like anxiety and depression
- ◆ Engaging in family therapy to help address dysfunction in the family system that may underlie or result from excessive social media use





BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

WHEN USED PROPERLY

While problematic social media use can lead to negative emotional and mental health outcomes, healthy use carries several benefits.

The study published by the University of Illinois found that 24 percent of heavy social media users report positive emotions resulting from their use. These include feelings of motivation, enjoyment, self-esteem, relaxation and reduced stress. These users feel a sense of belonging and closeness with their online groups.

When used in a healthy way, social media has a number of benefits. It helps people:

- ◆ Stay connected to friends and family members near and far
- ◆ Follow the news more closely
- ◆ Stay informed about relevant social issues
- ◆ Connect with others who have similar interests
- ◆ Find resources and support
- ◆ Collaborate with one another
- ◆ Manage their social calendars
- ◆ Relax and reduce stress
- ◆ Share information
- ◆ Update their social circle about important life events



HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA IN A HEALTHY WAY



Curbing excessive social media use and using social networking in healthy ways helps ensure you reap the intended positive benefits of online communities. Healthy social media use helps prevent negative feelings and networking-related depression. Here are some tips for using social media in a healthy way.

Stay positive. Posting negative updates on your social media feed spreads negativity and can lead you to dwell on unhappy thoughts and events. Strive to keep your posts positive. Likewise, keep your interactions with others positive, even when you're debating a hot issue.

Ignore and delete trolls. It's tempting, but don't engage with trolls. Trolls are people who post extremely negative things in order to stir up trouble. Delete any inflammatory comments from trolls and unfollow or unfriend them. If the situation warrants it, report the troll to the site's admin.

Unfollow. Most of us have at least one associate on social media that causes us emotional distress. Whether their politics are the polar opposite of yours or they're simply very negative or narcissistic people, anyone whose posts cause mental or emotional distress aren't worth keeping in your circle. Don't feel bad about blocking, removing or unfollowing them.

Walk away for a period of time. Every now and then, make a point to stay off social media for an entire day, weekend or even a whole week. National Public Radio cites research by the Happiness Research Institute in Denmark that found people who took a one-week break from social media felt happier and less lonely. They also reported a significantly higher level of satisfaction with life and considerably less stress than those who remained online.

Engage. NPR points to a number of studies showing that passive social media users—those who don't engage, but only consume—are more likely to feel envy and other negative emotions as well as a reduced sense of well-being. Meanwhile, another study found that posting status updates decreased feelings of loneliness and promoted pleasant emotions. So don't just browse. Engage meaningfully with your social media community.

Don't make comparisons. Think about the things you post on your social media sites. You probably don't make a habit of admitting your electricity got turned off or you're having relationship problems. Make an effort to avoid comparing your life with the lives of those in your social media circle. Chances are, their lives are not as idyllic as they would like you to believe.





Remove your phone apps. If you feel like your social media use is out of control, make a point to use it only on your desktop computer. Remove social media apps from your phone to make it more difficult to check in so frequently.

Set time limits. Time can get away from you when you're engaged on social media, and you may end up online for more time than you intended. This can cause negative emotional consequences. If this is something that happens to you, set a timer when you log on, and log off immediately when the timer goes off. This can help ensure your time spent on social media is productive and pleasant and doesn't result in guilt, shame or embarrassment.

Close tabs. Close social media tabs while you're working. Open tabs make it easy to toggle back and forth between your current task and your social media site, which can lead to time wasted and related feelings of regret.

Put your phone away. When you're out with friends, spending time with family members or at work or school, keep your phone in a pocket or purse. Don't be tempted to take it out and check your sites during minutes of downtime. Focus solely on your real-world interactions when you're hanging out with others.

Be productive during down time. It can be tempting to check in with your social media sites while you're waiting for the bus or on a break at work or school. Instead, ask yourself if there's anything productive you can do with that time. Make that doctor's appointment you've been putting off, write your grocery list, call your mother or run an errand. That way, when you do log on, you won't feel guilty for neglecting other important things.



Think before you post. If you find that your posts sometimes get you in trouble, think carefully before posting anything controversial or negative. Don't call out others' negative behaviors online or air dirty laundry. Ask yourself four questions before hitting "post:"

- ◆ Is it necessary?
- ◆ Is it helpful?
- ◆ Is it kind?
- ◆ Is it true?

If the answer to any of those questions is "no," don't post it.

Keep it out of the bedroom. Screen time before bed can interfere with quality sleep, which can fuel depression. It can also throw a wrench into your love life. Put your phone away a half hour before you hit the sack.

Talk to someone. If your social media use has left you feeling depressed, lonely or otherwise emotionally vulnerable, talk to a therapist. Therapy can help you identify the source of these emotions and develop a plan to improve the way you use social media or cut down on your use. Online support groups can also help reduce negative feelings and provide resources for other types of help.

**ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS CAN ALSO HELP
REDUCE NEGATIVE FEELINGS AND PROVIDE
RESOURCES FOR OTHER TYPES OF HELP.**

A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a blue denim shirt over a grey V-neck t-shirt, is smiling and looking down at a smartphone held in his right hand. He is standing in front of a light blue textured wall on the left and a red brick wall on the right. A semi-transparent dark blue rectangular box is overlaid on the bottom right of the image, containing white text. A thin vertical white line is positioned to the left of the text box.

THE BOTTOM LINE

ON SOCIAL MEDIA, DEPRESSION
AND ADDICTION



Problematic social media use can cause emotional and mental problems like depression and anxiety, and it can lead to overuse and even addiction. Knowing how your social media use affects your mental health is the first step in changing the way you use it.

Getting help for depression or social media addiction can help you restore your quality of life and learn to reduce your use or use social media in healthier ways. The benefits of social media are many, but only when it's used in a way that produces positive, rather than negative, feelings.

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