Orygen

The National Centre of Excellence
in Youth Mental Health

Fact sheet
For clinical and non-clinical professionals
who work with young people

Social media + youth mental health

Social media use is very personal, and everyone interacts with it and experiences it in their own unique way. A recent survey found that 55% of Australians between the ages of 18 and 30 visit social networking sites more than five times a day[1]; another found that young people spend on average 23.16 hours per week on social media[2]. When thinking about the effects of social media use on a young person you might be working with, consider how they are engaging with it and whether or not their usage is right and helpful for them.

This fact sheet was developed out of a focus group run with young people who took part in the Orygen Summer Experience Program. It provides an overview of the pros and cons of social media, as well as some top tips about social media use among young people, for professionals working with young people in any setting.

Let's weigh up the pros and cons of social media

Social media use by young people is inherently neither good nor bad, but rather a balancing act that is unique to every young person and their needs and priorities.

👍 Good stuff

✓ **Relationships:** using social media to build and strengthen young peoples' relationships. A safe place for them to find support and legitimisation for their identities (e.g. cultural, sexual, ethnic), and experiences (e.g. illness, disability).

✓ **Civic engagement:** using social media to learn about and participate in politics and social movements.

✓ **Learning and discovery:** social media is used for both formal education (e.g. University or TAFE subject forums, discussion boards, vlogs or video tutorials etc.), and informal education (e.g. news, training and education opportunities, DIY videos, etc.)

✓ **Creativity and media literacy:** social media facilitates skills in vetting and presenting posts. This encourages creativity and upskilling in computer and other digital literacies.

👎 Not so good stuff

✗ **Cyberbullying:** using social media to repeatedly carry out aggressive and/or harmful behaviour towards a person.[3,4]

✗ **Social comparison:** comparing yourself (including how you look, feel, and what you do) with what other people post on social media.

✗ **Exposure to harmful content:** seeing stuff that you don't want to see, like self-harm or other explicit content.

✗ **Sleep disturbance:** getting less sleep because of increased digital screen time.[5]

Top tips for social media from young people[6]

Here's a summary of the top tips from young people for young people about how they use, or don't use, technology in their day-to-day lives:

- **Audit your social media use** and vet the platforms and pages you engage with based on:

  - how the content makes you feel (e.g. if the content makes you feel guilty, ashamed or evokes negative feelings, consider how to limit exposure).

  - why the content makes you feel that way (e.g. is the content personally targeted, or are the general themes you are exposed to upsetting?)

  - how the content adds value to your life (e.g. does the content provide some other positive aspects, such as information or news, as well as negatives?)

  - see if you can you find the content you like, without the negative impacts.

- **Engage mindfully and safely** with sensitive issues online. Refer to Orygen's #chatsafe guidelines for more information.

- **Use filters and plugins** to enable or disable sensitive content. Some social media platforms will allow for this in their settings.

- **Engage in self-reflection** after using social media, particularly after any upsetting or distressing moments.

- **Don't make assumptions** about whether social media is good or bad. Explore what is important to you, and try to make sure your social media use aligns with this.

- **Don't place levels of importance** or superiority on social media use. Digital friendships might be equally important to you, or more important, than face-to-face friendships.

Want to know more?

You can find a video, webinar and clinical practice point on social media at orygen.org.au

Further resources

Orygen's clinical practice point:
Digital technology and youth mental health

Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner

Orygen's #chatsafe guidelines designed to help young people communicate with each other safely online about suicide.

Social media platform help centres
Facebook
Twitter
Snapchat
Instagram

References

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