

Mental Health Implications of Internet and Social Media Use for Teens and Adolescents
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“The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn’t understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.” -Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google

Teens and adolescents have regular access to the internet. Current data suggest that 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% report that they are online ‘almost constantly’(1). Social media use is just as ubiquitous, and teens utilize Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr most frequently (1, 2). Some of these sites, notably Snapchat and Tumblr, are preferable to teens due to some settings (i.e., Snapchat images disappear within 2-10 seconds, if not screenshotted; Tumblr allows anonymous sign-up and interaction).

Additionally, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that teens and adolescents experience internet aggression, including cyberbullying, cyber dating abuse, and online harassment. Data suggest that nearly a quarter of teens report perpetration of cyberaggression in intimate relationships, while 42% report victimization (3-6). Unlike in-person bullying, cyberbullying may be particularly insidious because technology affords constant access between individuals, can occur anonymously or even without a person being aware (i.e., online stalking, tracking), has the potential to reach widespread audiences (5, 7). Not surprisingly, online bullying and harassment is associated with mental health effects, including anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (8, 9), although longitudinal data suggest that often the mental health symptoms proceed the cyberaggression, suggesting that those with pre-existing mental health symptoms may be more likely to experience later aggression online (9).

Indeed, counselors, parents, and school administrators are increasingly recognizing the link between mental health symptoms and online use. Online internet use is consistently associated with anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, and self-objectification, (10-12). However, the question becomes, which leads to which? For example, is excessive online use leading to more mental health problems, or do mental health problems lead teens and adolescents to engage with the internet in problematic ways? Longitudinal data suggest that the use of the internet does increase mental health issues four years later, even when statistically controlling for prior and current mental health issues (13). Therefore, longitudinal data suggest that internet use is an antecedent to later mental health problems.

However, the issue seems to be more complex than just “those that are on the internet experience more mental health symptoms”. There are data that suggest that the types of sites and posts examined matters. For example, several studies have demonstrated that social media use in particular is associated with depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification (14-19). Females also tend to engage in higher compulsive internet use, and are more likely to engage in social forms of internet use (13). Additionally, there are new data suggesting that the amount of time utilizing social media may matter (19). A new study

found that adolescents that spend more than 3 hours per day interacting with social media are at heightened risk for mental health problems, particularly anxiety and depression (19).

There are also data to suggest that examination of appearance-related images and appearance-related consciousness may contribute uniquely to mental health outcomes (20, 21). In particular, for women, it may interact with their use of social comparison with other posts online. Girls and women are more likely to use “upward social comparison” in which they compare themselves with idealized standards of physical beauty, and compare themselves to posts of people whom they believe are more attractive (22). These unrealistic expectations, combined with high internet use and appearance-related consciousness on social media, may create a complex context in which mental health is impacted.

Taken together, parents and school administrators should recognize the widespread use of technology use in teens and adolescents, and seek to mitigate its negative effects in a variety of ways. First, set limits on the amount of time that your teen is spending on the internet, particularly social media sites. Since mental health problems and sleep deprivation is consistently associated (23, 24), and there are data suggesting that internet use interferes with sleep in teens (25), set limits with regard to how late phones may be accessed, and remove them from your child’s room at nighttime. Further, monitor and talk with your teen about the unrealistic nature of beauty standards portrayed on social media sites, particularly among girls and women. Because women are socialized to believe that their physical appearance are of critical importance and that their appearance does not measure up to societal ideals (26), they may be particularly susceptible to unrealistic expectations for physical beauty. Finally, and most importantly, learn about and talk to your teens about their online use, how coercion and harassment can occur online, and create an environment of open dialogue about the benefits and perils of the internet. This should be an ongoing and repetitive dialogue to help your teen navigate the difficult waters of online use and the internet.

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