

# Tick Tock, Tiktok: Do You Need a Break from Social Media?

Social media came into our lives with the promise of making people around the world feel more connected. It enables us to share everything from vacation pics to breaking news easily. For many, it's the first and last thing we see each day.

What's the psychological impact of this technology and our preoccupation with it? Is this communication tool actually making us feel more isolated? Are curated and filtered photos fueling low self-esteem? Is viral fake news dividing rather than connecting us?

## **Social media may have the most considerable influence on the minds of young people.**

American teenagers grew up with social media in their pockets. They've never known a world without posts, likes, comments, and shares accessible 24/7.

"In some cases, social media is great because young people, teens, and kids can connect with others, even around the world. They can find friends with common interests in a way that's sometimes easier than in person," says child and adolescent psychiatrist Nicole Mavrides, M.D., with the University of Miami Health System. This access has benefited LGBTQ+ youth in remote areas of the country, for instance, as they have used social media platforms as a network to find and support each other.

“But all of that screen time, and not knowing where the other person is, is also a risk and can cause kids to become super uncomfortable and anxious when having to talk or meet people in person,” Dr. Mavrides says. “I don’t know if we can say that it’s causing social anxiety, but it is definitely contributing to it.”

In theory, social media can be a safe, substance-free escape from daily stressors. It can serve as a self-soothing distraction if you limit screen time and are thoughtful about the types of accounts and content you follow.

“It becomes detrimental when it’s not used only as an escape, but as a way of life,” Dr. Mavrides says. “Social media can be harmful when it becomes a constant focus of attention. When you judge your self-worth from your ‘likes,’ ‘dislikes,’ or followers, it’s problematic.”

In 2016, research published in the *Journal of Adolescence* concluded that “Adolescents who used social media more — both overall and at night — and those who were more emotionally invested in social media experienced poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression. These findings contribute to the growing body of evidence that social media use is related to various aspects of wellbeing in adolescents.”

**Focusing your gaze on filtered faces, photo-edited bodies, and influencers’**



# **staged and curated highlight reels can trigger self-criticism and depression.**

“The ideal life, the ‘perfect’ body, and Photoshopped faces on Instagram, Snap Chat, and Tiktok contribute to teens and young adults (and older adults) feeling inadequate and unsuccessful,” Dr. Mavrides says. “Teens may come to think that they have to look, act, or dress a certain way to get people to like them. You may assume that everyone else is having a great life or a good time, and you are the only one feeling overwhelmed, sad, or down. But what you see online isn’t real.”

This heavily airbrushed version of reality isn’t a trend. We’ve seen this on the covers of magazines for decades. “But, because social media is so much more readily available, I think it’s worse or has more of an impact than a beauty or fitness magazine can,” says Dr. Mavrides. “Magazines are published monthly. But kids and teens follow Instagram accounts and see multiple posts every day.”

In addition, the images on a sharing platform supposedly represent the experiences and appearances of “real people,” not models and celebrities alone. This false representation of normalcy can warp young viewers’ perceptions of reality.

Since the advent of social media, “I don’t think that there are more cases of body dysmorphia or eating disorders among young people,” Dr. Mavrides says. “But it affects self-esteem and can cause a lot of anxiety and even depression,” as people compare themselves to others they see online.

During the holidays, especially, many people post photos and videos of festive parties, joyful family get-togethers, engagements, and extravagant gifts. Some

followers are left wondering why they aren't included and saddened that they aren't surrounded by loved ones and presents of their own.

"It can be very depressing, and feelings of negative self-worth can worsen during this time of year," says Dr. Mavrides. If someone thinks that everyone else is perfect — with the most adoring partner or the cutest party dress or the best-looking food — it can make them feel hopeless because perfection, in real life, isn't attainable. This can spike anxiety, depression, reckless behavior, and substance abuse.

## Why is social media so powerful?

You may have heard social media referred to as an "echo chamber" or "bubble" because we tend to find, like, and share accounts and posts that reflect our values and opinions.

"I think that social media is influential because we're following our friends, our community, and others we look up to," Dr. Mavrides says. "If someone you follow is spreading a particular message, you may take it more seriously because you value their opinion. Teens and young adults may be more easily influenced because they think the people they follow are important."

Most young people desire to belong to a group and often find a tribe of like-minded people online.

"Some older adults and, I think, most teens/young adults aren't watching the news. They are getting their news from social media," she says. "If they see violence or rage online, they may assume it's warranted since it's coming from or supported by someone they respect."

# Does your kid need a break from social media?

“I don’t think that teens can determine on their own when they need to cut back or take a break from social media,” says Dr. Mavrides. “Parents need to ensure that the accounts their children follow are a good influence. Check-in and ask questions to find out if your teen is preoccupied with getting more likes on their pics and posts. Is someone ‘trolling’ them and posting mean comments on their posts?”

“If your child gets sad or angry after looking at social media (when it should actually be relaxing or benign), then this is too much and a problem. If your child can’t put down their phone or turn it off for a period of time without experiencing a lot of anxiety, then a break is really needed.”

Many parents already monitor their children’s social media usage to ensure their exposure and interactions are safe and age-appropriate. Some families benefit from dedicated phone-free times like during meals and before homework. Others use app blockers to impose self-designated time limits on access to social media apps.

Have deeper conversations with your child. It will help you understand how social media affects how they think about others and feel about themselves.

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Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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