
IS SOCIAL MEDIA TANKING YOUR MOOD?

BY ELIZABETH LEMBO, MS, LPC

We've all witnessed the rapid evolution of social media over the past two decades. What started out as a convenient way to stay in touch with friends and family quickly broadened to include access to news, employment opportunities, professional organizations, and personal interests. While there are many positives associated with these changes, some people find themselves feeling less-than-positive after engaging in social media. Two of the most apparent culprits of undesired moods are *content* and *comparison*.

Caution: Heavy Contents

Humans are empathetic beings and exposure to human suffering impacts us. Coverage of wars, injustice, and natural disasters spark our empathy and can remind us of times when we've experienced suffering as well. It can be difficult to disconnect from the emotions and thoughts we experience after learning about or witnessing suffering. In some instances, we may feel hopeless, out of control, or uncomfortable with the uncertainty of these events. The field of cognitive science examines these reactions and our tendency to ruminate on them. Rumination occurs when we dwell on what happened, what could possibly happen in the future, or both. For many, rumination decreases mood and amplifies feeling out of control.

Perhaps the most obvious solution is to disengage when your wellness and day-to-day functioning are in question. Social media use can distract us from tasks and loved ones. Are power struggles with



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strangers leading you to obsess over the ultimate snarky reply? Notice if you have difficulty peeling yourself away from what was supposed to be a quick feed update. Notice if loved ones are pointing out your social media use and consider if they're just trying to spend more time with you. If temporarily un-plugging from current events is not an option, consider how in-depth you need to go to stay informed. Do you need to watch the video, or will reading the article suffice? We all know better than to read the comments if we're feeling down or stressed. If you notice yourself checking-in out of fear of missing out, consider trying an experiment. Predict what will happen if you disengage from social media for a week, unplug, and then compare your prediction to reality at the end of the week. Take stock of what you missed and what you gained.

In the face of tragedy, social media plays varied roles. Some people find solace by focusing on how to help others through sharing resources and information about available supports, or by connecting with people who are also experiencing emotional pain. For others, the need to disengage from virtual platforms and seek professional or social support in person is a more effective choice. Remember you have options; every person has a right to determine how they can best cope with suffering.

Comparison: The Thief of Joy

We often hear that social media contains limited curation of someone's life as opposed to an honest accounting of their reality. When we lose sight of this, we may find ourselves comparing our life to what we see, ruminating, and feeling less-than. This can appear in the form of "why questions" such as "Why is my life not as good as theirs?" "Why do things seem easier for them?" Asking why in the context of comparison is understood to proliferate rumination and decrease mood.¹

Consider shifting from asking why to asking how. "How can I increase my satisfaction with what I have?" "How can I make improvements I'd be proud to share?" These thoughts eliminate the passive confusion associated with "why" and offer some level of empowerment by being solution focused. If you think your use of social media is leading you to ruminate more than you would otherwise, over-ride the automatic urge to fill short bursts of time with social media and check-in with yourself before logging in. Ask yourself: how's your mood? Is this the first break you've had all day? Is there anything else you'd rather do in these few minutes?

You are the Expert on your Mood

Experiences of social media use are by no means monolithic. A recent study² indicates that the impact of social media usage varies widely across demographics of the user. While science continues to study the phenomenon of social media and mood, we can benefit from honestly assessing our own



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relationship with it. We can choose the content we want to engage in by building in more intention around when, what kind, and how much media we consume. Consider changing up the accounts you follow as the stressors in your life wax and wane. If you're feeling particularly stressed, give yourself permission to prioritize photos of loved ones, funny animals, or meme pages you enjoy. Make sure social media is benefiting for you, and not the other way around. No need to overthink it, just notice your mood before, during, and after use and make adjustments that reflect and support your personal and professional needs as they change. 🌸

NOTES

1. Watkins, Edward R. *Rumination-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Depression*. United States, Guilford Publications, 2016.
2. Bekalu, M. A., McCloud, R. F. and Viswanath, K. (2019) 'Association of Social Media Use With Social Well-Being, Positive Mental Health, and Self-Rated Health: Disentangling Routine Use From Emotional Connection to Use', *Health Education & Behavior*, 46(2_suppl), pp. 69S-80S. doi: [10.1177/1090198119863768](https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198119863768).

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