

Social Media—The Risky Real-time Experiment

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According to Psychology Today, “we are running an impossibly risky, real-time experiment on children's mental, emotional and physical health.” Theodore Dalrymple, MD, writes, “I have often wondered whether the so-called social media could be as accurately described as the anti-social media. In restaurants, for example, you often see people...attending to their screens rather than to the person opposite or next to them.”

Facebook, as of Q3 2023, says there are over 3 billion active monthly Facebook users, making it the largest app in the world. According to Facebook’s *Social Shepherd*, an estimated 175 million people in America have an account on Facebook. While it can be one way to share and/or discover news about friends and family, is it the *best* way? Or is this a case of the *good* being the enemy of the best?

Whatever you do, put your whole heart and soul into it, as into work done for the Lord, and not merely for men—knowing that your real reward, a heavenly one, will come from the Lord, since you are actually employed by the Lord Christ, and not just by your earthly master (Col. 3:23, Phillips). How can we apply this to our daily media habits?

Why is social media a mental health concern?

- People spend more time on social media than they do connecting in-person with people. Instead of authentic communication—including body language, tone, variation of expression, choosing appropriate words and actions to communicate life’s inevitable ups and downs— social media offers a curated view of others’ lives, edited to give the best impression (and often ignoring reality).
- Jesus said, *and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free* (John 8:31-32, NKJV). Being *free* in Christ implies being transformed. 1 Peter 1:22-25 (MSG) explains: *Now that you’ve cleaned up your lives by following the truth, love one another as if your lives depended on it. Your new life is not like your old life. Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new birth comes from God’s living Word. Just think: a life conceived by God himself! That’s why the prophet said, ‘The old life is a grass life, its beauty as short-lived as wildflowers; grass dries up, flowers wilt, God’s Word goes on and on forever.’ This is the Word that conceived the new life in you.*
- Receiving a “Like” on Facebook causes the brain to release dopamine, a neurochemical that causes good feelings. Looking for that “hit” of dopamine can cause an addiction to social media, as well as an inability to determine whether what we’re seeing is true or false. Like drug addicts, social media users release anticipatory dopamine just imagining looking at Facebook, TikTok, Insta, Snapchat, etc. Along with dopamine release comes a physiological and emotional urge to increase the amount of a substance or activity—which can easily result in ever-increasing time and energy spent on social media—and ignoring connections with real people.
- Facebook’s *Social Shepherd* says the largest audience on Facebook comprised men aged 25 to 34, making up 17.6 percent of the global user base. The second-largest audience group was men aged 18 to 24 years. 6.6% of Facebook users fall into the 65+ age group.

- According to Pew Research, nearly half of U.S. teenagers say they are online almost constantly. 44% of teens feel anxious when they don't have their phones. Half of parents say they have looked through their teen's phone.
- According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey of 1,453 U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 and their parents, "About four-in-ten parents *and* teens report regularly arguing with one another about time spent on their phone. Nearly half of teens (46%) say their parent is at least sometimes distracted by their phone when they're trying to talk to them."
- 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and approximately 60% say they use TikTok, Snapchat, or Instagram.
- The **4.76 billion** social media users comprise **59.4%** of the world's population. Of these, YouTube takes an average of 19 minutes daily. Users spend an average of 30 minutes per day on Snapchat, while users on Instagram spend an average of 29 minutes daily on the platform. **Pinterest** users scroll through ideas each day for 14.2 minutes (source cited: techjury). While it's impossible to find totally accurate statistics for social media usage, it is possible to self-monitor what we're seeing, hearing, and doing.

How can we reduce social media's negative influence?

- As an individual and as a family, **fall in love with Jesus and share His love with one another.** When Jesus was asked which commandment is most important, He said, '*The LORD your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.*' *And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.'* *There is no other commandment that ranks with these* (Mark 12: 29-31, MSG).
- **Spend time deeply connecting with people,** especially your family. *Become wise by walking with the wise; hang out with fools and watch your life fall to pieces* (Proverbs 13:20, MSG).
- **Know where your children go online.** You wouldn't let them travel to another part of the world without appropriate adult supervision; why let them travel alone and unsupervised on the "world-wide web"?
- **Be fully present** (unlike the bumper sticker that reads, "I'm having a wonderful time. Wish I were here"). Parents: recognize when you're being distracted from what really matters. Look in the other person's eyes, communicating with your body language and words that you really hear and care about the person you're with. Actively listen! *Answering before listening is both stupid and rude. Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights* (Proverbs 18:13, 15, MSG).
- **Talk with one another!** Share your stories, remembering what God has done. Joel 1:3 (NLT) says, *Tell your children about it in the years to come, and let your children tell their children. Pass the story down from generation to generation.*
- **Eat meals as a family as often as you can.** And during mealtime, focus on the day's God stories, sharing how God has worked in and through you and others.
- *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline* (2 Timothy 1:7, NIV).