



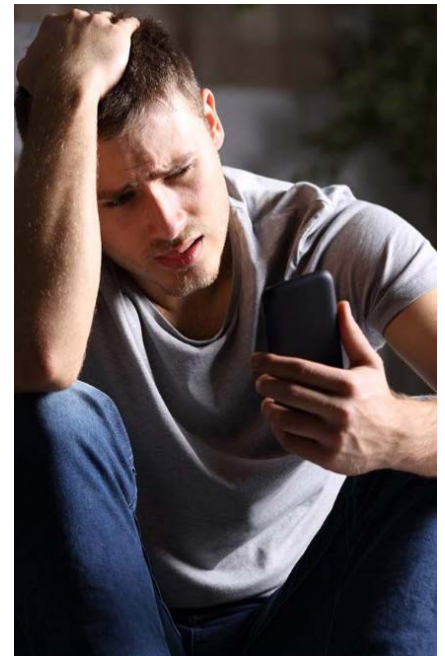
# EXPLORE WELLNESS

## How to use Social Media, According to a Mental Health Expert<sup>1</sup>

Six tips from a psychologist for coping with the negative impacts of social media use, which research has linked to social isolation, loneliness, and depression.

More than one-third of American adults view social media as harmful to their mental health, according to a new survey from the American Psychiatric Association. Just 5% view social media as being positive for their mental health, the survey found. Another 45% say it has both positive and negative effects.

Two-thirds of the survey's respondents believe that social media usage is related to social isolation and loneliness. There is a strong body of research linking social media use with depression. Other studies have linked it to envy, lower self-esteem, and social anxiety. As a psychologist who has studied the perils of online interactions and has observed the effects of social media (mis)use on my clients' lives, I have six suggestions of ways people can reduce the harm social media can do to their mental health.



**1. Limit when and where you use social media:** Using social media can interrupt and interfere with in-person communications. You'll connect better with people in your life if you have certain times each day when your social media notifications are off—or your phone is even in airplane mode. Commit to not checking social media during meals with family and friends, and when playing with children or talking with a partner. Make sure social media doesn't interfere with work, distracting you from demanding projects and conversations with colleagues. In particular, don't keep your phone or computer in the bedroom—it disrupts your sleep.



2. **Have “detox” periods:** Schedule regular breaks from social media. Several studies have shown that even a five-day or weeklong break from Facebook can lead to lower stress and higher life satisfaction. You can also cut back without going cold turkey: Using Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat just 10 minutes a day for three weeks resulted in lower loneliness and depression. To make it easier, seek help from family and friends by publicly declaring you are on a break.

*Experiment with using your favorite online platforms at different times of day and for varying lengths of time, to see how you feel during and after each session.*

3. **Pay attention to what you do and how you feel:** Experiment with using your favorite online platforms at different times of day and for varying lengths of time, to see how you feel during and after each session. You may find that a few short spurts help you feel better than spending 45 minutes exhaustively scrolling through a site’s feed. And if you find that going down a Facebook rabbit hole at midnight routinely leaves you depleted and feeling bad about yourself, eliminate Facebook after 10 p.m. Also note that people who use social media passively, just browsing and consuming others’ posts, feel worse than people who participate actively, posting their own material and engaging with others online. Whenever possible, focus your online interactions on people you also know offline.



4. **Approach social media mindfully; ask “why?”:** If you look at Twitter first thing in the morning, think about whether it’s to get informed about breaking news you’ll have to deal with, or if it’s a mindless habit that serves as an escape from facing the day ahead. Do you notice that you get a craving to look at Instagram whenever you’re confronted with a difficult task at work? *Be brave and brutally honest with yourself.* Each time you reach for your phone (or computer) to check social media, answer the hard question: *Why am I doing this now?* Decide whether that’s what you want your life to be about.

5. **Prune:** Over time, you have likely accumulated many online friends and contacts. Some content is still interesting to you, but much of it might be boring, annoying, infuriating, or worse. Now is the time to unfollow, mute, or hide contacts; the vast majority won’t notice. And your life will be better for it. A recent study found that information about the lives of Facebook friends affects people more negatively than other content on Facebook. *People whose social media included inspirational stories experienced gratitude, vitality, and awe.* Pruning some “friends” and adding a few motivational or funny sites is likely to decrease the negative effects of social media.

6. **Stop social media from replacing real life:** Using Facebook to keep abreast of your cousin’s life as a new mother is fine, as long as you don’t neglect to visit as months pass by. Make sure digital interactions don’t become a substitute for talking face-to-face. When used thoughtfully and deliberately, social media can be a useful addition to your social life, but only a flesh-and-blood person sitting across from you can fulfill the basic human need for connection and belonging.



<sup>1</sup>Kecmanovic, J. The Conversation. *6 Ways to Protect your Mental Health from Social Media’s Dangers.* Retrieved and modified from: <http://theconversation.com/6-ways-to-protect-your-mental-health-from-social-medias-dangers-117651>