

Report: Social media makes us less happy

By Alfred Lubrano
The Philadelphia Inquirer

As 2019 recedes, it leaves behind a sobering legacy: Unhappiness continues to haunt Americans.

Social media tends to drain joy from teenagers and adults, both by stoking anxieties about the "better" lives others seem to be leading online and by robbing time we should be spending interacting with others in the real world.

Meanwhile, broad issues such as opioid addiction and the pursuit of money contribute to unhappiness.

In March, the U.N. World Happiness Report set the tone on comprehending our plight, showing, through a complex formula, how happiness in the United States has dipped in recent years.

Findings were based on numerous variables, such as economics, levels of political corruption, and survey questions, including, "If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends ... to help you?" Also, people were asked about feelings of enjoyment, worry, sadness and anger.

On a scale of one to three, American happiness slipped from a high of 2.28 in the 1980s to recent score of 2.16, according to the U.N. report. The U.S. is slotted as only the 19th-happiest country in the world, just after Belgium and right above the Czech Republic. The happiest is Finland; the least happy, No. 156, is South Sudan.

In unrelated WalletHub reports measuring happiness, Hawaii ranked first and West Virginia last. Among cities, No. 1 was Plano, Texas, while No. 182 was Detroit.

One of the traits that hurts Americans most is their quest for more money when they already have enough, said Jacksonville, Florida, psychologist Gary Buffone.

People in other countries say that once their basic needs are met, "any more money doesn't help toward happiness," Buffone said. "Excess can lead to unhappiness. Eating the extra piece of chocolate cake, looking for that high, doesn't bring more happiness.

"Happiness comes from

having good relationships with people, and a sense of purpose in life."

Buffone cited a study showing that people making \$75,000 a year won't get any higher satisfaction from more money.

Happiness is elusive, but you need to search it out, according to Quintelina Lewis, 77, of Boothwyn, Pennsylvania, who has endured her share of woes.

"You have to find it within yourself to push to be happy," said Lewis, an endometrial cancer survivor and a widow who has raised and continues to live with her four grandchildren, ages 18 to 21. The family lives on Social Security income and food stamps.

"My house is a mess, I can't keep up with what needs to be done, but I've always been upbeat, and I try to do the best I can with what I have," she said. "I'll get depressed sometimes, but I keep on truckin'."

As optimistic as Lewis is, however, she'll allow that one thing gets to her more than anything else: Facebook.

"Going online just adds to unhappiness," she said. "Someone saying on Facebook they got new siding and windows on their house — I'd love that. But I can't afford it."

Beyond the envy factor, Facebook presents sad stories people must somehow absorb, noted Burgandy Holiday, 41, a married Mount Airy therapist and mother of two.

"They set us up for the worst humanity has to offer," she said. "And Facebook has this feedback loop that plays the horrible things in the world, and it circles and circles among us. We're over-consuming this content that drives down our happiness."

Life online proved difficult for Americans, especially teenagers.

On average, 12th graders in the U.S. spent six hours a day online in 2017, according to the U.N. report. This meant spending less time interacting with friends, socializing, going to parties, and even sleeping.

All that corresponds with growing teen unhappiness, the U.N. report concluded. Girls spending five or more

hours a day on social media are three times more likely to be depressed than nonusers.

"Bullying also is a factor of the dark side of social media that increases kids' sadness," noted Barbara Becker Holstein, a Long Branch, Pennsylvania, psychologist who works with teenagers.

"Kids are waiting for us adults to calm them down from the excesses of being online and give them feelings of purpose. Not everyone is sitting down together at dinner for 45 minutes, chatting and laughing."

To illustrate the problems teens face, Holstein shared a video of a 13-year-old girl named Alyssa (her last name is withheld to protect her privacy).

"Cyberbullying," Alyssa says in the video, "makes you keep all jumbled-up feelings inside and can ruin lives."

She speaks of a friend who was the victim of "horrible" false stories told about her online by former friends. When the girl responded online by saying, "I thought we'd be friends forever," her tormentors retorted, "Stop talking to us, clown trash." The girl cried.

Beyond online complications, American happiness is also being thwarted because we are a "mass addictions society," according to the U.N. report.

For complex reasons stemming from socioeconomic inequality and growing anxiety, among other things, Americans are indulging in drugs, alcohol, and food, and are spending too much time shopping. They're even exercising more than is healthy.

Addictions "directly lower well-being ... (and) may also give rise to clinical depression," the report concluded.

Statistics may bear out that somber diagnosis. Suicide in the U.S. increased 30% between 2000 and 2016; it was up 50% for girls and women in the same time frame, according to the American Psychological Association.

Perhaps as a result of people trying to self-medicate because of the unhappiness in their lives, experts say, drug overdose deaths increased by nearly 10% from 2016 to 2017 throughout America. Pennsyl-

vania registered 44.3 deaths per 100,000, among the highest rates, figures for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show.

As the opioid crisis has advanced, news reports have shown that many drug deaths are related to drug manufacturers' push for profits.

While unhappiness persists, there may be ways to cope, said psychologist Mary Mercer of Las Vegas, an expert on optimism.

"To be happy, what I advise people is to focus on their problems as not being permanent, and being fixable," she said. "Optimistic people know this,

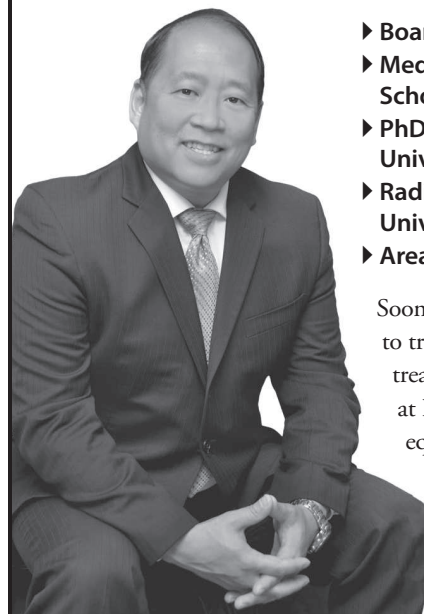
and figure out ways to solve problems."

Further, she said, the happiest people are those who don't blame others for their difficulties. "Optimistic people take responsibility. It causes them to feel better.

"In the end, you're not doomed to being depressed."

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