

## STAYING CURRENT — AND HEALTHY

■ Studies have linked social media use with depression, envy, lower self-esteem and other mental health issues. Here's some tips for avoiding problems without giving up the benefits of the technology

By **Aneri Pattani**  
The Philadelphia Inquirer

Scrolling through photos on Instagram or reading updates on Facebook can be draining. It can seem as if everyone else is having more fun or achieving greater success or getting more likes for their photos and status updates.

Yet social media is also how many people stay connected with long-distance friends or cousins they'd otherwise see only once a year at family reunions.

So how can people reap the benefits of social media without letting it harm their mental health?

Researchers have come up with a few easy-to-follow tips. But first, what are the dangers that social media users may face?

### HERE'S WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH

Several studies have linked social media use with depression, envy, lower self-esteem, and social anxiety. A recent paper reported that one in three young adults who see images of cutting on Instagram will also engage in cutting in a similar manner.

Yet this body of research often faces the criticism that people who already have mental-health challenges are likely to spend more time on social media, rather than



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Studies have found that limiting social media use can decrease depression.

social media being the cause of their illness.

One study that followed British teenagers over eight years found social media has limited effects on the typical adolescent's well-being. It was mostly harmful for vulnerable groups, such as teens predisposed to depression and anxiety.

Because most studies focus on specific populations — teens or young girls, for instance — it's hard to know for sure how social media affects mental health for the overall population.

### HOW TO PROTECT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Jelena Kecmanovic, an ad-

junct professor of psychology at Georgetown University, recently wrote an article for the Conversation about how to avoid the dangers of social media. Here are some of her tips:

- Limit when and where you use social media. Using social media can interrupt and interfere with in-person communications. Consider turning your social media notifications off or even putting your phone in airplane mode during meals with family and friends, conversations with your partner, or important meetings at work.
- Try to not keep your phone or computer in your bedroom, or use social media

right before bed; studies show that using devices at this time disrupts your sleep.

Consider scheduling regular multi-day breaks from social media. Several studies have shown that a five-day or week-long break from Facebook can lead to lower stress and higher life satisfaction. If that seems too extreme, just limiting your social media use to 30 minutes a day can reduce feelings of loneliness and depression.

- Pay attention to what you do and how you feel. Instead of mindlessly scrolling through Facebook or watching multiple Snapchat

stories, try to be mindful every time you use social media.

Do you check Twitter first thing in the morning because you need to be informed about breaking news or because it's an ingrained habit? Does viewing photos of your friend's vacation make you happy or envious?

Each time you check social media, think about why you're doing it, how it makes you feel, and whether that's really what you want.

• Narrow your online networks and pay more attention to your real-life relationships. Over time, most people accumulate online friends and organizations they follow that are no longer relevant. Some of the content is boring, annoying, or even upsetting. So unfollow, mute, or hide them.

One study found that people whose social media included inspirational stories experienced gratitude, vitality and awe, so consider adding a few motivational or funny sites to your feed.

It's also important to remember that online connections cannot replace real-life interactions. Humans have an innate need for connection and belonging. Spending time with friends in person and building networks off-line can be protective for your mental health.

### IS THERE ANYTHING GOOD THAT COMES FROM SOCIAL MEDIA?

Researchers are finding ways to harness the power of social media to benefit mental health, too.

Studies have shown that analyzing language from Facebook posts can help predict whether a user is depressed up to three months before the person receives a medical diagnosis. Another study found that the color, lighting, and symmetry of photos shared on Twitter may give insight into who is at risk for anxiety and depression.

Smartphones can also be portals to helpful tools, like meditation apps — some of which have been shown to make people feel less lonely and increase the number of in-person social interactions they have each day.

While online communities may not replace face-to-face connections, they do provide an important space for many people dealing with rarer and often stigmatized mental illnesses, such as bipolar or borderline personality disorder. Many individuals turn to Facebook groups or online gaming platforms to connect with others who share similar experiences. People of color have also used social media to develop private communities where they can discuss the impact of racism on mental health.

## Paradox: Diabetes cases fall as obesity rates rise

By **Mike Stobbe**  
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The number of new diabetes cases among U.S. adults keeps falling, even as obesity rates climb, and health officials aren't sure why.

New federal data released Tuesday found the number of new diabetes diagnoses fell to about 1.3 million in 2017, down from 1.7 million in 2009.

Earlier research had spotted a decline, and the new report shows it's been going on for close to a decade. But health officials are not celebrating.

"The bottom line is we don't know for sure what's driving these trends," said the lead author of the new report, Dr. Stephen Benoit of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Among the possibilities: Changes in testing and getting people to improve

their health before becoming diabetic.

The report was published by the journal BMJ Open Diabetes Research & Care. The statistics run through 2017. Last year's numbers are not yet available, Benoit said.

Diabetes is a disease in which sugar builds up in the blood. The most common form is tied to obesity, and the number of diabetics ballooned as U.S. obesity rates increased.

But other factors also might have pushed up annual diabetes diagnoses from 2000 to 2010, and they may partly explain why the numbers have been going down since, some experts said.

First, the diagnostic threshold was lowered in the late 1990s.

That caused more people to be counted as diabetics, but the impact of that may have played out.

"We might have mined out

a lot of the previously unrecognized cases" and so new diagnoses in the last several years are more likely to be actual new illnesses, said Dr. John Buse, a University of North Carolina diabetes expert.

Meanwhile, doctors have increasingly used a newer blood test to diagnose diabetes. It's much easier than tests that required patients to fast for 12 hours or to undergo repeated blood draws over two hours.

The American Diabetes Association recommended the new test, known as the hemoglobin A1C blood test, for routine screening in 2010. Because it's easier to do, it would be expected to lead to more diagnoses. But some experts say it may miss a large proportion of early cases in which people aren't showing symptoms.

"You may be missing people that would have been

diagnosed" with older tests, Benoit said.

Another possibility: Increasingly, more doctors have been diagnosing "prediabetes," a health condition in which blood sugar levels are high but not high enough to hit the diabetes threshold.

Physicians typically push such patients into exercise programs and urge them to change their diet.

"Prediabetes is becoming a more accepted diagnosis" and may be causing an increasing number of patients to improve their health before becoming diabetic, said Dr. Tannaz Moin, a UCLA expert.

The new report is based on a large national survey conducted by the government every year. Participants were asked if they had been diagnosed with diabetes, and also if the diagnosis was made in the previous year.

It found the rate of new

diabetes cases fell to 6 per 1,000 U.S. adults in 2017, from 9.2 per 1,000 in 2009.

That's a 35 percent drop, and marks the longest decline since the government started tracking the statistic nearly 40 years ago, according to the CDC.

The decrease was mainly

seen among white adults, the researchers said.

Meanwhile, the overall estimate of how many Americans have diabetes — whether the diagnosis is recent or not — has been holding steady at 80 per 1,000 U.S. adults.

That translates to about 21 million Americans.

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