

Be Well Aware - Health Article



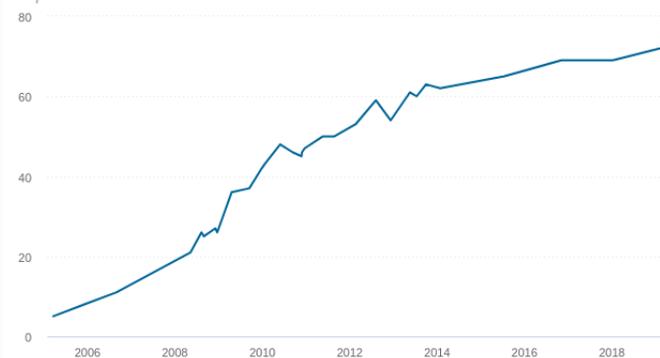
The Brain's Connection to Social Media

The impact of the Internet on today's society is clear. We rely on it for many daily tasks including work and play. Social media, however, remains a topic of investigation as it uniquely influences the way the human brain functions.

According to the Pew Research Center (2019), approximately 72% of U.S. adults use social media today. Most social media users check their accounts at least once per day, while many check multiple times per day. This adds up to an average of about 2-4 hours of daily smartphone use. The graph below reflects an exponential increase of social media use over time.

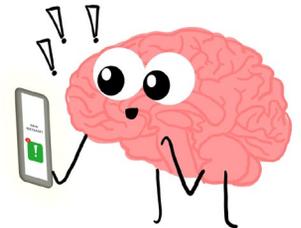
Social media use

% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site



Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2019.

Though social media has benefits including professional networking and quick communication, recent studies show the detrimental effects it can have on your mental health (including increased levels of anxiety and depression, poor sleep quality and low self-esteem).



Social Media Today

The use of social media began with similar motivations to that of traditional forms of communication: to stay in touch with friends and family, make plans and network with others. Over the last decade, this motivation has shifted to a quest for acceptance from others and exposure to shape one's identity. Today, social media allows people to alter the ways that others perceive them through curated profiles, photo filters and in some cases, alternate identities. This shift in social media usage has given rise to a new era of mental health disorders including Social Networking Site (SNS) Addiction and nomophobia ("no mobile phone phobia," or the fear of being without your phone).

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The Brain and Social Reward

When we receive positive interactions via social media, such as getting “likes” on a post, our brains recognize it as a successful feeling that boosts self-esteem. This happens through the release of dopamine, a chemical produced by the brain that plays a large role in motivating behavior. Once dopamine is released, it sends a signal to the brain rewarding the behavior that preceded it and encourages you to repeat the behavior. Over time, it takes more of said behavior to cause the same reaction in our brains (in this case, causing us to check social media for more “likes”). This is the same chemical pathway associated with gambling and drug addiction.

Social media apps take advantage of the human brain’s reward-driven feedback mechanism by implementing algorithms into their platforms to keep you engaged with material you are likely to interact with. We are also inherently motivated to open the app because of the expectation that some type of social reward will be waiting for us when we do (using the example above, this might mean getting a notification that someone “liked” or commented on your post).

Recharging from Social Media

The human brain is not built for continual stimulation and needs a break sometimes, just like our bodies do. The following tips may help you find ways to take your eyes off the screen and recharge your brain for better use.

Unplug. Set aside time each day to unplug from social media. Turn off your notifications or put your phone on “do not disturb” so you can fully experience and enjoy the real world around you.

References:

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Slow down. Social media serves as a constant reminder in the back of our minds that we always need to be doing something. Some people even have multiple social media apps running at a time in order to constantly be engaging. Take a moment each day to slow down and set an intention; it can be as simple as a reminder to stop and take deep breaths.

Unwind. Take a break from social media with some “you time.” Read a book, go for a walk or take a yoga class. Find an activity that helps reset and recharge your brain, and perhaps even helps you forget about what’s happening on your screen.

Eat brain foods. Foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, B vitamins and antioxidants are known to support brain health. Incorporating the following foods on a regular basis can improve your mental function: green leafy vegetables, fish such as tuna and salmon, berries, avocados, walnuts, flaxseeds, tea and coffee.

While it may not be realistic to employ all of these strategies at once, taking the time to commit to at least one per week may just be the reset your mental health needs.