

Social Media and Mental Health

How many times have you checked your social media today?
Social media platforms are specifically designed to keep us coming back for more and to hold our attention for as long as possible — and they're very good at it.

According to We Are Social's Digital 2022 report:

- Australia has 21.45 million social media users with social media penetration in the country currently at approximately 82.7%.
- The average Australian spends an average of 6 hours and 13 minutes per day online.
- 88% of those online users watch videos, 34.5% watch vlogs, 64% stream music, 35% listen to podcasts and 34% stream radio stations.
- Australians spend an average of 1 hour 57 minutes per day on social media.

IS SOCIAL MEDIA BAD FOR US?

As well as thinking about how many times you've checked your social media today, think about why you've logged on. Social media can offer a number of benefits. They can help us:

1. Communicate and stay up to date with family and friends around the world.
2. Find new friends and communities.
3. Join worthwhile causes.
4. Find emotional support.
5. Discover sources of valuable information.
6. Find vital sources of social connection, especially if you live in a remote area.

Your relationship with social media is likely to be a largely positive one if you're accessing social media to:

- Find specific information,
- check on a friend who's been ill, or
- share new photos of your kids with family.

However, your social media experience may be more negative if you're logging on:

- Purely out of habit,
- to see if your latest post has 'likes', or
- to mindlessly kill moments of downtime.

If you fall into this latter category, you're more likely to spend longer on the platforms and be more susceptible to experience some form of social media addiction. This is defined as an urge to constantly check social channels in order to experience fast, short-term pleasure via the secretion of dopamine.

IS SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACTING MY MENTAL HEALTH?

You may be asking: "So, I spend a little bit longer on social media than I should. Is it really that much of a problem?"

Well, everyone is different and there's no set length of time spent on social media that can be defined as 'bad for your mental health'. Rather, it has to do with the impact it has on your mood and other aspects of your life, along with your motivations for using it.

For example, your social media usage may be problematic if it:

1. Causes you to spend less time experiencing face-to-face contact with people.



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2. Distract you from work or personal tasks.
3. Leaves you feeling envious, angry, or depressed.
4. If you are motivated to use the platform just because you're bored or have "FOMO" (or fear of missing out).

Other indicators that social media might be negatively impacting your mental health can be:

1. Spending time on social media even when you are out with family or friends. While you're in a social situation, are you constantly checking social media? This may be driven by feelings that others may be having more fun than you, or that you simply can't resist the urge to check up on something else during what you deem as a 'break' in the conversation. Whatever the case, this habit can not only alienate those that you are with, but cause you to miss out on the mental health benefits of quality social interactions.
2. Comparing yourself to others. Social media is full of people seemingly living exciting lives, or who are fit and healthy. This can make you feel as if you're not doing enough with your own life and/or create a negative body image of yourself..
3. Experiencing cyberbullying. You may be creating stress and anxiety for yourself by feeling you need to go online to monitor the comments and reactions of others to your posts, and to respond to trolling and negative reactions.
4. Being distracted at work. Work can be boring sometimes, so social media can provide the perfect distraction. However, this habit can put you under pressure to meet a deadline and impact success and career progression.
5. Having no time for mindfulness. If every spare moment is spent checking social media, then there's no time for reflecting on who you are, what you think, or why you act the way that you do — the things that allow you to grow as a person.
6. Suffering from sleep issues. You may think that social media helps you unwind before you go to sleep. However, the light from screen devices and the addictive nature of social platforms can keep you awake and disrupt your sleep patterns.

7. Worsening symptoms of anxiety or depression. Social media can often be perceived as something that brings us joy. However, social media has been proven to make people feel more anxious, depressed, or lonely.

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA HABITS

If you believe social media is negatively impacting your mental health, according to multiple studies, the best thing to do is to not use them at all. If you want to opt out of social media, it can be helpful to know that your desire is shared. A survey conducted in 2019 found that half of Australians had ditched social platforms at some point for some length of time. For some people, switching off entirely is not so easy. The vast majority of social media usage comes via apps on the phone, so if this applies to you, delete the app off your phone and switch to only using social media on your desktop. This should reduce the frequency and overall time you spend on your social profiles.

Other ways you can reduce your social media usage includes:

1. Using screen time reports to track how much time you spend on social media a day and setting goals to reduce it.
2. Turning off your phone at certain times of the day, such as when you're at a social event, at dinner, or playing with your kids. Don't take your phone with you to the bathroom.
3. Not taking your phone or tablet to bed. Try leaving them outside of the bedroom overnight.
4. Disabling social media notifications.
5. Staggering your checks. If you compulsively check your phone every few minutes, wean yourself off by limiting your checks to once every 15 minutes. Then every 30 minutes, then an hour, and so on.



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Social media can have a positive impact on our lives, however it has also been proven to negatively affect our brain chemistry and the way we feel. The key lies in the how and why we use these platforms. Are we using them for information and connection, or are we using them as an escape, a way to experience gratification, or a source of entertainment when we're bored?

If you fall into the latter category, it's important to remember that you have control over your relationship with social media. For example, whether you have an iPhone or Android device, you can delete one or more of your social media platforms in just a few seconds — a move proven to make people feel better for free. Ultimately, any decrease in social media use can be beneficial to your mental health, so give it a try.



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