Understanding How Social Media Affects Your Social Anxiety

Objective

To help you understand how social media relates to social anxiety and to identify ways to develop more social relationships in the real world.

You Should Know

Social anxiety is defined as a fear of embarrassing or humiliating oneself in social situations. It is different from shyness. Social anxiety tends to cause people to avoid social situations and become isolated. With the advent of social media as an acceptable means of communicating 24/7, people with social anxiety now have even more ways and more excuses to avoid being around other people in person.

Oddly enough, however, the increase in use of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, etc., can actually increase one's social anxiety. Signs of depression and anxiety, especially among young people, are associated with being online too much. People get "addicted" to "likes" and measure their self-esteem accordingly. The more "friends," the happier? Studies show just the opposite. Comparing yourself to others and their seemingly perfect lives? This is a recipe for more anxiety and depression.

Let's be clear. There are many benefits to social media—information sharing, photo sharing, networking, venting feelings, getting support, and more. But studies show that people with social anxiety are prone to hiding out on social media, which can be a form of escaping "real life." Thus, use of technology can actually be a coping mechanism for social anxiety, but one that may cause the social anxiety to worsen, because it isn't dealt with.

Overcoming social anxiety can best be achieved through repeated practice with people in person. The less you practice social skills, the harder it is to improve those skills. In this worksheet, you will evaluate your social media use, learn some alternatives to using social media, and reflect on next steps.

What to Do

Write down the devices and applications you use on a regular basis and estimate how much time you spend per day on each device, noting the mode of communication (e.g., text, email, IM, social media, etc). For help in assessing your device time, you might want to install a time-tracking app such as [Moment](#) or [(OFFTIME)](#) to gather data.

Device/App/Mode of Communication   **Estimated Time Spent Daily**

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_____   _____

_____   _____

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What are the positive effects of your use of technology, for example, convenient for planning, sharing thoughts and feelings, sharing news, etc.?

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What are the negative effects of your use of technology, for example, lack of face-to-face time, difficulty having an in-person conversation without interruption, increased irritability, anxiety, depression, or moodiness.

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Now, for those items on your list of the negative effects, think about how you can change your use of technology. Here are some suggestions from experts. In the space below the list, write down what you are willing to try in the next week or so:

- Schedule social activities that feel safe to you—individual or small-group gatherings with people you know. Go to a concert, movie, sporting events.
- When you feel anxious, instead of reaching for your phone, move your body—walk, go up and down stairs, activate your body and bring oxygen to your brain.
- Make an effort to be social in small groups without using your phones. Work at making eye contact with others and making "low-risk" small talk about mutually comfortable subjects.
- Practice sharing, in person, your thoughts and feelings with friends and loved ones. Resist the urge to hide behind the "safety" and "anonymity" of texting or emails.
- Make a plan to reduce time on devices—set a goal of limiting tech use to a specific number of minutes per day. Then stick to it.
- Alternatively, carefully *schedule in* your use of technology (e.g., 7:00 to 7:15, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- Install a blocking app that restricts your access to social media.
- Shut off all devices an hour before bedtime. Remember what it is like to simply think; or read, perhaps write in a journal.
- Make time to be in nature, walking, hiking, engaging in pleasant activities with people you know.
- Take a meditation or yoga class.
- Go to the gym. Or join one for the first time.
- If you tend to feel extreme anxiety, consult a mental health professional. It is possible to overcome social anxiety through directed techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy, which often includes "exposure therapy," that is, doing the things you fear in order to master them.

Add your own ideas here:

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More to Think About

1. Which of the alternatives to using technology listed above seem the easiest and most fun for you? Explain.
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2. Which alternatives seem the most challenging? Explain.
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3. Of the easy and the challenging alternatives you identified, which ones can you commit to trying in the next week or so, despite any resistance you might feel?
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Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?

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