

Behind the screen: How social media shapes teen minds.

According to Khalaf et al (2023) “Social media use among teenagers has significant implications for mental health, both positive and negative”. They go on to say that while it offers a platform for social connection, self-expression, and community, it can also contribute to anxiety, depression, and body image issues due to the constant pressure of seeking validation and comparing themselves to others. Cyberbullying, sleep disruption, and fear of missing out (FOMO) are additional concerns, as social media can cause feelings of isolation and insecurity. Furthermore, the nature of online content may lead to distorted self-perceptions, intensifying emotional struggles. However, social media can also provide a sense of belonging, particularly for bringing groups together, and connecting that might not otherwise exist (Khalaf et al, 2023). Balancing screen time with face-to-face interactions and offering guidance on healthy social media use can help with these negative effects, allowing teens to benefit from its positive aspects while safeguarding their mental health (Weir, 2023). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube serve as hubs for entertainment, social connection, and self-expression. Simply banning teens from these platforms is not a realistic or helpful solution. Instead, according to OECD (2023), society must focus on equipping young people with the skills, awareness, and support they need to use social media in a healthy, balanced way. By encouraging mindful use, improving digital literacy, and gaining supportive online communities, we can help teens protect their mental well-being while still benefiting from the positive aspects of the digital world.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the negative mental health impact of social media on teens is by promoting mindful and intentional usage. Many teenagers scroll through social media out of habit, often without realizing how it affects their mood, self-image, or overall emotional health. According to Ehmke (2025) “Teaching teens to reflect on their social media habits can help them become more aware of when and how their online activity impacts them negatively. For example, a teen who feels anxious or sad after spending time on Instagram might notice that certain types of content—such as edited photos or influencer lifestyles—trigger feelings of comparison. She continues to say that with this awareness, they can choose to unfollow accounts that bring negativity and instead follow those that promote positivity, authenticity, or mental health awareness. Time management is another crucial aspect of mindful use. Teens who spend hours each day on social media often experience poor sleep, reduced academic performance, and disconnection from real-life relationships. Setting screen time limits using tools built into smartphones or apps can help teens stay in

control of their time online. Encouraging regular "digital detox" periods—whether it's an hour before bedtime, one day a week, or during social events—can also reduce dependency on constant notifications and scrolling (Ramadhan et al, 2024). Rather than removing social media entirely, which may not be practical or necessary, this method focuses on helping teens become more aware of how online interactions affect their emotions. This creates a healthier and more supportive online environment. Setting time limits on app usage, using screen time monitoring tools, and taking regular digital detox breaks can also help reduce overuse and prevent emotional burnout (Ramadhan et al, 2024). Furthermore, when schools and parents educate teens on how to recognize emotional triggers—such as anxiety or stress after scrolling—they empower them to take control of their digital habits. Open conversations about social media experiences allow teens to share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment, which can be a crucial step in seeking help. Lastly, promoting offline activities like spending time with friends, engaging in sports or creative hobbies can help teens maintain a balanced lifestyle. These practices not only reduce the negative effects of social media but also strengthen teens' self-esteem and real-world social connections.

In addition to developing healthy habits, teens also need education to better understand how social media operates and how it affects their mental state. This is where digital literacy and mental health education come in. Hussain et al (2024) promotes that Digital literacy involves understanding how online content is created, shared, and manipulated. Teens should be taught to recognize that many posts they see—especially from influencers or celebrities—are carefully curated, edited, or even sponsored. These images often do not reflect real life, yet they can still shape unrealistic expectations around beauty, success, and happiness. By learning to question what they see online and think critically about the content they consume, teens can avoid falling into harmful comparison traps. Hussain et al (2024) believe that mental health education goes hand in hand with digital literacy. Schools, community programs, and even social media campaigns can teach teens to recognize the emotional signs of digital overload—such as anxiety, irritability, low self-worth, or difficulty focusing—and give them tools to cope. Teens should also be informed about when and how to seek help if they feel overwhelmed or distressed. Hussain et al (2024) also believe that incorporating mental health topics into school curriculums, hosting workshops, or using peer-led programs can normalize these conversations and reduce stigma. When teens understand how social media can influence their feelings and know how to respond in healthy ways, they're better equipped to protect themselves emotionally. Empowering teens with knowledge helps them build resilience and confidence in navigating the online world.

Not all social media spaces are harmful—many are filled with inspiration, support, and encouragement. Another key strategy to help teens manage their mental health is to guide them toward positive and supportive online communities. The Office of Surgeon General (2021) stated that these communities can take many forms, from mental health advocacy pages and peer support groups to content creators who share personal experiences with anxiety, depression, or body image struggles. For teens who may feel isolated or misunderstood in their real-life environments, these digital spaces can offer a powerful sense of connection and belonging.

For instance, online forums or communities allow teens to talk openly about their challenges, find relatable experiences, and share coping strategies (The Office of Surgeon General, 2021). These conversations can make them feel less alone and more understood. Peer-to-peer support in online spaces can also be less intimidating than speaking to adults or professionals, and it can serve as a valuable first step toward getting help. Mental health influencers—such as licensed therapists or advocates who post content about self-care, emotional regulation, or trauma healing—can normalize important topics and introduce helpful resources (Pretorius, 2022). It's essential for adults and educators to help teens identify safe and trustworthy spaces online. Not all communities have good intentions, and some may spread misinformation or harmful content. By teaching teens how to evaluate the credibility and safety of online groups and encouraging them to engage in communities that promote kindness, respect, and growth, we can make social media a more positive force in their lives (Pretorius, 2022). These supportive environments can be a critical part of a teen's emotional development. While it can present serious risks to teen mental health, it also holds the potential to educate, connect, and empower when used wisely. Instead of fearing or banning technology, parents, educators, and society must focus on giving teens the tools to navigate social media with awareness and intention. By promoting mindful usage, teaching digital literacy and mental health skills, and encouraging engagement with positive online communities, we can help teens create a healthier relationship with the digital world (Pretorius, 2022).

In conclusion, social media's impact on teen mental health is undeniably significant. While the digital world offers teens an opportunity to connect, express themselves, and access valuable information, it also poses serious risks, including anxiety, depression, body image issues, and social isolation. McAlister et al (2024) suggests that rather than simply blaming social media or attempting to eliminate it altogether, a more effective approach lies in equipping teens with the skills, strategies, and awareness to use these platforms in a healthy, intentional way. It is essential that as a society, shift the focus from restricting social media

to guiding teens in managing their engagement with it (McAllister, 2024). In schools, communities, and homes, there must be prioritized education around both digital habits and mental health, teaching teens to be aware of the emotional effects of their online interactions and to critically evaluate the content they consume. At the same time online spaces that foster support, kindness, and authenticity, providing teens with positive role models and communities where they can connect, learn, and grow should be utilised (McAllister et al, 2024) . By integrating these efforts into daily life, theres way to help teens gain a balance between their online and offline well-being, allowing them to see the benefits of technology without falling to its harmful side effects. Ultimately, the key to protecting teen mental health in the age of social media is not about avoiding or rejecting digital platforms but about fostering a healthy relationship with them (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Teens must be empowered to embrace technology with confidence, knowing how to set boundaries, find supportive communities, and seek help when needed.

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