How We Engage on Facebook Affects Our Depression

by KATE TURNER

Study Looks at Facebook and Risk of Depression

Comparing ourselves to others is often a habitual practice, but it can be incredibly damaging — especially when done on social media sites like Facebook.

In fact, new research has shown that making such comparisons online can lead to depression — even more so than making them in-person. The rumination and overthinking that occurs while we're scrolling through someone's profile has deep ties with poor mental health.

Researchers from Lancaster University in the U.K. analyzed data from 14 countries regarding social networking and depression. They discovered Facebook users were at an increased risk for depression when they:

- Experienced envy while observing others' lives
- Were Facebook friends with their exes
- Posted negative status updates regularly
- Made negative comparisons

Unsurprisingly, women and people with neurotic tendencies were even more prone to developing depression. Considering over a billion people use Facebook, this puts a lot of people at risk.

"The findings of this review may have significant implications when taken in the context of public mental health," the research says. "It has been suggested that psychologists should be aware of potential problematic relationships with online social networking and how this could impact mental health."

However, the study indicates that all hope is not lost when it comes to social media: they discovered a positive relationship regarding Facebook users and social support, number of Facebook friends, and perceived social connectedness.

How Facebook and Depression Interact

The key to understanding how online social media triggers depressive symptoms isn't the social media itself, but how people tend to use platforms like Facebook. In order to avoid unhealthy effects, users must learn to avoid unhealthy habits when they log on.

Several other unsavoury effects related to Facebook and depression include:

- **Jealousy.** A lot of ambiguous information can fly around Facebook, and one study from 2009 has suggested that misinterpretation, or a tendency to "fill in the blanks" can lead to jealousy, and challenge relationships.
- **Envy.** The more time people spend surfing through friends' pages and posts, the more envious they

become. This comes down to social comparison: it's natural to compare your own achievements with those of your peers, and since many Facebook posts single out impressive accomplishments and self-promoting events, it can seem like your life pales in comparison.

- **Isolation**. Understandably, sitting in front of a computer pining for friends or waiting for a response to a message can bring about feelings of loneliness. Instead of feeling connected to your social network, a lack of back-and-forth communication can have the opposite effect.
- **Resentment.** Facebook can become addictive, and like other addictions, that can lead to anger and resentment during each experience. Envy can turn into resentment for those people who seem to be "ahead" of you, but you could also begin to resent yourself for the online persona you feel you must maintain.
- **Stress**. All of these effects can combine to form one self-perpetuating, stressful situation. Once your thoughts of inadequacy, isolation, and lack of fulfilment get the better of you, you can begin to see and feel signs of physical and emotional stress, such as problems sleeping and change in appetite.

So, what can be done about this supposed "Facebook depression?"

- **Work on your envy towards others.** If other people's vacation photos lead to you spiraling down into a depressive episode, scroll right past them. Even better, if certain people continuously bring up feelings of resentment, filter their posts so you only see important updates, or even unfollow them.
- **Delete your exes.** Bite the bullet and hit that 'unfriend' button. Your mental health will be better off without you checking up on their every move.
- **Take a break.** If social media is causing you a lot of strife, try taking a little break from it or check it less often. Give yourself a reprieve from all the drama and selfies!
- **Remember you don't get the whole picture.** What we see on social media is not reality — it's the best of what people choose to show us of their lives. So remember, just because someone is posting awesome vacation photos, it doesn't mean they don't have their own issues too.

Tips for Maintaining a Better Self Image

Luckily, it is possible to use Facebook and keep your healthy, positive outlook. Although a large number of studies found that Facebook has negative effects on its users, other studies revealed the opposite: some researchers found that social networks increase trust and engagement, and online interaction could even physically reduce pain and stress.

Those who reap the social rewards of Facebook instead of incurring emotional damage share a few good habits:

- **Interacting instead of consuming**. Posting on walls, private messaging or "liking" a post has a far better effect on your self-image and emotional state than simply scrolling through your newsfeed and cruising through friends' pages. Interaction promotes bonding, and passive use promotes isolation.
- **Paying attention and forming opinions.** It's easy to flick through posts without thinking much about them, but that can quickly lead to boredom, which leads to unhappiness. On the other hand, engaging with the content in a thoughtful manner keeps your brain working and attitude upbeat.
- **Differentiating between social pressure and genuine feelings.** The compulsion to "like" a post or offer sympathy can make you express feelings out of social obligation rather than genuine concern, and that can chip away at true friendship. Those who realize that online and in-person communication are not the same — and face-to-face time is important for healthy friendships — will be better off in the end.

The Internet can complicate relationships and skew self-perception before you even realize it, but it doesn't have to control your life or change your personality. For some, signing off of Facebook permanently is the best way to relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety, but it can be dangerous to blame the social media outlet itself for all of your problems. As the divided results of the studies have shown, attitude and approach are the most important elements in healthy and productive online interaction.