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Teens say social media is stressing them out. Here's how to help them.

Date: 2023
From: All Things Considered
Publisher: National Public Radio, Inc. (NPR)
Document Type: Audio file; Broadcast transcript
Length: 1,406 words
Content Level: (Level 2)
Lexile Measure: 760L

Full Text:
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ARI SHAPIRO: About 95% of teens in the U.S. use some type of social media, and about a third say they use it constantly. At the same time, teens are facing a mental health crisis. Scientific evidence suggests these two trends are intertwined - that social media use can cause depression and lower life satisfaction. And while clinicians are trying to come up with solutions, an essential place to look for advice is from the teens and young adults who know social media the best. NPR's Michaeleen Doucleff has this story for our series Living Better.

MICHAELEEN DOUCLEFF: Back when Emma Lembke was 12 years old, many of her friends were already on social media. As each friend got a phone, she noticed something changed.

EMMA LEMBKE: Each one of them, as a result, was getting pulled away from kind of conversation with me, from hanging out with me, from even, like, playing on the playground, like, hanging out outside at school. It felt as though my interactions were dwindling.

DOUCLEFF: She thought there must be something so magical and amazing about these apps if they made her friends not want to talk to her. She begged her parents for a smartphone, and finally they caved.

LEMBKE: And I got Instagram. And I remember, for the first few months, I was in love with it. I followed, you know, Kim Kardashian to Olive Garden.

DOUCLEFF: It did seem magical.

LEMBKE: I still joke that my favorite moment was I think I commented, like, @olivegarden, I love you. And they responded, we love you, too. And I was, like, screaming around the house. I was like, this is the best day ever.

DOUCLEFF: But within a few months, Lembke's time on the phone rose from one hour to five or six hours.

LEMBKE: As I began to scroll more, I felt my mental and my physical health really suffer.

DOUCLEFF: Lembke is now age 20 and a student at Washington University in St. Louis. She's trying to help prevent teens from suffering the way she has. She's the founder of a project called Log Off. It's part of a growing movement by teens and young adults to help adolescents minimize the harms of social media while maximizing its benefits. Lembke and a few others have a series of steps teens can take to have a healthier relationship with social media.

First off, know what you're up against. Social media can connect you with new people and teach you things. They say it can also make your insecurities feel worse, increase your fear of missing out, and research suggests it can worsen mental health problems. Here's Lembke again.

LEMBKE: I'm someone who was already predisposed to issues with mental health, anxiety, depression. And I felt like I just was continuing in horrific, you know, mental health spirals, increased anxiety, deepened depression.

DOUCLEFF: And yet she found it hard to stop. Lembke says teens need to know the goal of these apps is to keep you using them so you can see lots of ads. That's how the companies make money, and that's why it can become a habit.

RIJUL ARORA: I used to check my phone first thing in the morning, last thing at night, in the bathroom, while talking to people, and - or I was in class, and I was checking my phone.

DOUCLEFF: That's Rijul Arora. He's 26. He says he felt like he wasn't really using social media apps, but, instead, these apps were using him.

ARORA: So overall, I could see that I had a toxic relationship with social media.

DOUCLEFF: He felt like he was addicted. He broke that addiction, but he didn't want to give up social media completely. Now, he works to have a healthy relationship with apps.

ARORA: I'm connected with people across the world. I need social media.

DOUCLEFF: Now, he gives classes and workshops helping teens do the same. And he says first thing teens should do is a digital audit. Basically, measure how much time you're spending on each app each day. Seeing these numbers can be transformative. There are many apps to do this, Screen Time on Apple, RescueTime on Android. For example, Sofie Keppler is 16, and she spends a lot of time on TikTok.

SOFIE KEPPLER: Before I go to bed, when I wake up in the morning, when I'm at school - just - you get so, like, involved - keep scrolling and scrolling and scrolling - it's, like, constantly scrolling.

DOUCLEFF: For a high school English project, she decided to track how much she uses her phone. What she found shocked her.

KEPPLER: I realized that I was using it, like, a lot - a lot more than I thought.

DOUCLEFF: We're talking five to 11 hours a day on her phone. Apple Screen Time told her she picked up her phone 200 times a day.

KEPPLER: It definitely made me think about, like, maybe I should limit myself - put restrictions on my phone so I'm talking to everyone around me.

DOUCLEFF: Sofie says her mental health hasn't suffered, but she feels it has impacted her sleep and her schoolwork.

So how do you restrict yourself? Add friction to your social media. Just as friction on the road slows down your car, friction on social media apps slows your usage. There are apps that will do this for you. They make it a bit harder for you to log in, scroll or watch a video. Emma Lembke recommends something called HabitLab from Stanford University. It has 20 different ways of adding friction.

LEMBKE: Which would buffer my screen when I tried to enter. It would make me type in why am I even entering. I had another app that basically made me take mindful breaths before every minute that I went on Instagram, and it would only allow me on for 10 minutes at the most.

DOUCLEFF: Did you find that helpful?

LEMBKE: Oh, I think my screen time decreased by, like, 80%.

DOUCLEFF: Lembke says friction also helps you stop using social media mindlessly. It makes you pause and think, do you really want to watch this 10-minute video? We reached out to both TikTok and Meta, Instagram's parent company, and both pointed us to tools they've developed to help kids cut down their time online. Alassane Sow is 20 years old and a student at Michigan State University. He was also spending lots of time on his phone, and it was getting in the way of his real life.

ALASSANE SOW: For me, really like art. And I'd see a lot of, you know, people posting art on TikTok or on Instagram, and I'd be like, oh, man, I wish I could do that.

DOUCLEFF: Then he realized he could do that if he stopped spending so much time scrolling and started practicing art instead.

SOW: It was like, OK, I'm going to put the phone down and have my long hobby for the day be making art.

DOUCLEFF: And this is key - enrich your life offline. Having alternative hobbies and relationships disconnected from the phone makes it easier to cut down your hours online.

SOW: You know, I've started to make myself do, like, a long-form sort of entertainment thing every day, whether that's reading or drawing or painting or making myself go talk to a friend or something. So that's my favorite thing to do because it's, like, a group activity.

DOUCLEFF: Finally, the last piece of advice might come as a surprise, but teens say it over and over again. Go get help from your parents. Ask them to make a few reasonable goals, like no phones in the bedroom or at meals. But Sow says parents need to follow these rules, too.

SOW: We're saying like, hey, like, I'm going to get off my phone. 'Cause I know my parents use their phones a lot as well, and it feels - like, when I was younger, it felt weird for them to say, hey, get off your phone, and my dad's on Facebook still.

DOUCLEFF: Hmm. Maybe it's time for the moms and dads to do a digital audit, too, and add some friction to our apps.

Michaeleen Doucleff, NPR News.

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Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)
"Teens say social media is stressing them out. Here's how to help them." *All Things Considered*, 17 May 2023. *Gale In Context: Middle School*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A749654534/MSIC?u=nysl_ro_cmhs&sid=bookmark-MSIC&xid=fc819846. Accessed 23 Jan. 2025.
Gale Document Number: GALE|A749654534