Balancing life and social media

Social media has not only transformed the way we communicate, but also the way we develop and maintain relationships. Just a decade ago, we talked face-to-face with family and friends. But today, most of us also have dozens of virtual friends – people we know only through online social media sites. In fact, **1.2 billion people** worldwide spend hours on Facebook sharing their lives, commenting on issues, offering advice, playing games, and posting jokes and amusing videos. Is this growing dependence on social media good or bad for our mental health? Is it bolstering our self-esteem or is it causing anxiety? The answer is "yes" to both.

Social media – the good

Social media can be good for our mental health because it allows us to:

- **Maintain family and cultural ties.** Many of us have family members across the country or even across the globe. This can increase feelings of alienation and loneliness. But social media lets us post pictures of the kids or updates on events so grandparents in India and cousins in Calgary can feel part of our daily lives. Viewing their posts can help us stay connected to our culture and roots.
- **Find old friends and make new ones.** Even the shyest person can meet new people online. One of the key elements for good mental health is having supportive friends.
- **Improve our self-esteem.** Don't we all feel good when our posts receive several "likes", "re-tweets" or positive comments or when our complaints receive sympathy?
- **Have company at any time, in any place.** We never have to feel lonely or bored.

Social media – the bad

"We tend to forget that happiness doesn't come as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather of recognizing and appreciating what we do have."

– Frederick Keonig

With more and more people choosing screen-to-screen relationships over face-to-face relationships, they're finding the complexities and nuances of real life interactions increasingly stressful and confusing. This is especially true for young people who text rather than talk, play in virtual worlds, communicate with emoticons rather than words and find the nuances of body language completely baffling.

This can cause extreme stress when they land in the workplace and are suddenly expected to articulate their thoughts, interact with co-workers of all ages and backgrounds and understand subtle personal interactions.

Social media usage can also lead to:

- **Insecurity and inferiority.** While some people share both the good and bad of their day-to-day lives online, others present edited or idealized versions by only posting positive news or what they want people to know. This can make us feel inadequate because our jobs don't seem as interesting, our spouses and children not as wonderful, our homes not as beautiful and our vacations not as frequent or exotic.
- **Jealousy and resentment.** Constant postings of other people's holidays, nights out, parties and other social events can make us feel like we're missing out on life.
- **Anxiety.** Many people feel anxious if they can't log onto their social media profile several times a day. The positive reinforcement and attention they receive for their posts can actually lead to issues such as **Facebook addiction**.
- **Bullying.** Bullying through social media sites is mostly, but not exclusively, experienced by school age children and youth. In fact, **9 out of 10 teens** online report witnessing cruel behavior on social media sites. **15 percent** of social media-using teens said they had been the target of online bullying.

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

If being on social media is causing negative feelings, try to:

- Reduce the number of posts and comments you make.
- Limit your time online.
- Expand your real-life social network. Real-life relationships are harder but can also be deeper, more meaningful and long-lasting – and no one is perfect.

Avoid comparing yourself to others. Remember that people's lives might sound better than yours, but the reality is that they too have problems – they just don't mention them on social media.