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Millennials, Social Media, and Depression

— Depressed college students spent more time on social media

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January 09, 2019

Certain behaviors on social media were linked to higher likelihood of major depressive disorder (MDD) in millennials, researchers reported.

In a survey of over 500 college students active on at least one social media platform -- Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Snapchat -- those who fit the criteria for MDD tended to score significantly higher on a social media "addiction" scale (18.5 [MDD] vs 15.3 [No MDD], $d=0.55$), according to Krista Howard, PhD, of Texas State University in San Marcos, and colleagues, writing online in the [Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research](#).

Comparing themselves with others on social media also was a common theme among those with MDD, the researchers found. This went in both directions: social media users with MDD were more likely to report comparing themselves to other individuals who appeared better off than they were -- but they also frequently made comparisons between themselves and others seen as worse off.

"These results suggest that negative social media behaviors such as increased social comparisons and addiction on social media are more associated with individuals who meet the criteria for MDD, whereas positive social media behaviors, such as social interaction with others, are more associated with individuals without MDD," the researchers wrote. "Not only do these findings support our hypotheses and are in line with previous research but our results also extend previous studies and provide greater detail regarding specific social media behaviors associated with MDD."

The team recruited college students from a large, public university, and using an online survey, rated their intensity of social media use, motivation behind using a social media

platform, and their addiction to it, as well as providing an assessment of MDD using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9.

Another interesting relationship Howard and co-authors identified in the analysis was the link between the number of followers on social media and major depression. Specifically, on Twitter, people with depression tended to follow fewer people and were significantly less likely to be following more than 300 other accounts (OR 0.427, 95% CI 0.189-0.967, $P=0.41$). People with depression also tended to have significantly fewer followers on Instagram.

As for specific social media behaviors assessed, the researchers also found that individuals with depression were significantly more likely to be bothered if they were tagged in an unflattering photo on social media (OR 1.343, 95% CI 1.080-1.685, $P=0.011$).

"While this study highlights social media behaviors that are associated with major depression, it is important to recognize that social media use can offer many positive benefits, including fostering social support," explained Howard in a statement. "The key is for individuals to develop an awareness of how they currently use social media and determine what changes could be made in their social media use to reduce the behaviors associated with psychological distress. Some changes could include reducing the time spent on social media, unfollowing individuals or groups that cause distress, or limiting online social comparisons."

Howard and co-authors reported no relevant conflicts of interest.

Primary Source

Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research

Source Reference: [Howard K, et al "Social comparisons, social media addiction, and social interaction: An examination of specific social media behaviors related to major depressive disorder in a millennial population" *J Appl Behav Res* 2019; DOI: 10.1111/jabr.12158.](#)