



Mental Health and Social Media

Discussion Guide for Teens and Their Parents/Caregivers

February 2024

Teens: If you are like most people your age, social media plays a pretty important part in your life. It can help you connect with friends and communicate with people who have similar interests. It also gives you a way to express your opinions and creativity to a broad audience. However, like lots of other teens, you're probably also aware that social media has some potential downsides, particularly when it comes to your mental health and safety. To see what other teens are saying and to find out how your own social media habits might be affecting you, take the [Mental Health and Social Media Quiz](#) on the *We Think Twice™* website. As you take this short quiz, note "Your Results" for each topic below. Then, use this discussion guide to help your parent, caregiver, or another trusted adult understand the role social media plays in your life and how they can support you with any challenges you might be facing.



Parents/Caregivers: This discussion guide gives you an opportunity to learn more about the reality of teen life today. You'll learn about the pros and cons of social media in teens' lives, and most importantly, you'll learn how to support the teen in your life in making social media work for them, not against them! After the teen you care for has taken the quiz and recorded their answers, follow these instructions for each section of the guide:

1. Read the background section about the topic together.
2. View the teen's results for the topic.
3. Use the discussion questions to have a conversation about the topic.
4. Go over the tips for addressing the topic.
5. If the topic presents challenges, help them create an action plan to reduce any negative effects of social media on their mental health.



Use the tips provided in each section to identify actions you can take to improve your relationship with social media and your mental health. See the example below:

My Action Plan: Culture of Comparison						
Action Item	Start date	How will I know when I've met this goal?	Who can help me accomplish this goal?	What is a barrier I might face?	How can I overcome this barrier?	Goal achieved!
Curate my feed to be more positive and trigger fewer social comparisons.	February 1	I will have unfollowed or muted accounts that bring up negative feelings.	My parents/ caregivers, my friends	I want to stay connected to people I currently follow and don't want to hurt their feelings, so it's hard to unfollow them.	I'll mute the accounts instead of unfollowing. I'll also spend more time on hobbies and less time on my phone.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>



CULTURE OF COMPARISON



Background

People of all ages compare themselves and their lives with what they see on social media and may feel bad because they assume everyone else's lives are perfect while theirs are not, leading to a "culture of comparison." This is because people often attempt to display the perfect life on social media. Social comparison can negatively affect people's self-esteem.

Your Results

Social comparison is not a big deal for you! Keep reminding yourself about all the great things you have going for you!

Social comparison may be somewhat of a challenge for you. Comparing yourself to others on social media could be affecting your self-esteem.

Social comparison seems to be a challenge for you. Comparing yourself to others on social media is probably affecting your self-esteem.

Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)

- What did you think about your results?
 - What did you agree or disagree with?
- How big of a challenge do you think online social comparison is when it comes to young people's mental health?
- What types of content and accounts might cause you to feel worse after seeing them?
 - Do you follow accounts like that now?
 - How can you avoid this content?
- What types of content and accounts might you be following that make you happy or feel good about yourself?
 - What do you like about these accounts and the content they post?

Tips

- Pay attention to what triggers social comparisons and consider muting or unfollowing accounts that trigger negative feelings.
- Remind yourself that people tend to post only their best moments on social media and leave out the parts that seem undesirable, boring, difficult, or sad.
- When you find yourself starting to compare your life to others, remember the positive things about yourself and your life.

My Action Plan: Culture of Comparison						
Action Item	Start date	How will I know when I've met this goal?	Who can help me accomplish this goal?	What is a barrier I might face?	How can I overcome this barrier?	Goal achieved!

ISOLATION FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Background
<p>During the COVID-19 pandemic, isolation from friends caused many teens to feel depressed and anxious. Although social media is a great tool to stay in touch with friends, family, and other loved ones, it can also contribute to feelings of loneliness when used in place of one-on-one conversations.</p>
Your Results
<p>Isolation from friends and family doesn't seem to be a problem for you! Keep up the good work! Staying connected to friends and family is good for your mental health.</p> <p>Isolation from friends and family may be somewhat of a problem for you. You might be letting your online activities keep you from spending time with loved ones in your life.</p> <p>Isolation from friends and family seems to be a problem for you. To some extent, you are letting your online activities keep you from spending time with the loved ones in your life.</p>
Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think about your results? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What did you agree or disagree with? • What communities are you a part of on social media, if any? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Which online communities are beneficial to you? How? Which might be harmful? How?

Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the role of online communities in your life?
- How can you use social media to feel a sense of community?
- Examine whether you are turning to social media for a sense of community. If you are, is it because you feel some lack of community in real life?
 - If so, what steps can you take to cultivate a real sense of community—offline? How can I help?
- What are some activities you can do with your friends or family when spending time with them in person?

Tips

- When possible, make plans to see people in person to strengthen your relationships.
- It can be hard to create and maintain relationships when you feel sad, so reach out to someone who won't judge you, who energizes you, and who is easy to talk to.
- Make a list of activities you like to do with friends or family in person so you have fun suggestions when the opportunity to hang out comes up.
- Surprise someone with a phone call and brighten their day.

My Action Plan: Isolation from Friends and Family

Action Item	Start date	How will I know when I've met this goal?	Who can help me accomplish this goal?	What is a barrier I might face?	How can I overcome this barrier?	Goal achieved!



INAPPROPRIATE SHARING AND ONLINE SAFETY

Background

It's important to stay safe online and avoid inappropriate sharing on social media. The internet can be a place where criminals take advantage of people's desire to connect with others. Sharing personal information increases your odds of being a victim of fraud or other types of harm. Personal information includes your location, sexually explicit photos, or things like family and relationship drama.

Your Results

You are generally mindful of what you share online. Good job. You're protecting your safety and your future reputation by being careful about what you post.

You might not always be mindful of what you share online. Think twice before you post. You can probably do more to protect your safety and your future reputation by being careful about what you post.

You are generally not mindful of what you share online. Think twice before you post. You can do more to protect your safety and your future reputation by being careful about what you post.

Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)

- What did you think about your results?
 - What did you agree or disagree with?
- Has anyone ever told you that you may be oversharing?
- What's a good way to remind yourself to calm down before posting something when you're upset?
- What are some steps you can take to stay safe online and use social media to share information in a safe way? How can I help?

Tips

- Use social media to share information about issues that are important to you instead of sharing highly personal information.
- Avoid following accounts that pull you into angry and unproductive debates.
- Think twice before posting. Anything you post on the internet can spread quickly and stays on the internet forever.
 - If you feel unsure about posting something online, you can always ask a parent/caregiver or another trusted adult for advice.

My Action Plan: Sharing and Online Safety						
Action Item	Start date	How will I know when I've met this goal?	Who can help me accomplish this goal?	What is a barrier I might face?	How can I overcome this barrier?	Goal achieved!

EFFORTLESS PERFECTION

Background
<p>Effortless perfection is the idea that someone is good at everything without even trying. This idea can place impossible expectations on teens and can increase feelings of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and being overwhelmed.</p>
Your Results
<p>You seem to show your authentic self online. You are not overly concerned about impressing others online. You use social media to share who you are, your true appearance, and the activities that really are important to you. Keep it up!</p> <p>You might be projecting an unrealistic version of yourself online or trying too hard to impress others. This could have negative consequences for your self-esteem and consequences for the self-esteem of others.</p> <p>You are probably projecting an unrealistic version of yourself online or trying too hard to impress others. This could have negative consequences for your self-esteem and consequences for the self-esteem of others.</p>
Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think about your results? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What did you agree or disagree with?

Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)

- What do you typically use social media for? (This could include learning more about a specific skill or craft, keeping up with friends, or posting about issues important to you.)
 - When you think about your own use, how much of your effort goes into sharing authentic experiences vs. trying to create a positive image?
- How can one person’s attempt to show perfection affect another person who views that page?
- Do you see the value in being more authentic online?
 - If so, how can you be more authentic online?
- What is something you can do to put less pressure on yourself to be perfect?

Tips

- Post without filters. They can be fun to use but often create unrealistic expectations and can negatively affect your self-esteem and body image.
- Turn off your ability to see the number of likes or views a post received. This allows you to focus more on the quality of the interaction you see online instead of the numbers of likes and comments.
- Be kind to yourself. Focus on the goals that are most important to you and don’t expect to be good at everything.
- Remind yourself that no one’s life is perfect, and we all need help sometimes.

My Action Plan: Effortless Perfection

Action Item	Start date	How will I know when I've met this goal?	Who can help me accomplish this goal?	What is a barrier I might face?	How can I overcome this barrier?	Goal achieved!

UNCONTROLLED USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA



Background

[Almost half of teens say they are online “all the time.”](#) and more time online is linked to [lower self-esteem and higher odds of depression](#). It can be easy for people to become overly absorbed with social media. In addition to harming one’s mental health, uncontrolled social media use can cause people to neglect the important relationships and responsibilities in their lives.

Your Results

You don’t seem to be overly absorbed with social media. It looks like you’ve figured out how to prioritize the things that matter in your life, like schoolwork, jobs, relationships, and your health. Keep it up!

You might be overly absorbed with social media. Like many teens, you may be having a little trouble controlling when and how you use your time online. If taken too far, it could possibly affect other parts of your life.

You seem to be overly absorbed with social media. It appears you may be having challenges controlling when and how you use your time online to the point where your social media use affects other parts of your life.

Discussion Questions (for parents/caregivers to ask teens)

- What did you think about your results?
 - What did you agree or disagree with?
- Have you ever felt like you’ve spent excessive time on social media? How did it make you feel afterward?
- What do you think causes young people to spend too much time on social media and sometimes neglect commitments like school or work?
- What steps can you take to control your screen time, and how can I help?

Tips

- Set limits on your social media use. Manage your screen time using your phone or use other apps to set a time limit.
- Make screen-free zones.
- Turn off notifications or delete apps.
- Take frequent breaks from social media.

My Action Plan: Uncontrolled Use of Social Media						
Action Item	Start date	How will I know when I've met this goal?	Who can help me accomplish this goal?	What is a barrier I might face?	How can I overcome this barrier?	Goal achieved!

This guide was created by the *We Think Twice*™ campaign with support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau. It is one of several valuable resources designed for youth-serving professionals as well as parents/caregivers. It is intended to encourage positive youth development by strengthening prevention education and other youth development programs.



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