

Social Media Around the Table

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SOCIAL MEDIA AROUND THE TABLE

Social media and smart phones are ubiquitous in our society. The average person in the United States uses a cell phone about two hours a day. Since social media is primarily accessed on smart phones, it is reasonable to think about the effects of cell phones and social media together to understand how they have changed the landscape of communication and society.



We know that social media is influencing the way people feel. Research indicates that its use is moderately related to lower moods, higher anxiety, increased sleep disturbances, lowered self-esteem, increased envy and frustration, and increased loneliness.¹

Social media also creates in us certain habits of interaction. It allows us to connect with people all around the world—and gravitate toward people we are familiar with or who hold views similar to our own. This is different from how we interact in physical space where we come into contact with a variety of people—even if all we have in common is residing in the same community. Online, we are not required to interact with people with whom we disagree, creating what are referred to as echo chambers. As we share our thoughts and opinions online, they are heard by our friends or followers who have already decided to friend or follow us because of some shared view or experience. The result is that our own views and opinions are repeated again and again, leading us to believe that they are more common and reasonable than they may actually be. These interactions can also lead us to become more extreme in our views because we are encouraged by hearing others agree with us, an experience related to group polarization.

Cognitive processing is also affected by

smart phones. Our brains have a limited capacity for what they can actively process. Whether on our smart phones or elsewhere, we rarely multi-task; rather, we quickly switch back and forth between tasks. In addition, while using smart phones, we easily become distracted, making us less able to accomplish the single task we began with and decreasing our ability to focus for an extended period of time.² It is easy to become anxious about what we may be missing (often referred to as FOMO—fear of missing out).

Because new information is always appearing, and we don't want to miss any of it, people can develop an addiction to social media. And although research cannot keep up with the rate of change in social media options and usage today, the features of addiction are being readily identified in people related to their social media use.³

Something that is even more concerning for our face-to-face interactions is that the mere presence of a cell phone seems to have a negative impact. When a cell phone was present, as compared to a notebook, participants in one research study indicated that their conversations did not lead to feelings of closeness or trust in their conversation partner.⁴

It is clear to most of us that social media and smart phones are affecting social interaction. People we meet are likelier to experience depression or depression-related symptoms because of social media. People have become less practiced in civil disagreements because they are unaccustomed to interacting with people with whom they disagree. They are also unaccustomed to having conversations face-to-face, having become accustomed to hiding behind the anonymity of the Internet. People are more easily distracted and less able to cope with or ignore distractions; they struggle to focus on the face-to-face

conversation for fear of missing out on the social media interactions. And even when the phone is down—unless it is out of sight and preferably out of room—it will not be out of mind.

My advice is to leave your cell phone with your coat and focus on being present with the people around you. You are better off not missing what is in front of you than missing what may or may not be happening somewhere on the Internet. Be supportive of and patient with friends and family as you practice having discussions face-to-face. And consider practicing civil disagreements. If we cannot find common ground with family and friends, we are not likely to find it with strangers. Take a break from social media, and if you think you might have an addiction, take time this summer to re-evaluate what truly matters in your life.

At the same time, do not be too discouraged about the effect of social media and smart phones. Humans are adaptable and curious; we will find new ways to fill our time as our fascination with smart phones and social media evolves. In the meantime, remember to be with the people you are with. And perhaps consider turning off the television, too, and have a conversation with the people you are with.

DR. LURALYN HELMING

FOOTNOTES

1. <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20180104-is-social-media-bad-for-you-the-evidence-and-the-unknowns>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkdcnkGBQSw>
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2017/06/30/a-run-down-of-social-medias-effects-on-our-mental-health/#c2de1932e5af>
4. <https://digest.bps.org.uk/2012/09/24/how-the-mere-presence-of-a-mobile-phone-harms-face-to-face-conversations>

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