

The Facebook Effect: Good or Bad for Your Health?

By Ashley Day

News-grabbing headlines like "Facebook Linked to Depression" get all the attention, but other research shows that social networking can actually make you healthier. Read this report before you "like," "poke," or "friend" again.

Is it us, or are news headlines about Facebook's impact on our health popping up more and more these days? Considering that 51 percent of Americans over age 12 now have profiles on the social networking site compared to 8 percent just three years ago, according to new data from Edison Research, it's no wonder there are entire scientific journals devoted to the psychology of social networking, and piles of studies analyzing such sites' effects on our moods, body image, friendships, and marriages.

Negative conditions such as "Facebook depression" or Facebook-fueled divorces bear the brunt of the media blitz, but much of the body of research actually points to positive perks from Facebook use. Here, a deeper look at how all those "likes," "pokes," and status updates are really affecting you and your family's well-being, and how you can outsmart some of the potentially negative side effects.

Health Benefits of Facebook

Research shows that Facebook can:

1. **Fuel self-esteem.** In a Cornell University study, students felt better about themselves after they updated their Facebook profiles; a control group of students who didn't log onto the site didn't experience such a mood lift. The very act of posting something about yourself — regardless of what you write — can boost your self-confidence because you control the image you present to your network of friends, according to researchers. Similarly, according to a Michigan State University study, students with low self-esteem and happiness levels who used Facebook more frequently felt more connected to friends and campus life than those who logged on less often.
2. **Strengthen friendship bonds.** In a small study of heavy Facebook-using young British adults between ages 21 and 29, Lancaster University researchers found that the site

helped cement positive interactions among friends. Both private messages and wall posts allowed Facebook users to confide in their friends, surf down memory lane, and laugh out loud, promoting happy feelings.

3. **Stamp out shyness and loneliness.** In a soon-to-be-published Carnegie Mellon study, researchers who surveyed more than 1,100 avid Facebook-using adults found that receiving messages from friends and consuming info from friends' news feeds boosted feelings of connectedness, especially in people with self-described "low social skills." Authors say that for shy people, gleaning information from news feeds and profiles can help start conversations they otherwise might not be comfortable enough to strike up. "People who are uncomfortable chatting face to face gain more through their use of the site," says study co-author Moira Burke, a PhD candidate in the university's Human-Computer Interaction Institute.

Similar benefits hold true for tweens and teens: Australian researchers who studied more than 600 students between age 10 and 16 found that communicating online helped improve communication skills for lonely adolescents, giving them an outlet to talk more comfortably about personal topics.

Health Risks of Facebook

Research also shows that Facebook can:

1. **Cause depression.** A recently published American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) paper made a major splash when it described Facebook depression — a condition said to result when tweens and teens spend too much time on social media, leading them to turn to "substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive or self-destructive behaviors."

However, the phenomenon is more anecdotal than based on solid science, and some experts suggest that it's more of a correlation — that people who are depressed may simply be more likely to use Facebook. "People who are already feeling down or depressed might go online to talk to their friends, and try and be cheered up," wrote John M. Grohol, PsyD, founder and editor-in-chief of PsychCentral.com on his blog. "This in no way suggests that by using more and more of Facebook, a person is going to get more depressed."

In one of the papers cited by the AAP report, researchers found that the more time first-time Internet users spent online, the more likely they were to experience loneliness and depression but a follow-up study showed such effects disappeared a year later, according to Dr. Grohol. "It may simply be something related to greater familiarity with the Internet," he wrote. In another paper referenced by the AAP report, the depression-Facebook link only held true among people with "low-quality" friendships; people with good pals did not experience depression with increasing Facebook use.

2. **Trigger eating disorders.** The more time adolescent girls spent on the social networking site, the more likely they were to develop eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, and extreme dieting, Israeli researchers recently found. Exposure to online fashion and music content, as well as watching TV shows like Gossip Girl, were also associated with an increased risk for eating disorders.

But researchers aren't saying that social networking sites necessarily cause eating disorders; as with Facebook depression, it may be that people prone to eating disorders spend more time online. What's more, the researchers found that parents can help protect their daughters from harmful effects of media: The children of parents who were aware of what their daughters were viewing online — and talked to them about what they saw and how much time they spent — were less prone to develop eating disorders, according to study authors.

3. **Split up marriages.** Facebook was referenced in 20 percent of divorce petitions processed in 2009 by Divorce-Online, a British law firm. *Time* magazine reported that feuding spouses use their Facebook pages to air dirty laundry, while their lawyers use posts as evidence in divorce proceedings. Sexual health expert Ian Kerner, PhD, recently blogged on CNN that he's seen many relationships destroyed by "Facebook bombs" — people reconnecting with high school sweethearts or other blasts from the past that can lead to emotional, if not actual, cheating.

"The mistake I often see is when someone gets friended or messaged by an ex and doesn't tell their partner," Kerner told *Everyday Health*. "It's a slippery slope from the moment you don't disclose information."

He warns that it's easy to over-romanticize the past, which can cause people to check out of their current relationship. Kerner advises couples to not keep secrets about whom they're chatting with on Facebook. And while the site certainly makes it easy to reconnect with old flames and flirt behind the façade of your computer, the potential damage it can do depends on the stability of your relationship in the first place. "It all depends on your level of trust in your spouse," says Kerner. "Have a dialogue, set some rules. The key is transparency."

Bottom line: For most people, how or whether Facebook affects your mood, your health, or your marriage probably depends far more on your off-line well-being, activities, and influences than what you do when you log on.

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