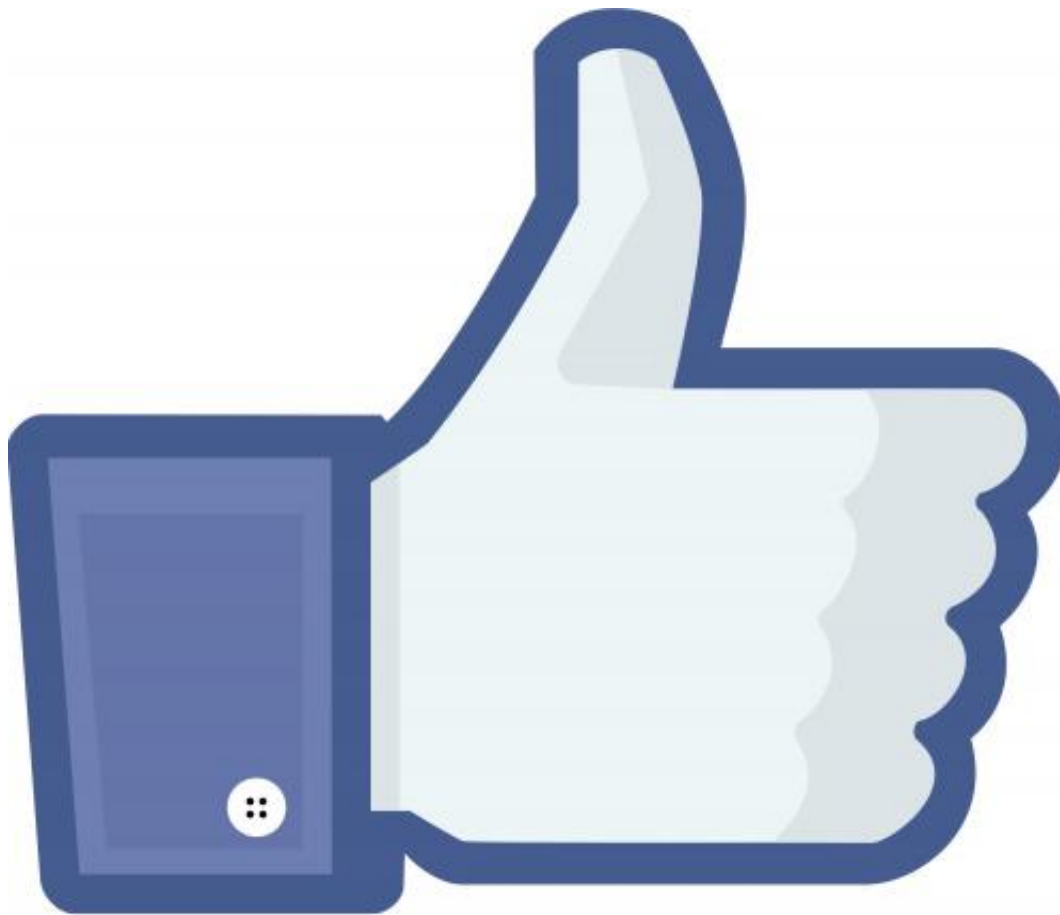


# Negative experiences on Facebook linked to increased depression risk in young adults

September 8 2016, by David Orenstein

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In the first study of its kind, public health researchers show that young adults who reported having negative experiences on

Facebook—including bullying, meanness, misunderstandings or unwanted contacts—were at significantly higher risk of depression, even accounting for many possible confounding factors.

"I think it's important that people take interactions on [social media](#) seriously and don't think of it as somehow less impactful because it's a virtual experience as opposed to an in-person experience," said lead author Samantha Rosenthal, an epidemiology research associate in the Brown University School of Public Health who performed the research as part of her doctoral thesis at Brown. "It's a different forum that has real emotional consequences."

The study, in press in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, is novel in at least two important ways. One is measurement of the prevalence, frequency, severity and nature of negative interpersonal experiences, as reported by the 264 participants. Other studies have used measures such as the amount of time spent using social media or the general tone of items in news feeds.

The other is that because the young adult participants were also enrolled as adolescents in the New England Family Study, the researchers knew how participants were faring in 2002, before the advent of Facebook. The study, therefore, suggests that their later [negative experiences](#) on Facebook likely led to their increased levels of [depressive symptoms](#), rather than just reflecting them, said Stephen Buka, professor of epidemiology at Brown and study co-author.

"This as close as you can get to answering the question: Do adverse experiences [on Facebook] cause depression?" Buka said. "We knew how the participants were doing as kids before they had any Facebook use, then we saw what happened on Facebook, and then we saw how they were faring as young adults. It permits us to answer the chicken-and-egg problem: Which comes first—adverse experiences on Facebook or

depression, low self-esteem and the like?"

## **Negative experiences and depression**

One of the study's most basic findings is that 82 percent of the 264 participants reported having at least one negative Facebook experience (NFE) since they started using the service, and 55 percent had one in the year before they were surveyed in 2013 or 2014. Among the participants, 63 percent said they had four or more NFEs during their young lifetimes.

Meanwhile, 24 percent of the sample reported moderate-to-severe levels of depressive symptoms on the standard Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale.

To determine the risk of depressive symptoms independently attributable to NFEs, the researchers in their statistical analysis controlled for depression as adolescents, parental mental health, sex, race or ethnicity, reported social support, daily Facebook use, average monthly income, educational attainment and employment.

After all those adjustments, they found that among people who experienced any NFEs, the overall risk of depressive symptoms was about 3.2 times greater than among those who had not.

The risk varied in many ways, for instance by the kind of NFE. Bullying or meanness was associated with a 3.5 times elevated risk, while unwanted contact had a milder association of about 2.5 times.

Frequency also mattered. Significantly elevated risks were only associated with unwanted contacts or misunderstandings if there were four or more, but even just one to three instances of bullying or meanness was associated with a higher risk of depressive symptoms.

Similarly, the more severe a person perceived incidents to be, the more likely they were to be showing signs of depression, Rosenthal said.

## Being conscious of the risks

It will take more research to determine who might be at most specific or strongest risk for potential depression related to NFEs, Rosenthal said.

But for now it may be prudent for teens and [young adults](#) to recognize that NFEs could lead to prolonged symptoms of [depression](#) and that if they have negative emotions related to Facebook experiences, it might be worthwhile to take a break. Another strategy might be to unfriend people who are becoming sources of NFEs.

"There is research that shows that people tend to feel more entitled to bully online than they do in person or engage in unwanted contact online than they would in person," Rosenthal said. "In some ways it's higher risk. It's worth people being aware of that risk."

The study's other authors are Brown University Professors Brandon Marshall, Kate Carey and Melissa Clark.

**More information:** Samantha R. Rosenthal et al. Negative Experiences on Facebook and Depressive Symptoms Among Young Adults, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.06.023](#)

Provided by Brown University

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