

Does time spent on social media impact mental health? New study shows screen time isn't the problem

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The amount of time teenagers spend on social networking sites has risen 62.5 percent since 2012 and continues to grow. Just last year, the average time teenagers spent on social media was estimated as 2.6 hours per day. Critics have claimed that more screen time is increasing depression and anxiety in teenagers.

However, new research led by Sarah Coyne, a professor of family life at Brigham Young University, found that the amount of time spent on [social media](#) is not directly increasing anxiety or [depression](#) in teenagers.

"We spent eight years trying to really understand the relationship between time spent on social media and depression for developing teenagers," Coyne said about her study published in *Computers in Human Behavior*. "If they increased their social media time, would it make them more depressed? Also, if they decreased their social media time, were they less depressed? The answer is no. We found that time spent on social media was not what was impacting anxiety or depression."

Mental health is a multi-process syndrome where no one stressor is likely the cause of depression or anxiety. This study shows that it is not merely the amount of time spent on social media that's leading to an increase in depression or anxiety among adolescents.

"It's not just the amount of time that is important for most kids. For example, two teenagers could use social media for exactly the same amount of time but may have vastly different outcomes as a result of the way they are using it," Coyne said.

The goal of this study is to help society as a whole move beyond the [screen time](#) debate and instead to examine the context and content surrounding social media use.

Coyne has three suggestions to use social media in healthier ways.

1. Be an active user instead of a passive user. Instead of just scrolling, actively comment, post and like other content
2. Limit social media use at least an hour before falling asleep. Getting enough sleep is one of the most protective factors for [mental health](#)
3. Be intentional. Look at your motivations for engaging with social media in the first place

"If you get on specifically to seek out information or to connect with others, that can have a more [positive effect](#) than getting on just because you're bored," Coyne said.

In an effort to understand teenagers' mental health and their [social media use](#), researchers worked with 500 youth between the ages of 13 and 20 who completed once-yearly questionnaires over an eight-year span. Social [media](#) use was measured by asking participants how much time they spent on social networking sites on a typical day. To measure depression and anxiety, participants responded to questions with different scales to indicate depressive symptoms and anxiety levels. These results were then analyzed on an individual level to see if there was a strong correlation between the two variables.

At age 13, adolescents reported an average social networking use of 31–60 minutes per day. These average levels increased steadily so that by young adulthood, they were reporting upwards of two hours per day. This increase of social networking, though, did not predict future mental health. That is, adolescents' increases in social networking beyond their typical levels did not predict changes in [anxiety](#) or depression one year later.

More information: Sarah M. Coyne et al. Does time spent using social media impact mental health?: An eight year longitudinal study, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2019.106160](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106160)

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