

How do social media and loss of sleep affect young people's mental health?

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We've all done it—scrolled through our phones immediately before bedtime to read the latest news, only to wake up at 3 a.m. feeling anxious about all the things we've read. Then, having trouble falling back to

sleep, we grab our phones again and distract ourselves with social media.

The next day we wake up feeling overwhelmed, anxious and exhausted.

But how exactly do [social media](#) and poor sleep influence our mental health? Researchers in the department of epidemiology and biostatistics at Western's Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry are working to understand the relationship between sleep, social media and mental health among youth in two recently published papers.

Professor Kelly Anderson, Ph.D., looked specifically at the role of social media in the equation through a [systematic review](#) of previously published studies.

"The literature highlighted how complex this relationship is," said Anderson, who is also a Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Public Mental Health Research. "These things are likely bidirectional; they are likely all part of a larger process that are feeding back to each other. So, if you aren't sleeping well, you are probably going to use social media more often, which is going to impact your mental health, which impacts your sleep and so on."

This topic has become especially important during the pandemic, said Rea Alonzo, a master's student and contributing author on the paper, published in the journal *Sleep Medicine Reviews*. "Youth may be resorting to using more social media, given the current social restrictions. Also, as youth continue with online learning, technology is more easily accessible to them and [screen time](#) may be escalated."

The review found significant associations between excessive social media use and poor mental health outcomes, and between poor sleep quality and negative mental health. Frequent social media use was a risk factor for both poor mental health and poor sleep outcomes.

"The link between the three is what really interested us," said Junayd Hussain, one of the contributing authors on the review. "Based on our research, it seemed as though at least part of the negative effects that social media use has on mental health may act through sleep disturbances."

The authors noted that none of the studies in the review specifically looked at the interplay of all three factors and Anderson says it is an area that warrants further study.

"One of the main takeaways is that this is a very complex process, and we are going to need really good data to try to tease apart the contributions of each and the mechanisms underlying these relationships," said Anderson.

Another recently published study from the department of epidemiology and biostatistics found that adolescents who experience difficulties sleeping are at higher risk of developing symptoms of anxiety and depression, and that this relationship is strongest among girls.

Analyzing data from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, the study published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* found that girls with persistent difficulties sleeping between the ages of 12 and 15 experienced higher rates of anxiety and depression.

"When present, these symptoms can persist into young adulthood and negatively impact relationships, quality of life and employment," said Dr. Saverio Stranges, chair of the department of epidemiology and biostatistics, who was senior investigator on the study. "This study highlights the potential role of difficulties sleeping for adolescents' mental health. Our findings further emphasize the need for public health initiatives to promote sleep hygiene in this population subgroup facing a critical life transition."

One of the ways to promote good sleep hygiene is to limit screen time before bed, said Stranges, whose collaborators included MSc graduate Sophia Nunes along with Western professors Karen Campbell, Neil Klar and Graham Reid.

"Adolescent sleep problems are a current public health concern," said Nunes. "Up to 25 percent of 12- to 15-year-old Canadians report difficulties sleeping more than once a week. From a public health perspective, this research contributes to the evidence on the important and potential long-term [mental health](#) impact of sleep problems in early adolescence."

More information: Rea Alonzo et al. Interplay between social media use, sleep quality, and mental health in youth: A systematic review, *Sleep Medicine Reviews* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.smrv.2020.101414](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smrv.2020.101414)

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