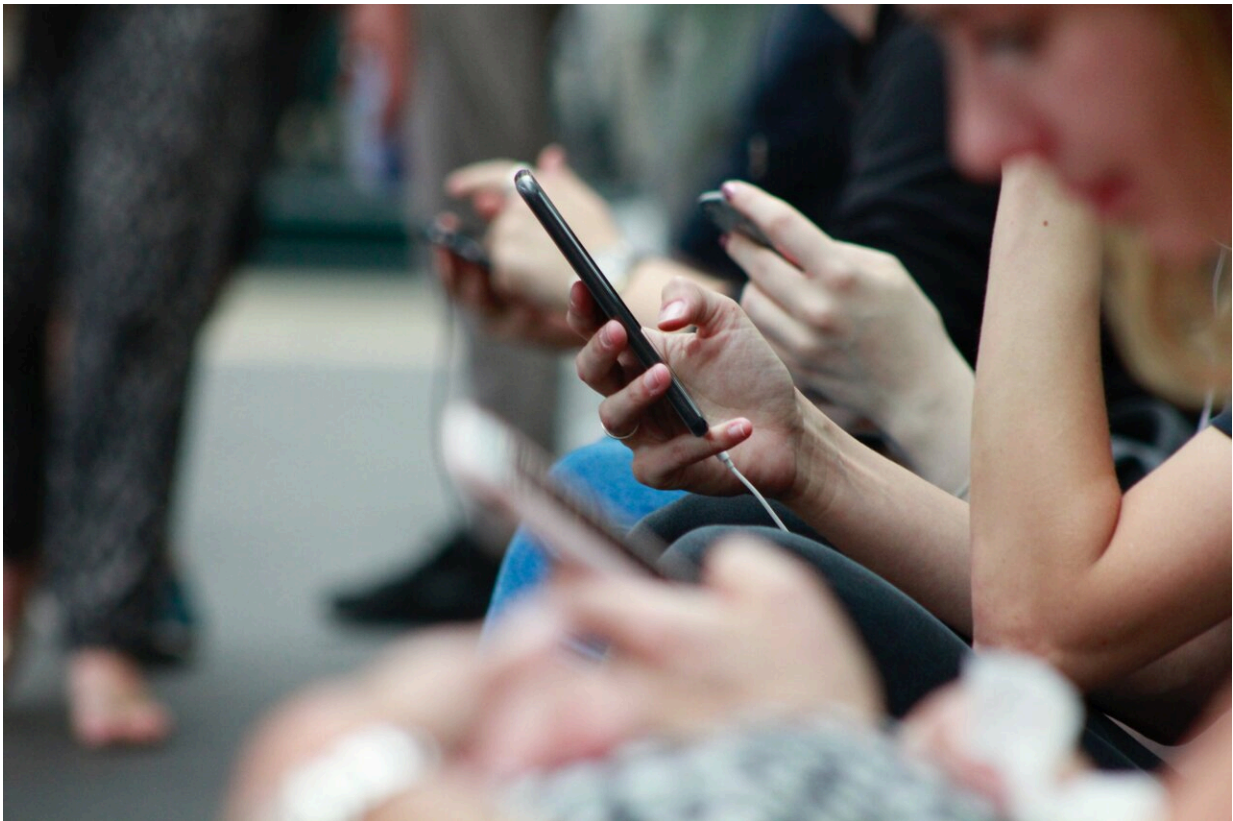


Reducing social media use significantly improves body image in teens, young adults

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Teens and young adults who reduced their social media use by 50% for just a few weeks saw significant improvement in how they felt about both their weight and their overall appearance compared with peers who

maintained consistent levels of social media use, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Adolescence is a vulnerable period for the development of body image issues, eating disorders and [mental illness](#)," said lead author Gary Goldfield, Ph.D., of Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute. "Youth are spending, on average, between six to eight hours per day on screens, much of it on [social media](#). Social media can expose users to hundreds or even thousands of images and photos every day, including those of celebrities and fashion or fitness models, which we know leads to an internalization of beauty ideals that are unattainable for almost everyone, resulting in greater dissatisfaction with [body weight](#) and shape."

However, much of the psychological research on social media, body image and mental health is correlational, according to Goldfield, so it is uncertain whether people with body image and [mental health issues](#) spend more time on social media or if social media use leads to greater body image and [mental health](#) issues.

To better understand the causal effects of reducing social media use on body image, Goldfield and his colleagues previously conducted a [pilot study](#) with 38 [undergraduate students](#) with elevated levels of anxiety and/or depression. Some of the participants were asked to limit their social media use to no more than 60 minutes per day, while others were allowed unrestricted access.

Compared with participants who had unlimited access, participants who restricted their use showed improvements in how they regarded their overall appearance (but not their weight) after three weeks. Due to the [small sample size](#), though, the researchers were unable to conduct a meaningful analysis of the effect of gender.

The current experiment, involving 220 undergraduate students aged 17–25 (76% female, 23% male, 1% other) and published in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media*, sought to expand the pilot study and address the gender limitation. In order to qualify, participants had to be regular social media users (at least two hours per day on their smartphones) and exhibit symptoms of depression or anxiety.

For the first week of the experiment, all participants were instructed to use their social media as they normally would. Social media use was measured using a screentime tracking program to which participants provided a daily screenshot. After the first week, half the participants were instructed to reduce their social media use to no more than 60 minutes per day.

At the start of the experiment, participants also responded to a series of statements about their overall appearance (e.g., "I'm pretty happy about the way I look") and weight (e.g., "I am satisfied with my weight") on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating "never" and 5 "always." Participants completed a similar questionnaire at the end of the experiment.

For the next three weeks, participants who were instructed to restrict their social media use reduced it by approximately 50% to an average of 78 minutes per day versus the control group, which averaged 188 minutes of social media use per day.

Participants who reduced their social media use had a significant improvement in how they regarded both their overall appearance and body weight after the three-week intervention, compared with the [control group](#), who saw no significant change. Gender did not appear to make any difference in the effects.

"Our brief, four-week intervention using screentime trackers showed that reducing social media use yielded significant improvements in

appearance and weight esteem in distressed youth with heavy social media use," said Goldfield. "Reducing social media use is a feasible method of producing a short-term positive effect on body image among a vulnerable population of users and should be evaluated as a potential component in the treatment of [body-image](#)-related disturbances."

While the current study was conducted as a proof of concept, Goldfield and his colleagues are in the process of conducting a larger study to see if reduction in [social media use](#) can be maintained for longer periods and whether that reduction can lead to even greater psychological benefits.

More information: Helen Thai et al, Reducing social media use improves appearance and weight esteem in youth with emotional distress., *Psychology of Popular Media* (2023). DOI: 10.1037/ppm0000460

Provided by American Psychological Association

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