

Q and A: Have anxiety? Social media not the best source for coping advice, researchers say

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Social media can often be one of the first places people with anxiety turn for information and coping strategies. But is what they come across accurate or even helpful?

While there have been several studies to understand the link between [social media](#) and anxiety—and whether more time spent on social media impacts mental health—there's not been much work on whether social media sources can lead to a better understanding of anxiety or how to manage it.

FIU Center for Children and Families (CCF) professor Jeremy Pettit and Ph.D. student Rebecca Wolenski wanted to find out. They published the results of their study in *Psychology of Popular Media*, and here they break down their findings and suggest where to find good sources of information.

First, does an anxiety diagnosis make someone more likely to seek information on anxiety or coping strategies?

Our data shows that people who experience high levels of anxiety are more likely to seek information about anxiety and coping strategies. This includes seeking information on social media and other sources such as websites, books and friends and family. This makes sense: If people perceive that they are experiencing problems with anxiety, they seek information to better understand their experience and learn strategies to cope with it.

Generally, this type of information-seeking can be considered positive because it is "problem focused" coping. But it's important to remember its effectiveness depends on the quality of information. If it is accurate and provides evidence-based coping strategies, then the information should be beneficial. But, if the information isn't accurate, the opposite can happen—and even lead to worsened anxiety.

That's why we wanted to find out where [young adults](#) turn to for

information about anxiety and strategies to cope with anxiety, and whether the information sources they use are associated with accurate knowledge of anxiety and coping strategies.

Are younger adults using the internet or social media to find information about anxiety?

Previous studies have found people turn to different types of media, like television, frequently to cope in times of stress or other mental health crises. Young adults rely heavily on [digital platforms](#), like social media, over more traditional sources, like books, to learn about and find coping strategies for [mental health issues](#), including anxiety.

Many people and influencers share information on social media about anxiety. Some of this information is accurate and based on science. Unfortunately, some is based on unsubstantiated claims or even flatly contradicts science.

Did the study find social media was a good place to get information?

We surveyed 250 young adults between 18 and 28 years old about where they seek information about anxiety, how knowledgeable they are about anxiety and what strategies they use to cope. We also asked about their current and past experiences with anxiety.

Social media as an information source was associated with lower knowledge about anxiety. This means the more frequently people looked for information about anxiety on social media, the less knowledgeable they were about anxiety. We speculate people are accessing inaccurate information about anxiety on social media, resulting in low knowledge.

Social media contains vast amounts of information. Identifying which information is accurate versus inaccurate is a challenge. Our data indicates young adults may not discriminate between strategies suggested by reputable [e.g., mental health professional] and non-reputable [e.g., celebrity] sources. Only 18% of participants reported that most of the accounts with anxiety information they followed on social media were run by [health professionals](#).

This suggests young adults are often seeking and receiving information about anxiety from uninformed sources, which could result in misinformation about how to deal with anxiety.

There is a critical need for greater visibility of mental health professionals on social media. The demand for information exists. That demand is largely being met by people who lack adequate expertise.

What about coping strategies?

We found people who used social media as an information source were more likely to use both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies.

Adaptive strategies such as seeking support or positive reframing, for example, identifying ways a challenging situation presents opportunities for personal growth, can reduce anxiety. Maladaptive strategies, including avoidance or escape from anxious thoughts, feelings or emotions, may prolong or even increase anxiety.

From our findings, it seems people are trying multiple strategies to manage their anxiety based on what they find on social media. Some of these strategies are helpful. Others are not. Again, this suggests social media users may be unable to discriminate good versus bad strategies for managing anxiety.

So people should be more careful about the information they come across on social media?

All digital platforms provide almost limitless amounts of information. Because this information is largely unregulated, consumers need to be careful about where they look for information about mental health.

Our findings suggest people are more likely to find [accurate information](#) on the internet than social media, but even on the internet there is tremendous variability in quality of information.

What's clear is there's a strong demonstrated interest in the topic of mental health among young adults. But to truly benefit those suffering with anxiety, health professionals both making and promoting social media accounts with evidence-based information might improve the spread of accurate information.

People with questions about [mental health](#) issues like [anxiety](#) would be better served by consulting websites with [information](#) compiled by experts at professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association and National Institute of Mental Health.

More information: Report: psycnet.apa.org/buy/2023-41026-001

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