

Social media use interventions alleviate symptoms of depression

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Receiving therapy for problematic social media use can be effective in improving the mental well-being of people with depression, finds a new study by University College London researchers.

The research, published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, found that social media use interventions could help adults for whom

social media use has become problematic or interferes with their mental health.

Problematic use is when a person's preoccupation with social media results in a distraction from their primary tasks and the neglect of responsibilities in other aspects of their life.

[Previous research](#) has suggested that social media use can become problematic when it starts to interfere with a person's daily life and leads to poor mental well-being, including depression, anxiety, stress and loneliness.

To address these issues, and improve users' mental health, social media use interventions have been developed and evaluated by researchers. Such techniques include abstaining from or limiting use of social media, alongside therapy-based techniques such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

The researchers analyzed 23 studies which featured participants from across the globe, between 2004 and 2022. They found that in more than a third of studies (39%), social media use interventions improved mental well-being.

Improvements were particularly notable in depression (low mood), as 70% of studies saw a significant improvement in depression following the [intervention](#).

Therapy-based interventions were most effective—improving mental well-being in 83% of studies, compared to a 20% of studies finding an improvement where social media use was limited and 25% where social media was given up entirely.

Lead author, Dr. Ruth Plackett (UCL Institute of Epidemiology &

Health), said, "Mental health issues are on the rise, as is the number of people who use social media.

"Health and care professionals should be aware that reducing time spent on social media is unlikely to benefit mental well-being on its own.

"Instead, taking a more therapy-based approach and reflecting on how and why we are interacting with social media and managing those behaviors could help improve mental health."

Study author and GP Dr. Patricia Schartau (UCL Institute of Epidemiology & Health), added, "As [primary care physicians](#), we should proactively explore social media use and its effects on [mental health](#) in patients who present with anxiety and/or low mood in order to give those patients the opportunity to benefit from treatment including some of the more effective interventions outlined in our review."

In 2022 it was estimated that 4.59 billion people globally used at least one form of social media and the sites have dramatically changed how people communicate, form relationships and perceive each other.

While some studies report that social media can be beneficial to users and provide them with increased [social support](#), other evidence links social media with depression, anxiety and other psychological problems—particularly in young people.

The researchers hope that their findings will help to develop guidance and recommendations for policymakers and clinicians on how best to manage problematic social media use.

However, further research is needed in order to investigate who may benefit most from [social media](#) use interventions.

Study limitations

Current experimental research is of low quality, with issues of selection bias making it difficult to generalize the findings.

Further experimental and longitudinal research is needed with representative samples to investigate who may benefit most from [social media use](#) interventions.

More information: The impact of social media use interventions on mental well-being: a systematic review, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2023).

Provided by University College London

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