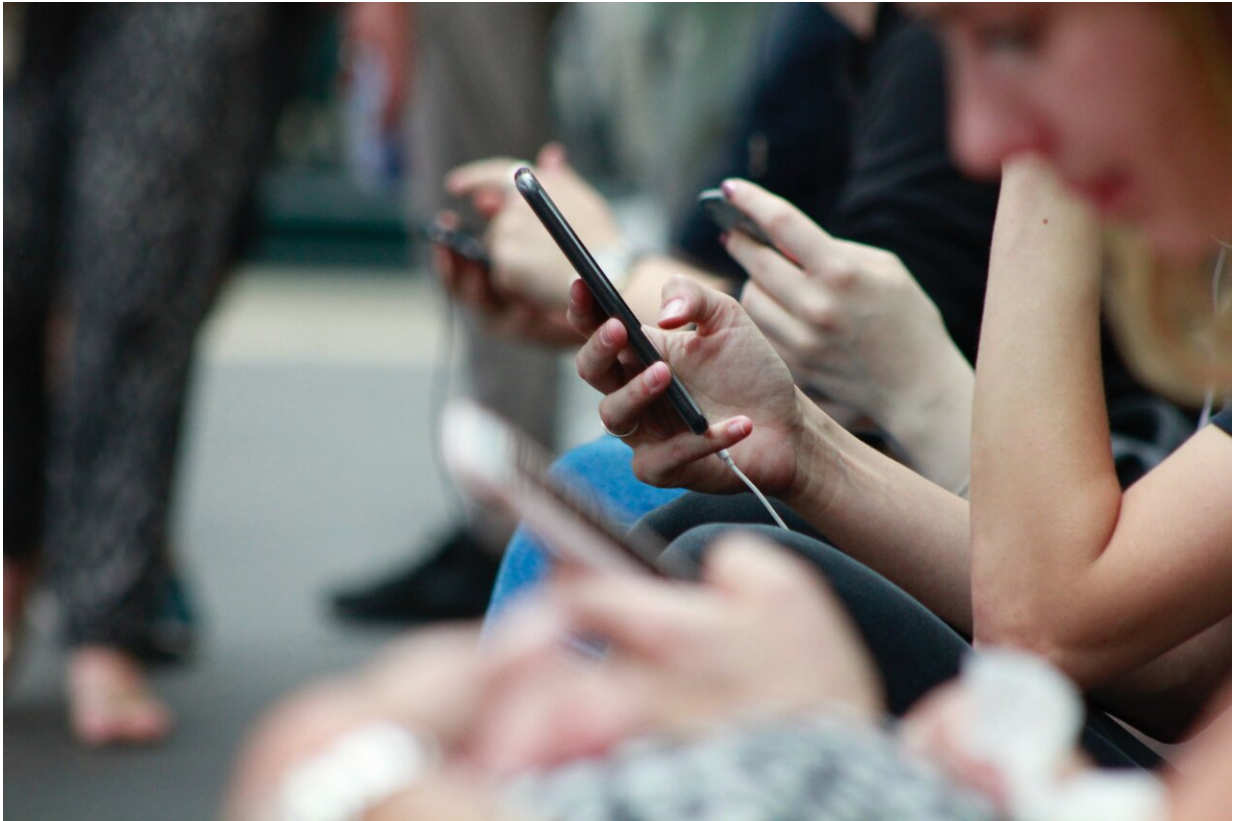


# Fear of missing out driving teen online anxiety, says study

October 9 2023, by Georgia Gowing

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Australian high school students who reported high social media use in conjunction with high levels of FoMO (fear of missing out) also reported increased symptoms of anxiety, while those with lower levels of

FoMO had less anxiety when online, according to a new study.

However, [the paper](#), published in the latest edition of the *Australian Journal of Psychology*, also showed that 54% of students with high social media use but low levels of FoMO said their anxiety increased if they did not use social media.

Out of 960 students aged 12 to 16, 25% said they were using social media one to four times a day, 21% were using it five to 10 times a day, 18% were using it more than 10 times a day, and 16% reported using it "constantly."

Study leader and Adjunct Fellow in the Macquarie University School of Psychological Sciences, Dr. Danielle Einstein, says the term FoMO may be only 10 years old, but it is an established and natural part of being human.

"FoMO is part of our drive to connect, so I don't think we should say we should never have it," she says.

"Teens want to have that sense of belonging to a group, and that means being able to share the same experiences, the same in-jokes.

"For [young people](#), many of those experiences take place online, leading them to worry they'll miss something and be left behind."

At the same time, teens who are online constantly never have the chance to learn whether their place in the group is safe even if they are not always there.

Dr. Einstein says they expected to see that high FoMO and high [social media use](#) were linked to increased anxiety, but the finding that a significant proportion of students reported low FoMO coupled with

more anxiety when offline was interesting.

"This suggests they are relying on devices to manage normal feelings of anxiety," she says.

"They're likely to need validation more often from their friends, or reassurance from family, and they may actually have forgotten how to support themselves independently."

This could be because some socially anxious teenagers actively choose the online environment over face-to-face because they find it more comfortable to build friendships and communicate that way.

However, previous research has shown that as socially anxious teens spend more time online, they enjoy face-to-face interactions less, feeding a vicious cycle that further erodes their social skills.

## **An age of distraction**

Screens and social media are being increasingly acknowledged as a source of distraction and potential problems for people of all ages.

Excessive screen use by toddlers has been linked to developmental delays including delayed walking and running, and as children get older, they can develop problems with attention and concentration, anxiety, depression, body image problems, and even screen addiction.

Phones in classrooms are known to be a major distraction, affecting attention and working memory, and impacting on performance, and leading a number of jurisdictions, including NSW, to introduce [phone bans](#).

Adults are by no means immune to phone distraction, as many of us

know only too well, with a growing number feeling like they spend too much time on their phones, struggling with distraction, and feeling they are unable to concentrate as well as they used to.

Dr. Einstein has been researching the effect of technology use on [mental health](#) for 10 years, and was instrumental in lobbying for and outlining the evidence supporting the phone ban set to begin in NSW schools in 2024.

She shares some of what she has learned about screen use and its effects in the new Australian documentary, *Disconnect Me*, in which Sydney-based comedian and film maker Alex Lykos attempts to address his own relationship with his smartphone by giving it up for 30 days. The movie aims to help people of all ages re-evaluate their use of technology, and make small but real changes.

"It's fair to say that we're living in an age of distraction," Dr. Einstein says.

"Smartphones are a challenge because they are always there and we have come to depend on them for features like communication and maps.

"For this reason, it isn't always practical to tell someone to just turn it off or not take it with them if they go out, so we need to be able to develop strategies that work for us."

With evidence that even having a phone facedown on the desk is a significant distraction, she says the best option is to turn off all unnecessary notifications and put the phone in another room when working.

But in addition to taking our attention away from our work, smartphones are distracting us from our relationships.

"Phubbing," or phone snubbing, refers to people either ignoring the person they are with in favor of their phone or trying to multitask.

"This leads the person you're with feeling they're not as important as the person on your phone, or the game you're playing," Dr. Einstein says.

"You might be watching TV with your partner, but as soon as there's an ad break, you're reaching for your phone for a little dopamine hit from a game or social media.

"It's very important that we prioritize our face-to-face relationships, and the first step to doing that is to be mindful of how and when we're using our phones.

"I'm not suggesting that we all throw our phones in the bin, because they do serve a purpose, but by being mindful of how we're using them and making small changes, we can have a positive impact on our lives.

"Nobody is immune to the fear of missing out, but we need to make changes if it is dominating us."

## **Tips for overcoming FoMO and reducing screen time**

- Do an audit: Estimate how many hours a day you think you are using your phone, then check your phone's settings for the actual number. You'll probably be surprised at the difference.
- Make your phone boring: Shift any apps you know you have trouble with onto a separate device like a tablet or computer, and set time limits for their use.
- Quiet the noise: Turn off most of your notifications, and fine-tune the rest so you only hear from the people who matter.
- Prioritize: Identify what's important to you. Chances are, it won't be what's happening on social media.

- Put the phone down: Make time for activities you enjoy where you either can't use your phone or are less likely to, including sport, exercise, playing a [musical instrument](#), or art and craft.
- Learn to be bored: We all tend to reach for our phones when we have nothing else to do, especially in public when it can feel awkward to be unoccupied.
- Be selective: Choose your groups carefully and don't be afraid to mute or leave them.

## **Tips for parents to help children navigate social media**

- Cold turkey won't work: Be aware that if a child or teenager has an unhealthy relationship with their phone, taking it away will cause conflict.
- Phones equal responsibility: When you give a child their first phone, set expectations for its use.
- Be aware: Make sure you know how high-school-age children conduct themselves on [social media](#) and have regular chats about this.
- Do as I do: Be a good example of healthy phone use.
- Not all bad: Let children know that some FoMO is a natural human feeling.
- IRL first: Encourage children to participate in sport and non-screen-based hobbies to foster face-to-face friendships.
- Quality over quantity: Encourage them to be selective about their online friendship groups, and only be active in groups where they feel supported.
- Healthy goals: Help them identify what is important to them, and how they can meet other priorities if their main goal—such as being popular—is not being met.

**More information:** Danielle A. Einstein et al, FoMO, but not self-compassion, moderates the link between social media use and anxiety in adolescence, *Australian Journal of Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/00049530.2023.2217961](https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2023.2217961)

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