

Social media affects people's views on mental illness, study finds

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Even subtle differences in the wording of social media messages may be enough to sway young people's beliefs about depression and anxiety and their treatment.

In a new study, researchers found that college students were more optimistic about the possibility of successfully treating [mental health problems](#) after they read social media messages conveying what is called a "[growth mindset](#)."

But [social media posts](#) written with a "fixed mindset" led young people to feel that [depression](#) and anxiety were more stable and innate, and not so easy to treat.

Growth mindset is the belief that a feature, such as mental health, can be improved with effort. A fixed mindset is the belief that a feature can't change, no matter how hard you try.

The results are important because young people spend a lot of time on social media and those with depression and anxiety may be encountering a lot of messages about their condition, said Whitney Whitted, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in psychology at The Ohio State University.

"These relatively subtle messages may be influencing whether they believe they have any possibility of working through their depression and anxiety and getting better," Whitted said.

The study, published recently in the [Journal of Clinical Psychology](#), involved 322 undergraduate students.

Participants viewed a series of messages (tweets) from the social media site X, formerly Twitter. They were randomly assigned to view tweets about mental health with a growth mindset or a fixed mindset, or a control condition in which the tweets did not involve mental health at all.

In the fixed mindset condition, the tweets portrayed mental health as a fixed condition that does not change. (For example, one tweet said, "I

can't wait for my seasonal depression to be over so that I can get back to my regular depression.")

Participants in the growth mindset condition read tweets that emphasized the fluid nature of mental health and the ability to recover from and take control of mental illness. (In one tweet, the user captioned "I got this" to a meme that read "telling those anxious thoughts who's really in control.")

After reading the tweets, participants completed a survey assessing their beliefs about how long depression and anxiety normally last and whether they ever go away; the effectiveness of treatment for depression and anxiety; and beliefs about how much control people have in recovering from mental illness.

Results showed that participants who read the growth mindset tweets were more likely than others to say depression and anxiety don't have to be permanent conditions and that people can take steps to alleviate the symptoms.

In contrast, those who read the fixed mindset tweets had less optimistic views about the permanence of mental illness and the ability of people to treat it.

It is notable that this short intervention had an impact, said study co-author Jennifer Cheavens, professor of psychology at The Ohio State University.

"It was just a few minutes of people reading these tweets with small variations in how the messages about mental illness were framed," Cheavens said. "But it made a difference in what these participants reported they believed."

Of course, it is not known how long the changes connected to reading the social media messages will last. But the results could be encouraging for several reasons.

For one, it suggests that growth mindset social media messages may help persuade people with depression or [anxiety](#) that it is worthwhile to seek help, the researchers said.

It can also help with people who are already in therapy.

"We want our clients to put in the hard work necessary to overcome their problems—but they have to believe it is possible," Cheavens said.

"This study suggests there may be ways to give them a boost, to help persuade them that working hard in therapy can pay off in the end."

Whitted said the findings are especially important now, given how much time young people spend on social media. Participants in this study reported using social media one to three hours a day.

"What we found is that what young adult [college students](#) view on social media has the potential to impact what they believe about mental illness," Whitted said.

"It is important that the messages they receive accurately reflect what we know about mental illness, especially the fact that it is treatable."

Other co-authors were Matthew Southward of the University of Kentucky; Kristen Howard of the Milwaukee VA Medical Center/Medical College of Wisconsin; Samantha Wick of Miami University; and Daniel Strunk of Ohio State.

More information: Whitney M. Whitted et al, Seeing is believing: The effect of subtle communication in social media on viewers' beliefs about depression and anxiety symptom trajectories, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/jclp.23647](https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23647)

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