

The Meaning of “Likes”

What parents need to know about risks associated with social media

While the long-term effects of social media involvement on adolescent health are yet to be understood, experts who work with teens and young adults are beginning to see some troubling trends. A growing number of mental health professionals report a potential link between teen use of social media and symptoms of depression and anxiety—struggles that can lead to self-medication with alcohol or other drugs.

Experts at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation specialize in the prevention, assessment, and treatment of addiction and co-occurring disorders among adolescents and young adults. Brenda Servais, PsyD, LP, LADC, lead psychologist for female patients ages 12–25 at Hazelden’s Plymouth, Minnesota, campus, has noticed a greater incidence of social isolation as well as symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder among the young people she helps. Below, she shares insights about these and other emerging risks for adolescents and young adults who are immersed in social media.

A viral strain of bullying.

Technology has increased exposure to ridicule and bullying exponentially. One classmate’s mean-spirited remark on Facebook can quickly morph into an all-out cyber campaign of spite, with “friends” adding comments or “liking” disparaging posts. “Cyberbullying is infectious and devastating,” says Servais. “As a teen, your entire life is about your peer relationships and what people think of you.” Social media intensify bullying in two powerful ways. First, bullying has a more public venue, with friends, classmates, and noninvolved parties able to view and respond to postings. And second, bullying now carries lasting harm. What once was a comment made in the school hallway is now a permanent message that can be recorded and stored.

A recurring cycle of trauma.

Adolescents and young adults who struggle with addiction and co-occurring mental health conditions have commonly experienced some type of traumatic event in their lives. Many of the young women Servais counsels have experienced significant emotional or physical trauma, such as sexual assault. Social media can perpetuate the trauma. As Servais explains, photos, videos, or conversations related to an incident of sexual assault can be easily and anonymously disseminated, becoming a recurring source of pain and distress. “Sexual trauma is no longer a private ordeal for a young person to work through,” she observes. “Instead, the trauma is revisited again and again, with each new post and every face-to-face encounter with peers who’ve seen everything play out through their social media feeds.”

Always connected and utterly alone.

Responding to Snapchat or Yik Yak messages or “liking” Facebook posts can seem like genuine interaction with peers. But texting, following, chatting, and posting can actually have the opposite effect for teens. “The young people we work with tell us how distraught they become reading Facebook,” says Servais. “They feel insecure and alienated, discouraged rather than buoyed by constant updates about the good times and accomplishments of their peers,” she explains. Young people don’t realize that their digital world is a façade—a skewed picture and modified storyline of what’s actually happening in the lives of their friends and peers. “They’re just left thinking, ‘What’s wrong with me? Everyone else is doing so well and I’ve got nothing going on,’” says Servais.

Just between you and me . . . and the world.

Raising resilient teens today may bring unknown challenges, but setting safe boundaries is still the bottom line. “Educate teens about what they’re allowed to post and share and where their messages could end up,” Servais tells parents. Adolescents and young adults need to know that they have no control over photos or messages once they’re sent; everything can be forwarded, reposted, and endlessly disseminated. “Young people are posting very personal things and not realizing that they’re relinquishing their boundaries and making themselves the potential target of ridicule, harassment, or bullying.”

Servais emphasizes that social media sites are not intrinsically unsafe or destructive and that many of them provide a portal to positive support and important information for young people searching for help and answers. She adds that “We’re in a new era of parenting, but the basics still apply: Keep the lines of communication open with your teen, know what’s going on in his or her life, and set clear rules and boundaries.”

We know how to help. Hundreds of young people find freedom from addiction every year through Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation’s programs for adolescents and young adults, and parents often serve as powerful change agents in that process. But reaching out for help isn’t easy for families, and the path to healing isn’t always clear. That’s why the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation provides extensive help and support for parents and other family members. Learn more today by visiting hazelden.org/youth or by calling **855-348-7032**.

Facebook is not always friendly

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—**Brenda Servais, PsyD, LP, LADC**

Lead Psychologist for Female Patients, Hazelden in Plymouth, Minnesota

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