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Children, social media and the effect the internet can have on mental health

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Children, social media and the effect the internet can have on mental health

Children, social media and the effect the internet can have on mental health

While social media can be a useful way of checking in with your friends, it can sometimes lead to people feeling concerned about fitting in, particularly for younger generations.

The acronym FOMO has been coined in recent years to describe the ongoing **anxiety** caused by the ever-present nature of technology and the need to constantly check social media due to a 'Fear Of Missing Out' on conversations or social events.

Leading Priory psychologist **Dr Georgia Henderson** is urging young people to make 2018 the year they switch from the 'social stresswork' to the 'Joy of Missing Out' #JOMO.

#JOMO campaign

Priory's advice comes as Wimbledon High School - a top girls' school in London - launches its own #JOMO campaign, urging pupils to reject the fear of missing out and replace it with the *joy of missing out*.

The move to create more positive wellbeing among children reflects the concerning results of a **study** among 5,000 year 9-11 pupils across several independent and state schools, where 71% of respondents said they had actively taken 'digital detoxes' to escape social media.

Perhaps most concerning was that pupils highlighted how social media was having a negative impact on their emotional wellbeing, with 57% saying they had received abusive comments online.

These results show that, while we may think that younger generations enjoy spending time on social media and sharing content with friends, there may be a darker side to spending large amounts of time online that could have further consequences.

Tricking our brains

These findings were matched by the comments of Dr Henderson, a clinical psychologist who works with young people at **Priory Hospital North London**, who believes parents and schools have a role to play when limiting the amount of time children spend on social media.

She said: "You wouldn't give your children free access to junk food every day. Parents need to balance what they *feel* is the correct amount of social media time for the health of their children, and schools can help by giving lessons on JOMO."

Social media tricks our brains into thinking that we need to compare ourselves to our peers in order to confirm that we fit in. Young people also find it hard to tell the difference between their peers and celebrities that appear in their news feeds, which can lead them to judge themselves against models and pop stars.

We know that 'likes' and digital feedback provides short term happiness, but it is very easy to get dependent on this. Also, everyone knows the feeling of being lonely in a crowded room. Imagine how lonely it feels to have "1000 friends" but no-one you really feel safe to be vulnerable around?"

Reconnecting

Dr Henderson offers advice for parents on how to help children and teens embrace #JOMO:

1) Reconnect to the real world

When we receive 'likes' on our content, this produces the brain chemical dopamine which gives us pleasure, but eye contact with another person produces oxytocin, making us feel loved, safe and understood.

These happy chemicals we receive through connecting to people face to face provide more long-term happiness and improved relationships.

2) Slow down for increased productivity

The swift pace of technology can leave us feeling breathless in our daily lives. Humans are at their most productive and creative when we allow our brains to process thoughts, leaving us feeling less stressed and more *mindful* in the process.

3) Safety

Younger generations are known for being one step ahead when it comes to digital technology. The downside of this is that it places increasing pressure on young people to be more mature than their age as a result of the internet and social media, so why not encourage young people to pause and step away?

4) Sleep

We know that the blue light emitted from phones can have a damaging impact on sleep, but what about the constant need to be "in the loop"? Social media is like a club open 24/7 and young people are not always great at knowing when to leave.

5) Role models

As parents, it helps to gauge your own use of technology and urge to check your devices. If you let it be known that spending time with family is enough without photos or updates, this can help you work together to change the culture of your family.

6) Self-esteem

Young people who spend a lot of time on social media are more likely to rely on external approval and physical attractiveness, rather than valuing their internal attributes and worth. Encourage a child to gain skills, play and travel without it featuring on social media. Learning to take a long walk, deep breaths or a hot bath is much more stable than turning to the web for support, and can help a young person learn how to analyse their own emotions and recognise the power of JOMO.

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