



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

# TRENDS

## SOCIAL MEDIA

The advent of technology in the last 15 years has meant that many children have grown up alongside social media in ways that most adults did not experience until much later in life, raising concerns about how this may affect child development, particularly mental health. For instance, mental health professionals have pointed out some concerns regarding the relationship between depression and social media use. It is hard to determine for sure whether social media use causes mental health problems such as depression symptoms.

Teens who spend more time on social media feel more isolated, potentially due to fewer deep and empathetic connections in social interaction obtained by social media, although equally possible is that isolated teens are simply spending more time on social media. Social media use at nighttime can interfere with restful sleep, one symptom of depression. In addition, excessive screen time limits activities that build competence and can help middle schoolers feel confident, with limited returns from time spent on social media. In addition, excessive social media use can result in teens feeling disengaged from the present moment (or mindful) – a capacity that is associated with good mental health. It's easy to get caught up in mindless 'doomscrolling' without even noticing how you got there or being able to slow down enough to acknowledge the impact.

To address issues like doomscrolling and to encourage healthy phone and social media use, we can support mindful use of social media. One such exercise may be encouraging teens to pay close attention to how they feel when they are scrolling through social media and to make a choice as to whether they would like to continue to engage in the activity or disengage when social media is negatively affecting their mood, rather continuing to scroll on autopilot. It's easy enough for parents and schools to restrict social media usage by simply switching phones off, confiscating phones, or

banning phones in schools. However, a more useful and lifelong skill for both online and offline is fostering present-moment awareness around social media usage and emotions.

Sometimes, social media use might be making teens feel bad, but it can be hard to pause and take the time to notice that when on 'autopilot'. Repeated practice of social media mindfulness exercises like these can build up the 'mindfulness muscle' so that when teens are caught up in doomscrolling, they have increased awareness to disengage when it is negatively affecting their mood and recognize patterns in their social media use.

### Formal mindfulness practice exercise for in or outside of school:

- Set a timer for 3 minutes. Open up a social media application (e.g., Instagram).
- Make note of: How do I feel right now? What emotions do I notice as I watch this video/ see this picture? How has my mood shifted or stayed the same? Are there any clues in my body that tell me what emotion I am feeling? What thoughts do I notice coming up?
- Try to pay attention to these thoughts and feelings in the present moment without judging whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. Just allow them to be there, just as they are.
- It's okay if the feelings are painful or uncomfortable, like jealousy, sadness, or loneliness – acknowledging them is a way of helping you

process the feeling without it consuming you. Be kind to yourself about your thoughts and feelings in the same way you would a friend going through something tough.

### Informal mindfulness practice exercise for outside of school:

Have you ever noticed that you have somehow been scrolling on Instagram for many minutes without even consciously or intentionally opening the app? This is called being on 'autopilot'. When we've practiced something so many times, we do it automatically, which can be very useful in some situations, but in others, it can stop us from being in charge of our own behaviors. One way we can change this is to 'interrupt' this autopilot response, and the more you practice this, the easier it gets.

- 'Press pause' on yourself for 10 seconds when you have the urge to open a specific app or if you notice you have opened it without realizing it. Before opening the app, check in about how you're feeling.
- Do you notice any patterns? Do you tend to open social media up when you are in a pleasant or poor mood? When experiencing pleasant or painful thoughts?
- Decide whether you want to open the app or if you choose to re-engage mindfully in something else. Either is OK, as long as it's your choice, rather than you simply acting on 'autopilot'.



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