**Can Social Media Make You Happy?**

No, wait. Actually, [social media makes you depressed](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/264902.php).

Have we mentioned that social media can drive you crazy? Well, maybe not, but it probably drives researchers crazy.

The thing is, social media isn't some separate entity apart from human beings. Social media IS human beings, and therefore, social media is what you make of it. It's something to keep in mind, because even though the modern forms are new and shiny -- Facebook was founded in 2004, Twitter in 2006 -- the concept is as old as human relationships.

For example, if you view Facebook through a half-empty glass, it may feel like an endless land of one-upmanship where everybody is doing better than you. On the other hand, if you look at it as a tool for building supportive relationships, it's a great place to find sympathy, encouragement and connection.

And it is a tool, says Margaret Duffy, a communications professor at the University of Missouri who oversaw [a study of college students and Facebook engagement](http://munews.missouri.edu/news-releases/2015/0203-if-facebook-use-causes-envy-depression-could-follow/). (Facebook was chosen because "about 100% of college students" are on the platform, Duffy says with a chuckle.)

[10 ways to get happy](http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/19/living/feat-project-happy-10-ways/)

"Just being a **heavy user** of social media, like Facebook, doesn't mean you're likely more vulnerable to depression," she says.

Social media can have effects on mental health. Studies have shown that getting "likes" for Facebook posts [actually results in a release of dopamine](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/vitality/201205/facebook-and-your-brain), a brain chemical associated with pleasure. Moreover, sad or moving posts can promote release of oxytocin, the "love hormone," which makes us feel protected.

Even the way we use it makes a difference.

In Duffy's study, "surveillance use" of Facebook -- that is, lurking and deliberately seeking out posts that may feed insecurity -- "was a significant indicator of the potential for depression," says Duffy of her study.

So how can social media make you happy? Here are some recommendations:

1. Don't let the Internet get you down.

Easier said than done, we know. Social media is everywhere, almost everyone is on it, and if you want to make yourself unhappy, simply imagine that the rest of the Internet is having a better time in your absence.

"Social media is almost like a game," writes [Adrienne Erin on Socialnomics](http://www.socialnomics.net/2014/04/08/can-social-media-make-you-happier/). "We are all at war with one another for likes and favorites and we compete by posting pictures of our expensive dinners, vacations and social interactions."

But if you're going to be on social media, there are ways to improve your mood.

Erin recommends a site called [Happier.com](http://www.happier.com/), dedicated to "celebrating the good around you." Tumblr has [a "positivity" page](http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/positivity). The [Nicest Place on the Internet](http://thenicestplaceontheinter.net/) offers virtual hugs.

Happiness, [one study says](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/274017.php), can be viral.

And when you just need to hit a reset button, try [Make Everything OK](http://make-everything-ok.com/).

2. Data is your friend.

Our virtual lives often seem separate from our actual lives, but every little bit of ourselves we put out there actually provides indicators on how we're feeling, both physically and mentally.

Adam Sadilek, a computer scientist at the University of Rochester, has helped create a model that can show the spread of disease by scanning Twitter data.

"Our model then predicts if and when an individual will fall ill with high accuracy, thereby improving our understanding of the emergence of global epidemics from people's day-to-day interactions," [he writes](http://www.cs.rochester.edu/~sadilek/research/).

Doesn't sound cheerful? How about this: Scientists also used Twitter [to determine when we were happy](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/science/30twitter.html?_r=0). (Moods are lowest first thing in the morning.)

The upshot is that the huge amount of data we're creating on social networks [can help us become healthier](http://bigthink.com/think-tank/how-social-networks-can-make-us-healthier-and-happier) -- or allow others to intercede if we're not.

3. Put the phone down. And especially put your children's phones down.

For all the connection social media can provide, it can't replace simple face-to-face contact -- even these days, when video messaging is as convenient as, well, clicking a phone.

(And we know [how anxious you get](http://munews.missouri.edu/news-releases/2015/0108-iphone-separation-linked-to-physiological-anxiety-poor-cognitive-performance-mu-study-finds/) when you're away from your phone.)

But it can really take a toll on youngsters. In a study from Stanford on girls age 8-12, "those who say they spend considerable amounts of time using multimedia describe themselves in ways that suggest they are less happy and less socially comfortable than peers who say they spend less time on screens," [The New York Times observed](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/25/does-technology-affect-happiness/?_r=1).

The study is by no means conclusive, but it does offer food for thought, Lyn Mikel Brown, an education professor, told the newspaper.

"The clear message is also how important it is for parents to create opportunities for girls to unplug, to live a balanced life, and increase quality face-to-face time with the people important to them," said Mikel Brown.

It all sounds like common sense -- but then, so does most advice on social well-being. Which is why some of the shrewdest words on the subject have nothing to do with social media at all.

"Don't waste your time on jealousy," wrote Mary Schmich in [a famous Chicago Tribune column](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/chi-schmich-sunscreen-column-column.html)that became the song "Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)." "Sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're behind. The race is long and, in the end, it's only with yourself."

And when you're in doubt, there are always [dog videos](http://www.animalplanet.com/video-topics/pet-entertainment/funny-pet-videos/top-10-hilarious-dogs/), [cat videos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tntOCGkgt98) and [dancing videos](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdcuaeYV9oM).

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