

# Don't compare yourself to others on social media, professor says

STUART PEDDLE THE CHRONICLE HERALD

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## Psychologist treats patients distressed by it



A clinical psychologist and associate professor at Dalhousie University says that comparisons with others on social media can lead to negative moods like feeling depressed, sad or anxious.

You fire up Facebook, check the news feed and see a friend posting fantastic photos from their trip to some exotic locale you couldn't afford to visit without a lottery win. You suddenly feel inadequate. You can take a small measure of comfort in knowing you're not alone. It's a thing.

For Dr. Simon Sherry, clinical psychologist and associate professor at Dalhousie University, it's an issue of our times.

In his practice, it's not uncommon for him to treat people "distressed in one way or another" by social media, he says.

Humans make social comparisons all the time, he says, describing those comparisons as being either upward or downward in nature.

"If you are a basketball player, you can compare yourself to LeBron James, which would be an upward social comparison, or you can compare yourself downward, perhaps to the most awkward player on your team," Sherry says. "And not surprisingly, there are implications for your mood depending on the nature of the social comparison you make upward or downward."

That can happen in many different domains such as wealth, appearance, relationships, health or any number of others, he says.

The result, broadly speaking, is not good.

"People tend to feel bad when they compare themselves to other people on social media. We have a growing body of research that points us toward that conclusion."

But Sherry says it's important to remember that with social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram the content is mostly "an ideal self representation."

"People tend to want to present an ideal version of who they are online," he says. "They present their best possible version of self, even if that best possible version of self is unrepresentative or unrealistic. And people not uncommonly will fall into a trap where they're sitting and engaging with social media and they're comparing their actual self to another person's ideal self. So they're comparing the person they actually are, perhaps sitting there in their pyjamas after work, to an ideal representation of self. And that type of actual-ideal comparison breeds dissatisfaction, breeds low mood."

The psychologist says there are many ideas related to the effects of social media that are still “understudied.” It’s a relatively recent advent in terms of being scientifically researched so there’s no diagnosis at this point for problematic internet or Facebook usage. But there clearly are some people who are more affected.

Someone who experiences distress may encounter negative moods like feeling depressed, sad, anxious and so forth. Someone who becomes impaired could find it affecting their work or substantially interfering with relationships.

Sherry says certain personality traits, such as neuroticism, seem to drive problematic internet usage.

“Just to give us a shared definition, neurotic individuals tend to be anxious, sad, jealous, envious, and their mood tends to be unstable,” he says. “And so this is sort of a dispositional form — a personality-based form — of negative emotions.”

That could lead people to go to social media in an effort to regulate their negative and unstable moods or seek social support from others. The jury’s out on its effectiveness.

You might also see a pattern of “displacement” in the lives of people with problematic usage, he says. The social media platform starts to take over key parts of their life, displacing face-to-face interactions and time with spouses or friends.

There is a chicken-and-egg question to think about, Sherry says: Does Facebook usage make people lonely or do lonely people gravitate toward Facebook?

“We’re some distance from being able to disentangle that chicken-and-egg question,” he says. “We need long-term longitudinal studies to get a question like that.”

On the other side of the coin, Facebook can be an ideal tool for narcissists.

“People who feel special, important, grandiose, unique, do tend to use platforms like Facebook to garner admiration, like a tool that feeds their sense of self-importance. And so from that perspective, there’s no doubt for narcissistic individuals, Facebook is just a tool for the self-aggrandizement.”

So what is his advice?

In short, interact and browse on social media, but don’t fall into the self-comparison trap.

“At this point, there’s scientific literature that points us towards those comparisons as being unhealthy. They are corrosive toward your self-esteem, toward your mood, toward your relationships and what I would want people to do is be savvy, be skeptical, be a critical consumer of these images and words that are coming your way. Question what you see. Seeing something on Facebook isn’t harmful to you, it’s if you passively accept it and you internalize it without questioning what you’re seeing.”

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