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Perfectionism Makes Social Media Use More Toxic for Girls

Research links perfectionism, depression, and social media comparisons.

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Source: Andrea Piacquadio/Pexels

Accusations that Instagram and other social media platforms may be harmful to adolescent girls' mental health have made [news headlines](#). In part, this is due to a recent leak from internal Facebook documents suggesting that Instagram use can trigger a "downward spiral" of negative emotions in girls. Though plenty of research has [linked](#) social media use to negative psychological outcomes for girls and young women, only some teen girls

seem to experience these outcomes. This might be because [what girls do](#) on social media matters more than how much time they spend on it. But another explanation is that individual personality traits can leave some girls more at risk for being harmed by social media use. [New research](#) published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* tested whether perfectionism might play a key role in determining whether and how social media use affects adolescent girls' mental health. The quick answer? Perfectionism makes things worse.

Teen girls are highly likely to have at least one social media account, and teen girls are more likely than teen boys to be heavy users. Adolescent girls also have higher rates of depression and body image struggles compared to male peers. Finally, girls are especially likely to make what are called "appearance-focused upward comparisons." This is the psychological term for comparing how you look to how someone else looks, and feeling like your appearance falls short of the standard set by that person.

Given these findings, the authors of this new research focused their study on teen girls. They surveyed 135 girls from a UK high school once a week for four weeks. The weekly surveys included measures of depressed mood, social comparisons, and body appreciation. (Body appreciation is an element of [positive body image](#) that involves feeling gratitude and respect for your body.) At the first time point, the girls also completed a measure of perfectionism.

The researchers examined two [distinct types](#) of perfectionism. The first, *rigid perfectionism*, involves feeling that your performance should always be flawless and that your worth is based on being flawless. People who score high on rigid perfectionism tend to feel awful when they fail to meet the extremely high standards they have for themselves. These individuals tend to strongly agree with statements like, "My value as a person depends on being perfect." The second type of perfectionism the authors explored was *self-critical perfectionism*. This type of perfectionism includes believing that other people make excessive demands of you, feeling intense doubt over any mistakes you make, and engaging in high levels of self-criticism. People who experience high levels of self-critical perfectionism are more vulnerable to depression. They tend to strongly agree with statements like, "When I make a mistake, I feel like a failure."

When the researchers asked the girls in the study about the context in which their social comparisons occurred, more than 80 percent were with someone

seen on social media. Analyses revealed that appearance-focused comparisons predicted more depression symptoms and lower body appreciation. In other words, girls who more frequently compared how they looked to how others looked in social media images tended to experience more symptoms of depression and report less kindness and compassion toward their own bodies. But the researchers were particularly interested in how perfectionism might play a role in these associations. Here the story gets a bit more complicated. When they tested whether girls who scored high on perfectionism were more vulnerable to these negative effects of social media comparisons, it was only self-critical perfectionism that seemed to play a role. In other words, the sense that others are holding you to impossible standards seems to be particularly damaging when you're confronted with social media images.

Stripping away the research jargon, here's how the sequence of events might look: A teen girl scrolls through her Instagram feed. She sees a photo of a peer who looks particularly good. Never mind that this friend has probably edited and filtered the photo, or that this friend likely selected the image from dozens of carefully staged shots. Our teen girl sees this photo, compares herself to it, and immediately feels that she's falling short in the looks department. The more this girl is prone to self-critical perfectionism, the more likely it is that this comparison will trigger feelings of depression and poor body image. Comparing yourself to the people you see in social media images is a bad idea in general, but even more so if you tend toward this type of perfectionism.

Regardless of where you fall on the perfectionism continuum, why not take a social media break and see what happens to your mental health? Without that highly curated stream of images to compare yourself to, you might find yourself feeling a lot less self-doubt. As the saying goes, "Comparison is the thief of joy." Reclaim some of your joy by stepping away from social media feeds and cutting down on the opportunities for these types of comparisons.