CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH

Social Media and Cellphone Addiction

REFERENCES

Social Media and Cellphones

Cellphones have become a prominent staple in our everyday lives that makes us accessible 24/7. In December 2023, the Ontario government insisted Ontario school boards (for grades K-12) crack down further on cellphone use in the classroom, with stricter rules that go beyond their **2019 policy** due to social media being a huge distraction for kids in the classroom. More recently, the Ontario government has announced a new set of rules that will go into effect in the **2024-25 academic year**, implementing a ban on all social media sites on school devices and networks. These new measures will also enforce an 'out of sight out of mind' policy, having students put their cellphones on silent, be removed from sight, and banned from being used during class time unless instructed otherwise by the educator. In British Columbia, the banning of cellphones in select high schools has shown to improve mental health, student engagement, academic success and decrease bullying.[1] Within the post-secondary environment, a recent Canadian study showed a concerningly high prevalence and severity of cellphone addiction, raising concerns about the health and academic impacts this has on post-secondary students.[2]

When discussing cellphone addiction and social media, it is important to emphasize that this is not a causal relationship. This means that having social media does not cause cellphone addiction, and that you can be addicted to your cellphone while not being on social media platforms. However, almost every single app on our phone is engineered to elicit addictive behaviours that, in turn, produces a dopamine rush (which produces feelings of pleasure) when it lights up.[3] All things considered, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated social media uptake and for many post-secondary-aged individuals who are addicted to their cellphones, social media is a part of the issue.[4]

While cellphones can positively increase social interactions and communication, nomophobia (fear of detachment from a cellphone) is an emerging threat to one's mental, physical, and social health, with a need for further research as this issue becomes increasingly prevalent.[5]

Nomophobia: What is it?

Nomophobia (no mobile phone phobia) is the psychological condition of fearing detachment from a cellphone, which includes symptoms such as trembling, perspiration, agitation, panic, tachycardia, depression, disorientation, and anxiety when[6,7]:

- **an individual is separated from their device or does not have access to it**
- **they experience the fear of missing messages and/or social media updates and posts**
- **their cellphone battery or network connectivity is low**

Studies show that nomophobia is more prevalent in individuals aged 18-25, with females displaying higher levels than men.[8] Post-secondary individuals mostly indulge in excessive cellphone use revolving around social media, playing games, and watching videos.[7]

Post-secondary aged individuals who indulge in excessive cellphone use exhibit[4,5,7]:

- **decreased attention in classroom settings**
- **academic procrastination**
- **increased rates of school dropout**
- **social withdrawal**
- **compulsive behaviour**
- **poorer psychological well-being**
- **anxiety and feelings of loneliness**
- **poorer sleep habits**
- **adverse academic performance**

Warning Signs

Cellphones provide us with emotional security, safety, and social presence without the physical aspects that go with face-to-face socialization. This form of indirect communication has only increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and can lead to overuse and cellphone dependence, adversely impacting adolescent identity formation.[5]

Common characteristics of someone displaying nomophobia include[7]:

- **avoiding areas where cellphone use is restricted**
- **owning more than one cellphone (not including work phones)**
- **taking their cellphone everywhere they go, including places like the shower**
- **checking their phone constantly to ensure a notification wasn't missed**
- **always having a phone charger on them**
- **keeping their cellphone nearby while sleeping.**

Impacts on physical health include[4,5]:

- **neck, shoulder, and back pain**
- **thumb and wrist pain**
- **carpal tunnel syndrome**
- **headaches, migraines, and fatigue**
- **eye strain**

Maintaining a Healthy Relationship with our Cellphone and Social Media

While usage of social media and our cellphones can be a way to cope with loneliness, distress, and isolation, consistent and continuous interaction with social media can increase feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and depression.[9]

Social media can be damaging to our mental health, but it doesn't have to be that way. It is all about creating healthy boundaries and having a positive relationship with social media and our cellphones.

Research shows that limiting social media use in students to 10 minutes a day significantly decreases feelings of depression and loneliness in comparison to those that have no time restriction on social media.[10]

Strategies to help you engage in a healthy relationship with social media and cellphones are:

- **focusing on content that aligns with your interests.**
- **setting time-limits to monitor your cellphone and social media use.**
- **avoiding phone use during mealtimes.**
- **sleeping with your phone out of reach or another room.**
- **turning push notifications off for apps.**
- **changing your device display to grayscale to make it less stimulating.**
- **turning your phone off at certain times of the day (i.e., when driving or eating).**
- **putting your phone away if you are chatting, eating, or leisurely spending time with people.**

It's acknowledged that 10 minutes is a very short period of time, and that most of us engage with social media for more than 10 minutes a day. If you'd like to try to limit your cellphone usage, you can try cutting down slowly in increments that feel comfortable and suitable for you.

Try the stack method! When getting together with friends or family, stack your phones together, face down, to limit interaction with your devices and promote healthier and more engaging social interactions!

Additional Resources

Seven Ways to Use Social Media to Benefit Your Mental Health

This tip sheet, created by BounceBack, provides tips on how you can use social media in a mindfully conscious way that minimizes the risks that come with social media use.

Youth Toolkit – Centre for Humane Technology

This toolkit, designed by the Centre for Humane Technology, provides issue and action guides surrounding the topics of social media, technology, and mindfulness. Each guide has informational content to help students navigate technology and social media in a mindfully conscious way. Both students and educators can use this toolkit.