Mental Health In The Digital Age

Sarve bhavantu sukhinah..sarve santu niraamayah...A prayer to the Almighty... May all be happy and may all be free from illness!

Be it the age-old Sanskrit peace mantra associated with the *Upanishadas* and *Puranaas*, which highlights the interwoven relationship between happiness and health or the modern-day definition of Health as defined by the WHO, as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease, the importance of health cannot be undermined.

This becomes even more relevant in the modern-day chaotic world where we have an almost unlimited access to any or all information! Poor attention spans, too much information, absence of any filtration/boundaries, risk taking, adventure seeking and need for immediate gratification have made it almost impossible for the present-day youngsters to keep pace with whatever is happening around them. Constant comparisons both at a personal/professional level with no or poor value-based decision-making capacity, adds to the chaos to their internal world as well.

But before proceeding any further its important to understand what is truly meant by a positive mental health.

The 7 C's of mental health offer frameworks for well-being, emphasising on personal growth, relationships, support and stress management.

- **Competence:** Feeling capable in one's abilities and actions.

- **Confidence:** Believing in oneself and having a positive self-image.

- **Connection:** Building meaningful relationships.

- **Coping:** Developing healthy ways to manage stress.

- **Compassion:** Practicing kindness towards self and others.

- **Community:** Feeling part of a larger supportive group.

- **Care/Calmness:** Prioritising self-care and finding inner peace.

As stated, these principles help build resilience, manage stress, and foster a positive mindset by focusing on skills, self-belief, relationships, ethics, and empathy for oneself and others.

Social media can make us feel all sorts of conflicting feelings, from anxious and isolated to connected and excited. Most research, however, suggests that social media can have an overall negative impact on mental health depending on who is using it and how.

MENTAL HEALTH

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- **Negative Impacts:** Increased anxiety, depression, cyber bullying, social comparison, loneliness, poor sleep, attention issues, poor frustration tolerance, emotional dysregulation and other behavioural problems.
- **Positive Impacts:** Awareness and education, enhanced social connections, access to support communities and broader information access.
- **Vulnerable Groups:** People with pre-existing vulnerabilities face higher risks for addiction and mental illness due to excessive device use.
- **Developmental Concerns:** Potential for delayed language, social, and emotional skills, especially in young children due to lack of in-life real exposures.

However, there are ways to make the online experience positive, including setting limits around usage. To be mindful about social media use, there is a need to know when it is becoming too overwhelming or triggering.

Here are seven ways to make Social media work to our benefit:

Connect With Others

Instead of aimlessly scrolling, spending time online texting a family member one hasn't talked to in a while, leaving a positive comment on a post from someone who is struggling, or starting a communication thread with a group of old friends can be a more gratifying experience. The "social" part of social media is one of the biggest mental health benefits. Research shows that people who feel more connected to others have lower levels of anxiety and depression and a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Join an Online Group

Private Facebook groups, online communities, and safe forums such as a group focused on a health issue that one may be struggling with, a support group for a particular challenge one is facing or a group dedicated to a common hobby can provide opportunities for connection, community, support, and resources. It is important to remember that there are all kinds of groups, so be sure to choose the ones that encourage healthy and positive behaviours that leave one feeling better, not worse.

Set Some Boundaries

It's important to know (and respond to) signs that one has had enough time online, but boundaries can also help to keep a good online experience from transforming into a negative one. Here are some limit-setting strategies:

- Track time on apps. Some apps have built-in timers that can help track time and set reminders to exit the app. One could also set a timer to be mindful about usage.
- Turn off push notifications. Notifications are designed to get us to check apps, which increases the likelihood that we'll start scrolling. Turning them off can help to stay off apps.
- Moving social media apps off from home screen. That can make one less likely to use them.
- Set up 'no phone zones' and 'no phone times' where one doesn't use the phone, such as the bedroom after a certain time, at the dinner table, or Sunday mornings.

Connect With People In Real Life/Time

If the days are spent wisely, talking or walking with a friend, one will have less time to overdo it scrolling. This will also allow time to make in-real-life friendships and bonds, which are a key part of physical and mental health. Having people, one can turn to, helps feel more connected and less alone, and it can decrease stress.

Focus on Facts

Even though it can certainly feel like it, social media is not real life. Posts are designed to grab attention, not reflect life outside the app. Remind yourself of these facts if you start to feel low:

- Social media apps have strong algorithms that control what content makes it onto one's feed.
- Influencers are paid to post, wear certain things, or look certain ways.
- Brands pay to target audience with ads.
- Filters and apps that change people's appearances are common, and they're regularly used to make people look different than they do in real life.
- People post only their highlights and share when they're feeling their best.

Clean Up the Feed

How does scrolling social media feed make one feel? Take note of how certain people or specific posts leave one feeling. If it is disturbing, unfollow them and fill the feed with accounts that feel good. Consider following different kinds of accounts, such as:

- Photographers who post shots of nature.
- Experts who post motivational quotes.
- People who share both the ups and the downs.
- People who reflect all different body types and sizes.
- Funny reels that make one laugh, such as animal videos or memes.
- Accounts that share awe-inspiring imagery, such as waterfalls and mountains.
- Educational content that helps one feel more informed.

Know When You're Struggling

If one tries all of this and still feels down in the dumps when online or find it difficult to kick the habit, it's okay. Social media is designed to keep one on the app. Sometimes, however, a mental health condition can colour the experience — and the most important thing one can do is ask for help (or get a friend help if they're struggling). Depression, anxiety, disordered eating, sleep disturbances and suicidal thoughts should never go ignored. Contact a mental health provider as soon as possible. And as a concerned guardian, these are some of the Strategies, which may be helpful:

Empower children and young people to be responsible online participants:

Children and young people should be empowered and supported to use digital technology well, so they can further reap benefits that social media provides. By talking with children about their use of social media, parents and carers should adopt an approach that works best for their child's age, interests and needs. This should be proportionate – maximising the protection against online risks without restricting the opportunities and benefits, or undermining the child's ability to explore, learn and express themselves freely.

Educate yourself/ families about appropriate digital use and risks:

By developing digital knowledge and confidence, parents and carers can actively engage with technology and model constructive and balanced digital habits.

Encourage industry to develop appropriate, regulated and accessible content:

Governments should encourage online broadcasters, digital developers and entrepreneurs to produce technology that fits a child's development via 'age-appropriate' content, as well as ensure that inappropriate content is not accessible.

Ensure that anybody who shows signs of mental illness gets help at the earliest:

It is imperative to intervene early when children and young people show signs and symptoms of mental illness. Child and adolescent mental health services are equipped to treat individuals with the most severe disorders and the most acute needs.

To conclude, children and young people's mental health in the digital age involves both risks (anxiety, depression, cyber bullying, addiction from social media/screen time) and benefits (stronger networks, access to support), requiring balanced approaches focusing on digital literacy, parental guidance, and school/ community support.

Strategies & Recommendations

- **Parental/Adult Role:** Set device limits (e.g., no phones at meals), lead by example, foster open communication, teach digital literacy, and model healthy tech habits.

- **School/Community Role:** Increase mental health professionals, provide teacher training, develop anti-bullying policies, and implement digital wellness programs.

- **Youth Empowerment:** Encourage self-awareness, teach emotional regulation, and promote responsible online behaviour.

- **Tools & Resources:** Utilise mindfulness apps, school-based interventions, and resources focused on online safety and resilience. ❑