

Social media and mental health: friends or foes?

Electra Wallington asks whether social media helps or hinders mental health



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We can all agree, it would be fairly obvious if a friend turned up to lectures one day with a broken leg. And yes, while being in constant pain isn't great, and hobbling around on crutches isn't exactly the most efficient way to go about your day, appearing obviously ill does reap a fair few benefits. It's not as if any of us would exactly complain about being showered with wishes of good health or endless offers of help. Mental illnesses, on the other hand, are not always quite as easy to spot as a broken leg. And consequently, it's a lot harder for those struggling with their mental health to get this same level of sympathy and support.

At least in theory, social media seems an ideal platform on which this support can be sought and provided. Those feeling isolated, or with no one to talk to, can reach out and find others in similar situations, construct support networks, and share advice. A topic like mental health, so often incredibly intimidating and difficult to broach face to face, can seem much more approachable and easier to open up about through the indirectness and anonymity of a screen. The benefits of social media aren't solely restricted to those who actively share personal experiences, either: just reading about someone who has felt the same way as you with regards to mental health can be a great comfort. While mental illness can be extremely isolating and lonely, social networks can do a great deal to lessen this isolation.

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That being said, social media does seem to have an annoying knack for turning serious, multi-faceted topics, that should be discussed with care, into hotbeds for unwarranted attack. Any situation transferred into the realms of Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter suddenly becomes a lot more two-dimensional. We have all fallen victim to the backlash that comes with an apparently harmless comment being misinterpreted.

Likewise, we are probably all guilty of assuming we know everything there is to know about a circumstance just from what we have read. And for those with mental illnesses, who look to social

media for reassurance and mutual understanding, this is dangerous indeed. Particularly for young, impressionable users (and we know mental illness is on the rise among adolescents), forming the wrong idea about what constitutes mental illness, or even falsely self-diagnosing, are just two of many serious consequences of this misinterpretation.

There also seems to be a certain insincerity embedded in social media culture. A friend once told me that she had to make herself avocado on toast for breakfast one morning, not because that's what she wanted to eat, but because "it would make a good Instagram." In itself, this seems a perfect example of the ever-widening gap between reality and the lives that we so carefully construct online. And frankly, the very 'un-perfect' topic of mental health doesn't seem to quite belong in this 'perfect' online bubble.

This obsession over the way we present ourselves, and the ever-blurring distinction between what's real and what's fake, also brings with it intense over-analysis. Having experienced the stereotypical all-girls school environment, I know very well how much people obsess over and pick apart what's posted online. There is a considerable irony to the fact that people are all too quick to accuse someone for being fake in what they post, whilst continuing to indulge in the insincerity of social media themselves. Considering this attitude, it's very easy to see why many would choose not to transfer discussion of mental health over into the realms of social media, for fear of very personal situations being judged in this way, being called fake or accused of simply begging for attention.

Mirror, mirror, on my Facebook wall...

There's also the celebrity factor. We live in a world where Zoella pulls at the heart-strings of her 10 million-strong online audience daily. And her anxiety just so happens to be one of the things she talks about so openly. Many other celebrities have begun to follow suit in opening up about mental health, the most recent being Fearne Cotton, who only a matter of days ago revealed her ongoing battle with depression. And yes, these public figures discussing mental health online should not only be considered brave, but do massively help to normalise what can still be considered a taboo topic.

However, we should also be wary of a growing link between discussing mental health and receiving attention online – or even, dare I say it, popularity online. If this is exploited, mental illness could begin to be perceived as, well, almost glamorous or trendy. The cliché, but nevertheless valuable phrase 'vicious cycle' seems extremely apt here. There is no doubt that the only way to educate and remove the stigma of mental health is to carry on discussing it online; yet the more attention it receives, the more false stereotypes it attracts, which in turn fuel stigma and misinterpretation still further.

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What is for certain is that the culture of sharing your life through social media isn't disappearing any time soon. So, with all it has to offer for subjects like mental health, it's essential that we try to make the most of such platforms. This calls for at least some attempt to make social media a safer place to share mental health issues. Could educating people on the benefits and implications of discussing mental health online be the answer? Or fighting the stereotypes and two-dimensional representations with proper facts? Whatever the solution, it is undoubtedly the case that open, positive discussion of mental health is an essential step to eliminating the stigma and ignorance that surrounds it

