

# Stressed, Scrolling On Social Media, And Stuck?



Have you ever found your focus and your mood completely derailed after getting sucked into a social media scrolling session? Maybe it started innocently enough with something like researching vacation destinations. Maybe you went looking for a dinner recipe. Or maybe you found yourself going down a rabbit hole looking up physical or mental health symptoms you've been having.

LifeStance Health recently surveyed over 1,000 U.S. adults to uncover how being constantly online and connected impacts Americans' mental well-being and relationships. One of the most startling findings was that so many participants reported relying on social media for mental health advice despite concerns about its credibility, with a whopping 50% of Gen-Z self-diagnosing mental health conditions based on social media content (but sometimes hesitating to actually seek professional help afterwards).

And then before you know it, 46 minutes have passed and you're totally overstimulated, treading water in a puddle of your own stress-sweat and you somehow need to get yourself back on track so you can get on with your day.

As becoming "chronically online" has become the norm for so many, this can play a big role in wellbeing. Some 26% of respondents shared that they check social media within five minutes of waking up, and the same portion spends four hours or more daily on social media. Gen-Z (45%) and millennial respondents (39%) were found to be the most likely to be constantly connected, compared to Gen X (25%) and baby boomer (14%) respondents.

These social media time-sucks and mood-dips can be disruptive no matter what time of day or night they occur, but when they hit in the middle of your day, it can significantly throw you off course.

## The Disruptions of Social Media

Dr. Caroline Fleck, a psychologist and author of *Validation*, quips, "If I wanted to set up conditions that would lead someone to develop major depression disorder, I'd have them lie down, limit their sunlight exposure and put them in a space where it's very easy to compare themselves to other people—social media offers all of those things."

According to Srinii Pillay, M.D., a Harvard-trained psychiatrist, chief medical officer of Reulay and author of *Tinker Dabble Doodle Try: Unlock the Power of The Unfocused Mind*, being chronically online can cause severe cognitive decline. He cites a March 2025 article published in *Brain Science* indicating that excessive exposure to low-quality digital content, especially through social media and video platforms, causes a phenomenon known as "brain rot"—a term recently crowned Oxford's Word of the



Year. “Symptoms include emotional numbness or fogginess, memory issues, poor decision-making and a distorted sense of self—fueled by dopamine-driven feedback loops that keep users locked in.”

Other researchers have found that chronic online users usually multitask and get side-tracked by constant notifications, which can lead to poor attention, memory and decision-making, he adds. Physical health issues, including increases in inflammatory markers like C-reactive protein, more physical symptoms and more visits to a doctor or health center for physical illness have also been noted in research.

“While social media can foster connection and provide emotional support, especially for marginalized groups,” explains Dr. Pillay, “it is also linked to a range of potential health challenges. These include increased risk of anxiety, depression, sleep disruption and body dissatisfaction—especially among girls—largely due to social comparison, problematic use and content exposure.” He adds that excessive use may displace vital health-promoting activities “like sleep, physical activity and real-world social interaction.” The neglect of physical health can contribute to or exacerbate mental health issues.

And by the way, this isn’t just impacting individual wellbeing. Pillay, who is also a leadership development expert working with Fortune 500 companies to help them build more resilient, agile, creative and productive teams, shares that according to research from McKinsey & Co., employee disengagement and attrition could cost a median-size S&P 500 company between \$228 million and \$355 million a year in lost productivity. “Over five years, that’s at least \$1.1 billion in lost value per company. The multitasking that occurs while working and engaging social media may slow people down, hamper creativity and increase anxiety, thereby impacting engagement.”

## **How to Get Grounded And Reclaim Your Attention**

### ***Physical Grounding Techniques***

Prentis Hemphill, a therapist focused on embodiment and the author of *What It Takes to Heal*, encourages starting by acknowledging how social media is actually designed to hijack your attention. “I think it’s good for us to know and understand that the design of social media has us consuming a lot of information and experiences of other people, but the speed at which we can do that doesn’t align with the speed at which our body processes emotion and experiences. So if we end up in that scrolling vortex, we usually experience some kind of overwhelm.”

That information about your mental state gives you a starting place. “Once we notice we’re triggered or overwhelmed, that’s a time to take a step back.” They encourage checking in with yourself about exactly what you’re feeling. “This can give you clues as to which actions you can take. Discern exactly what it is you feel.”

When we recognize what we’re feeling and what’s contributing to the uncomfortable feelings, explains Dr. Fleck, “we get some information about what the antidote would be.” In many cases, she says, the inverse can be helpful. If you’re scrolling inside, get outdoors (if you’re in a climate with sun). “You can even just sit outside without your phone.” Or if you’ve been sitting down while scrolling, “flip that on its head and get some movement. These are just some physiological ways of regulating your body.”



### ***Mental Grounding Techniques***

Considering how social media impacts your thoughts is also helpful, she says. “On social media, you’re being told to buy this and do that. You’re getting the fundamental messaging that you’re not enough. Self-validation is so important. You can say to yourself, ‘I don’t need anything other than what I am and what I have. I am enough.’ You can validate, of course I’m feeling bad—I’m comparing myself to people who are photoshopped to the nth degree. Recognize that it’s a distorted reality.”

Sometimes being honest with yourself about what you’re looking for on social media can also offer valuable clues, explains Dr. Fleck. “If you’re getting into scrolling while you’re working, most likely what you need in that moment is a break from the mental stimulation of the work you’re doing.” However, instead of giving ourselves a break, we flood our nervous system with these messages, she says, “and it makes us feel keyed up and burnt out at the same time. Instead of restoring our faculties, we’ve exhausted them. So if the function is to regulate or distract, if you notice this pattern more than once, it becomes about, ‘What can I do’ to change this pattern.”

Hemphill adds, “Carving out some time and space to be with your focus and train your focus as best you can makes it a little easier to return. When you do have to refocus or shift, having a mini ritual, such as a mini meditation, to help you be intentional about that transition to where you’re back in the driver’s seat of your attention can help you. A lot of us don’t transition back—our minds are still in that other space but we have work to do. This helps us get back into our bodies.” Some other examples they share are taking a deep breath and going outside to connect with nature and your body.

Dr. Pillay adds that deliberately seeking positive online experiences can help in the short term, too. “For example, if laughing babies make a person happy, they might search for a video online to switch their mood instantly. Or if a particular song puts them in a better mood, they might listen to that song immediately.” He also points to a study that demonstrated that affirming one’s values is rewarding to the brain. “This works especially if you think about what you want to honor in the future.”

### ***Social Media Mindset Matters***

Dr. Fleck encourages being honest with yourself about why you’re scrolling. To go back to the example of someone looking up symptoms, she says, “When we look up symptoms on social media, sometimes we’re seeking some degree of, ‘Is there anybody out there who’s feeling what I feel?’ What we’re seeking there is some signal that what we’re going through is real and overwhelming and hard. But that isn’t always the type of validation that serves us. It would be so much healthier to have someone to talk to rather than validation that things are as bad as they seem.”

If you’ve noticed that some people you know will tell you they find social media uplifting while others find it draining, the reason for that likely lies within, explains Dr. Pillay. “Recent research suggests the answer lies not in the platforms themselves, but in the mindsets we bring to them. In a large-scale, multi-study investigation involving over 2,000 participants, scientists introduced the concept of social media mindsets—core beliefs about how much control people feel over their use and whether they view it as helpful or harmful to their lives.”

“The study found that people with a sense of agency and a positive outlook on social media’s role in their lives tend to enjoy greater psychological and relational well-being,” he says. “In contrast, those who feel out of control and believe social media harms them report higher levels of distress.” Those who felt like



they could control when they scrolled and could take a break whenever they wanted fared better than those who felt like it was out of their control.

“As you rethink your digital health behaviors,” says Dr. Pillay, “consider that changing your mindset may just change your relationship with social media—and yourself.

## **Setting Healthier Boundaries with Social Media**

The Lifestance survey data reflects that an increasing number of people are considering using digital detoxes as ways to disconnect, with 76% of respondents reporting that they find the idea of a digital detox appealing. Gen-Z (84%) and millennial (83%) respondents were most interested compared to respondents from other generations. Over a quarter of respondents stated that they actually believe a permanent TikTok ban would positively impact their mental health.

“I think these questions of how we manage social media in our lives are so important,” says Hemphill. “I think it’s so important for us to have identities and lives that are full beyond social media.” They encourage exploring how you can cultivate a sense of autonomy when we have such strong algorithms driving negative emotions like insecurity and fear.

Hemphill recommends designating specific times and spaces for social media. “Setting blocks of time can help you set a reliable place and time where you know you can go in and come out. There are also places that are sacred spaces. I don’t scroll on social media when I’m with my kid or my partner. I also try to have other practices during my day and hold certain spaces sacred where social media can’t enter. You can also fill out your own social media experience with the types of content you want to see.”

Matthew Solit, LCSW, executive clinical director at LifeStance Health, adds, “Be careful with online mental health content and self-diagnosis. While it may seem more comfortable, it is not reliable. Wellness takes work and that work is most likely actualized through working in direct partnership with mental health professionals. The mental health challenges that can be fueled by excessive internet use, ‘doom-scrolling’ and overstimulation are real. If your thoughts involve harming yourself or others, please seek help immediately.”

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