

Social Media, Anxiety, and Teens

Topics Covered

- Social Media and Teens
- Signs and Symptoms
- Strategies for Parents

Wellness Wednesdays

05/13/2020

When was the last time it snowed in May? I may not be from New Hampshire, and I knew it would be cold moving up here, but snow? In May?

Life keeps throwing us these curveballs that are becoming more and more surreal. We've gone from the pandemic, to murder hornets, to May snow showers; WHATS NEXT, 2020?

Luckily, life was kind enough to remind my fiancé and I of the more beautiful and brighter side of things. As you can see in the picture below, while suffering through a stupid workout in the drizzling rain on Tuesday we were able to see a tiny rainbow develop into a very colorful, fully arched rainbow, and then into the infamous and amazing double rainbow.



Pretty cool, right? All photo credits go to my fiancé.

I bring it up though, not only because of the hope it instilled in me, but also because of the conversation that came up after the photo was taken.

Who has the rights to post it on Instagram?! Some may argue the photographer, others (me) would argue the owner of the phone. We ultimately determined she had the rights, so she got to post the super cool picture to her Instagram.

The conversation reminded me of how social media has affected my life in recent months, and more importantly how it currently affects teenagers that turn to it for support, entertainment, and connection during these trying times. Years ago, decades ago at this point, decisions about posting pictures would have sounded like a conversation amongst crazy people. And yet, we're now in a world where attention and validation are constantly being received virtually through a thumbs up or like on our photos and posts.

It made me consider the role social media is currently playing in the life of a teenager that has abruptly stopped due to social distancing and quarantine. It has its benefits, but with those benefits come significant drawbacks that often lead to increased anxiety and other social-related concerns discussed below.

This week we'll be examining teenage anxiety within the context of social media, given the current pandemic likely drawing teens even closer to their phones, apps, etc.; signs and symptoms of an anxious teenager; and what parents can do to support their teenager(s) in coping with this often unseen and difficult emotion.

Contact Me

Greater Lakes Child
Advocacy Center

95 Water Street
Laconia, NH

603-499-7504

Awolff@cac-nh.org



Social Media

- **It is present all the time now. Its at home, at school, in the car, at the movies, etc.**
- **Social media consumption and use reduces a teens ability to gain real world practice in how to interact with others**
- **We are social beings and social media tends to teach us social cues based on the presence of emojis, punctuation, certain phrases, a like, a retweet, a reply, a DM, etc., rather than teaching us how to read verbal and nonverbal cues in person**
 - Not only does this dynamic create anxiety in a teenager deciphering of the subtext in their messages and tweets, but also in their understanding of face-to-face interactions with peers
 - “They don’t like me, they never text me back”
 - “They aren’t texting me, they must be talking about me to someone else”
- **Social media prevents teenagers from developing an appropriate sense of risk-taking**
 - Teens can stay guarded and create “pseudo-selves” through social media
 - The more they try to maintain a balance of who they really are and who they’re presenting themselves to be, the more internal turmoil and anxiety they are likely to experience
 - Social media teaches teens to be overly deliberate in their responses and allows teens to gain comfort in longer time lapses in back and forth communication.
 - Ever wonder why your teen hates phone calls or face-to-face conversation?
 - It may be because they haven’t developed the skill, confidence in, or tolerance for immediate back and forth communication with another person
- **Cyberbullying**
 - Social media has taught teenagers, and consistently models, that people disagree with each other at extreme levels to a point of jeopardizing any form of relationship building or perspective taking
 - It has also led to polarized differences between individuals and peers creating worries in relation to feeling accepted by one another
- **Use of polls and surveys**
 - Teens are consistently receiving data and information that literally identifies how much people like/dislike them through social media (i.e. likes, retweets, views, poll results)
 - Although enticing, these polls and surveys open the door for significant increases in anxiety in relation to appearance, peer acceptance, etc., depending on the information received

Memes for Distraction



When someone in the house returns from the grocery shop



- **Social media has created more of the same traps that already make adolescence and understandably difficult period of development**
 - Teens are constantly comparing themselves to one another; social media increases opportunities to compare, but it also reinforces notions of perfection and success being likeable/desirable qualities
- **Prevents teens from tolerating alone time, because they're never truly alone while using social media**
 - Hyper-connections can lead to hyper-rejection and fear of rejection
- **Ghosting**
 - Social media has also made it possible for people to terminate relationships without conversation, all you have to do is unfriend, block, etc.
 - Teenagers are losing out on very important conversations that teach them how to be honest, drop their guard, and work through difficult moments
 - Teenagers will often fill gaps in information with negative attributions towards themselves especially when relationships are ended abruptly through social media leading to increased anxiety in relation to be attractive, wanted, and even loved

It would be unfair to say that social media is all negative, because there are some very positive aspects of it when it comes to connecting people to one another.

However, it is important to recognize that the teenage mind is so predicated on developing an individual self that is accepted and respected by the masses, and that a difficult dynamic is created for teenagers attempting to develop and display their identity through the virtual world.



When the quarantine is over and it's time to re-enter society



Me, emerging 8 weeks later from quarantine



Signs and Symptoms

- **According to the National Institute of Health (NIH), 1 in every 3 teenagers will experience an anxiety-related episode that meets the criteria of an anxiety disorder**
- **Teens typically experience anxiety in relation to their social life (i.e. physical appearance, “swag”, dating life, etc.), but they can also experience other-related anxieties:**
 - Phobias
 - Panic attacks/disorder
 - Separation anxiety
 - Generalized anxiety
- **Parents with teens that are experiencing anxiety may notice changes in their teen’s:**
 - Emotions
 - Appearing “on-edge” or tense
 - Difficulty remaining focused
 - Unexplainable outbursts
 - Increased irritability
 - Restlessness
 - Social life
 - Change in peer group
 - Isolation (often the result of avoidant behaviors)
 - Avoidance of peer group/activities
 - Physical
 - Headaches/migraines
 - Gastrointestinal problems
 - Unexplainable aches and pains
 - Excessive fatigue
 - Changes in eating habits (increases or decreases)
 - Complaints of excessive sweating
 - Sleep Disturbances
 - Difficulties falling/staying asleep
 - Nightmares
 - Waking up feeling fatigued
 - School performance
 - Significant change in grades (typically decrease)
 - Missed assignments
 - Statements of being overwhelmed by workload
 - Excessive procrastination/avoidance of schoolwork

- **Parents may also notice their teenager(s):**
 - Fixating on specific objects (technology, clothes, etc.) and having difficulties separating from it
 - Fixating on their physical appearance
 - Displaying disproportionate emotional responses to negative stressors related to their technology or physical appearance, for example:
 - Dysregulating after breaking/dropping a phone
 - Outbursts in relation to their appearance not meeting a specific standard they have

Strategies for Parents

- **Be aware of the signs of anxiety**
 - The more aware you are, the more likely you can intervene and support your teen
- **Talk with your teens about potential stressors**
 - Have conversations, acknowledge things that may be stressful, share how they make you stressed, and what you do to manage it
- **Be mindful of the expectations you set**
 - We all want what is best for our children and teens, but sometimes the way we seek what is best can lead to high, and even unrealistic, expectations
 - Expectations set by parents can often be projected on to peers leading teenagers to believe that their peers expect similar “perfection”
 - Bring your teen into the conversation as to what realistic expectations look like
 - Allow them to communicate their goals and let those goals create the roadmap to what expectations should be held to the highest of standards
- **Talk about social media use**
 - Explore what apps they use, how they use it, and friend them for monitoring purposes, if appropriate
 - Have conversations about the content on their social media
 - Educate them on privacy settings to prevent unwanted and unnecessary comments from “Trolls”
 - For those of you who don’t know, Trolls are people on social media who look to instigate and put other people down
- **Listen carefully and respectfully**
 - When your teen identifies difficult feelings listen to them with open ears
 - Look for specific themes or areas of concern that arise during the conversation
 - Always treat their feelings with respect, they are difficult to manage, and are very powerful at this time of life
- **Provide reassurance and validation**
 - Many times, these feelings are natural parts of being a teenager (i.e. changes in appearance, performance concerns, peer concerns, etc.)
 - Let them know what they’re feeling/experiencing is valid and that they also have the strength to manage/cope with it

- **Help build, maintain, and support relationships with coaches/mentors/teachers/etc.**
 - These relationships ultimately plant the seeds that grow into the foundation teenagers use to develop their identities when transitioning to adulthood
 - These relationships are also real and are not typically dependent on social media use
- **Perfection is not always needed**
 - Teens work and perform better when pressure is off their minds
 - Check how you are reassuring your teen and what subtle messages are being communicated when providing reassurance or compliments
 - A positive example:
 - “I know you must be disappointed about your grades. Feeling disappointed can sometimes make us want to work harder or change how we do things. I love you no matter what grades you get”
- **Practice non-judgmental communication**
 - Rather than working to pass judgement of right/wrong, good/bad, etc. work to developing a sense of curiosity and understanding
 - This mode of communication instills a sense of acceptance in teenagers which can reduce self-esteem related anxieties
- **Have conversations about meaning and purpose**
 - The teenage mind is geared towards developing understanding and learning about the world
 - Show that you value their thoughts, feelings, and experiences by seeking their perspectives during different experiences and activities
- **Empathy, empathy, empathy**
 - Teens need to feel understood
 - There will be behaviors that are not appropriate, and parents should place limits on these behaviors and consequence as needed
 - But feelings need to be understood and validated, especially a teenager’s feelings
 - Empathy helps your teenager feel seen, heard, and understood leading to feelings of acceptance, self-worth, and positivity
- **Teach your teens to manage their anxiety, not to get rid of it**
 - Anxiety is a natural part of our minds
 - By communicating that it is something that we need to rid ourselves of, we fail to highlight the times when our anxiety can be helpful to us
 - And for some, who have a very hard time “ridding” themselves of their anxiety, it can become very invalidating leading them to believe that something is wrong with them
- **Implement technology free zones or times**
 - Model appropriate human-to-human connection
 - Driving in the car? Put your phones down and talk with each other
 - Eating dinner at the table? Awesome! Hands are for forks and knives, not phones
 - Keep your teens engaged in the physical reality they live in

Final Thoughts:

Anxiety can be a difficult emotion even for adults. It often takes a while to truly gain comfort in communicating what it is that we are anxious about; whether it is because we don't know what we're thinking or feeling, or because we're too afraid to acknowledge it.

There may be times where you offer all the support in the world to your teen and they still don't accept it or utilize it, and that is okay. Providing reassurance and an open door for conversation will ultimately help them gain comfort in knowing that they are loved, accepted, and will be validated by you.

If you find that your teenager is exhibiting some of the signs or symptoms above, and has been for an extended period, seek out support from a mental health provider. They are trained to assess where anxiety is coming from and how to best intervene in a way that will continue supporting your teenager's growth and development in the future.

*Andrew Wolff, M.S., LMFT
Mental Health Clinician*
