

Cutting back on social media has proven health benefits. Here are some tips

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A recent study underscored the suggestion that taking a break from social media can be beneficial for your mental health — even if it's just for a short time.

The study was first published in JAMA Network Open (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2841773>) on Nov. 24.

Dr. Amir Afkhami, vice chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the George Washington University School of Medicine, told WTOP that because social media is always with users, it's difficult for people to escape the negative side effects without making a concerted effort to cut down.

Afkhami said, for some users, it's not just a way to pass the time.

"Some jobs are built around social media use. If you're a community manager, say for a company on social media, it's tough to say, 'Hey, take regular breaks during the day,'" he said.

In the study, 295 young adults between the ages of 18-24 agreed to limit their social media use for one week. They were allowed no more than 30 minutes a day.

According to the findings, anxiety dropped by just over 16%, depression symptoms dropped by 24.8% and sleeplessness dropped by 14.5%.

But what didn't change: reports in the degree of loneliness participants had.

The methodology of the study did get some criticism, Afkhami said.

"It wasn't a blinded study, there wasn't a sort of a placebo group involved in the study," he said. "So in a sense, it was selective for people who were willing to take a break from social media in the first place."

But Afkhami said the findings are in line with similar studies that yielded similar results.

Afkhami said when assessing how beneficial social media is for any individual, there are some things that should be considered.

“Including the duration they’re on it, the patterns, the triggers that lead them to log on to social media,” he said.

Another consideration is the impact of the time spent on social media.

“I once had a student who was falling behind on med school work because they were spending too much time on social media and gaming platforms, which provide sort of a similar social structure,” Akhami said.

So how can someone cut back if they find the pull of social media too much to resist?

Afkhami suggested a form of fighting fire with fire; that is, using tech to help limit social media consumption. Steps to try:

- Removing certain apps from your home screen
- Disabling automatic notifications from social media programs
- Log off after using a social media account; if you have to log in with each use, you’re much less likely to start randomly scrolling
- Try apps that give you a certain amount of time before blocking you until the next scheduled use

And you can avoid midnight “doomscrolling” not by unplugging, but by charging your phone or tablet outside your bedroom.

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As a member of the award-winning WTOP News, Kate is focused on state and local government. Her focus has always been on how decisions made in a council chamber or state house affect your house. She's also covered breaking news, education and more.

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