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Living Better

A short social media detox improves mental health, a study shows. Here's how to do it

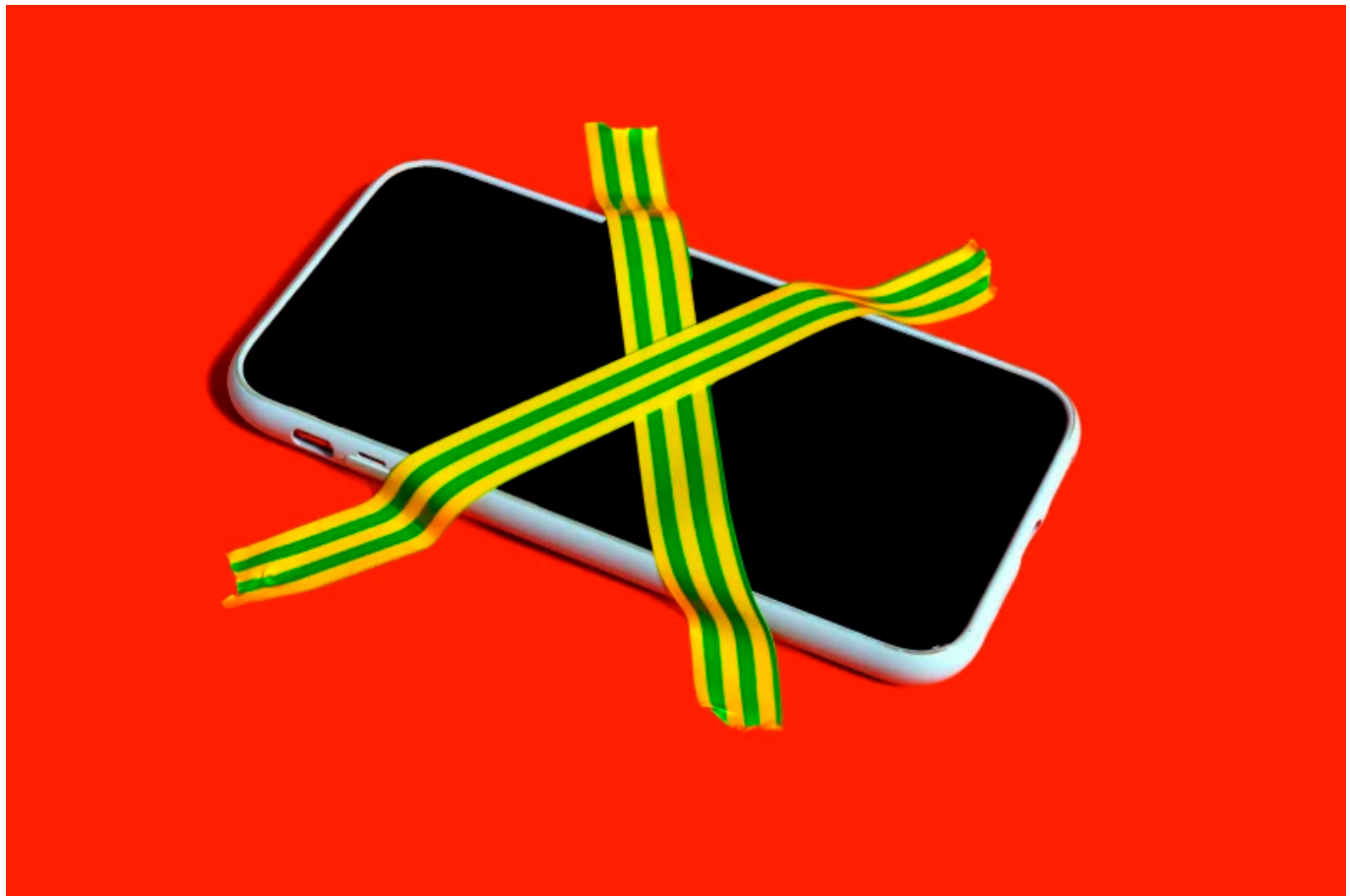
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By Rhitu Chatterjee

2-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



Westend61/Getty Images

If you have ever sworn off social media for a week or two because you sensed it was feeding your anxiety or dampening your mood, you may be on to something.

A new study out last week in *JAMA Network Open* found that cutting down on social media use even for a week can significantly reduce mental health symptoms in young adults.

It's part of a growing body of research that shows that taking breaks from scrolling and posting can be a mental health boon, especially for young people.

For example, a recently published meta-analysis found that limiting social media is tied to a statistically significant boost in "subjective well-being."

Unreliable data vs. an objective measure

Most studies on the impacts of social media ask users to recall how much time they spend on their phones or these platforms, as well as other aspects of their health like mood and sleep. But that data is often unreliable, says psychiatrist John Torous, director of the Division of Digital Psychiatry at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and author of the new study.

"If you ask me, 'How much have you slept in the past week, and can you guess your screen time?' says Torous, "I don't think I would be right."

In the new study, Torous and his colleagues tried to get a more objective measure of social media use. They recruited 373 young adults ages 18 to 24. For the first two weeks, participants used social media like they normally would and allowed researchers to record information from their phones about their social media use, their step counts and their sleep. They had participants download an app that sent the data directly to the researchers.

2 weeks of observation, 1 week of detox

During the first two weeks of the study, the app gave Torous and his colleagues baseline data. At the end of those two weeks, the researchers shared that data with participants and gave them standardized questionnaires for symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia and loneliness. Then, they asked whether they wanted to try a weeklong social media detox.

"We had 80% of participants opt into the detox," says Dr. Elombe Calvert, a co-author of the study.

At baseline, the participants were spending about two hours a day on the five social media apps the study was looking at: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). "During the detox, it fell to like 30 minutes a day," says Calvert.

By the end of that third week, Calvert and the team found a 16% reduction in anxiety symptoms, a 24% decrease in depression symptoms and a 14.5% decrease in insomnia symptoms. "So, it's very effective," says Calvert.

Torous notes that the results mirror what his and his colleagues' patients report. "We definitely have had patients telling us for some time that they've tried digital detoxes on their own [and] that they find it useful," he says.

Most participants in the study, however, did not score high enough in the mental health screenings to qualify for a mental health diagnosis, notes Torous. Only a minority showed elevated levels of symptoms at baseline, and this group showed "greater improvement," he says.

Striking results

"It usually takes eight to 12 weeks of intensive psychotherapy to see those kinds of reductions in mental health symptoms," says psychologist Mitch Prinstein, chief of strategy and integration at the American Psychological Association. "So if you can get those with just one week of change in behavior, wow!"

What's also striking, adds Prinstein, is that as the participants cut back on social media use, their screen time didn't go down. They were doing other things on their devices.

"So, it really helps us see that it's not just your screen that's a problem," he says. "It might be social media in particular."

Ready to get some relief yourself? Here are a few tips from experts:

1. Block out time

Using social media mindfully can help, says Prinstein. That can take the form of setting goals for when we check our phones and for what. For example, setting aside 10-minute blocks at specific times to get rid of notifications or check

headlines or unread messages. "Doing so seems to work and keeps us from getting distracted or going down rabbit holes for hours," he says.

2. Make it harder to log on and scroll

Removing apps from the home screen and disabling notifications from social media apps can help too, says psychiatrist Amir Afkhami, at the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. So does "logging out of the platform after use, which makes it a little bit harder to get back in," he says.

3. Protect sleep

For many people, social media use affects mood through "nighttime scrolling" by disrupting sleep and contributing to insomnia, says Afkhami. For those individuals, restricting evening or nighttime use is key, he adds. In a study published this year, Torous and his co-authors recommend "at least *one hour of tech-free time before bed*, to mentally disconnect from the online world and promote adequate, restful sleep." Parents can help teenagers build a habit of not using social media at night by designating bedrooms as "tech-free zones" at night, according to Torous and his colleagues.

4. Stroll more, scroll less

For those who turn to social media during periods of boredom, Afkhami recommends replacing screen time with physical activity like a walk or a run. "The initial hump is a little bit higher," he says, "but over time, actually, patients end up liking it more because they get more of a dopamine surge than they do with social media."

5. Seek treatment, if more is going on

For many people, social media overuse is linked to underlying mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and ADHD, adds Afkhami. And while cutting back on social media might help alleviate some of those symptoms, he recommends that they also seek treatment from a mental health care provider.