

Is Social Media Driving Americans Insane?

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

August 30, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Forty-three percent of Americans are constant checkers, i.e., someone who checks their email, text messages and social media accounts “constantly” throughout the day
- › Constant checkers report higher stress levels, overall, due to technology and social media, than those who check less often
- › Nearly 60% of parents worry about the effects of social media on their child’s physical and mental health, and 45% said technology makes them feel disconnected from their families even when they’re together

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 9, 2017.

It's been almost two decades since Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were created, and 17 years since the launch of the iPhone. The iPad, Pinterest, Instagram and Snapchat have been around for more than a decade, too.¹

In this timeframe, Americans' use of technology and social media has grown at a striking pace. The American Psychological Association's (APA) 2017 Stress in America survey reported that only 7% of U.S. adults used social media in 2005. By 2015, that had grown to 65% (and 90% among 18- to 29-year-olds, up from 12% in 2005).²

Every month, more than 2 billion users sign on to Facebook and Instagram, revealing their massive following. Also revealing, 86% of U.S. adults own a computer, 75% an internet-connected smartphone and 55% a tablet, according to the APA survey.

What's more, today about half of U.S. adults say they can't imagine life without their cellphones, yet their ability to keep you online and connected 24/7 has its downfalls, especially if you're a "constant checker."

Forty-Three Percent of Americans Are 'Constant Checkers'

A constant checker is someone who checks their email, text messages and social media accounts "constantly" throughout the day; 43% of Americans fit this bill, according to the APA, but they may be sacrificing their health as a result.

While noncheckers reported a stress level of 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being "a great deal of stress"), constant checkers' average stress level was 5.3. This climbed to 6 among those who constantly checked their work email even during their days off.³

According to the APA's 2017 Stress in America report:⁴

"This attachment to devices and the constant use of technology is associated with higher stress levels for these Americans.

Generally, nearly one-fifth of Americans (18%) identify the use of technology as a very or somewhat significant source of stress. The most stressful aspect?

Americans say technology causes the most stress when it doesn't work (20%)."

The use of technology is, in itself, a source of stress for some Americans, especially constant checkers (23% compared to 14% of nonconstant checkers). Meanwhile, constant checkers faced increased stress from social media, compared to noncheckers, namely due to political and cultural discussions.

Constant checkers were also more likely to report feeling disconnected from family due to technology (including when they're together), while 35% of this group also said social media made in-person meetings with family and friends less likely.

Perhaps not surprisingly, 42% noted that they worry social media may be having negative effects on their physical and mental health (compared to 27% of those who check less often).⁵

How Is Technology Affecting US Families?

On the family front, it's clear technology is affecting family units, and not necessarily for the better. While 72% of parents said they believed they were modeling a "healthy relationship with technology for their children," 58% also said they feel "attached" to their cellphone or tablet.

Even on their days off, more parents than not constantly check their personal email, text messages and social media, while 35% said they also check work email. But it's not only parents who are struggling to keep their technology use in check.

Fifty-eight percent of parents said their child is attached to their phone or tablet, and 48% described regulating their child's screen time as a "constant battle."

Nearly 60% of parents worry about the effects of social media on their child's physical and mental health, and 45% said technology makes them feel disconnected from their families even when they're together.^{6,7}

Teens' Emotional Health May Be Tied to Social Media

A report by the nonprofit Common Sense Media found **U.S. teens spend about nine hours daily using media**, and this only includes media used for enjoyment purposes.⁸ When just media on screens (laptops, smartphones and tablets) was counted, teens spent more than 6.5 hours daily, while tweens spent more than 4.5 hours.

It's an alarming trend not only because of research linking screen time to **increased sedentary behavior** and **trouble sleeping**, but also because teens' emotional health is often tied to their social media accounts.

Teens use social media as a way to monitor their own popularity, and when they're not online, they worry they're missing something (either positive or negative), which leads to compulsive checking.

More than half of teens (61%) polled by a CNN study, "#Being13: Inside the Secret World of Teens," said they check their social media to see if their posts are getting "likes" and comments, while 36% said they did so to see if their friends are doing things without them.

Another 21% said they check to make sure no one said anything mean about them.⁹ The APA survey suggested that teen girls may be bearing the brunt of this unhealthy emotional tie to technology, even more so than teen boys, noting:¹⁰

"According to a recent study in Pediatrics,¹¹ in the U.S. more teen girls than boys may be experiencing major depressive episodes. Research also shows teen girls were more likely to use social media to communicate,¹² which could expose them to the negative effects of this medium."

Almost All Parents Try to Manage Their Kids' Technology Usage

The APA survey also revealed that 94% of parents said they attempt to manage their child's technology usage during the school year. Common management strategies included:¹³

Not allowing cellphones at the dinner table

Unplugging or taking a "digital detox" from time to time

Not allowing devices during family time

Not allowing devices during time with friends

Turning off notifications for social media apps

Limiting time spent watching TV each day

It would be wise to follow your children on each social network they have joined, and talk about any posts or images that concern you. Keep tabs on your child's social media activity each day, and if your teen appears sad after receiving a text, ask him or her about it.

During the CNN study, nearly all of the parents surveyed (94%) underestimated how much fighting was happening on social media, but one important finding was that parental monitoring significantly benefited their children's psychological well-being and actually "erased the negative effects of online conflicts."¹⁴

There were some benefits reported, too, like connecting with friends, feeling affirmed and supported and exercising positive leadership.

The key is to find a happy medium that allows your child to connect with friends without damaging effects to his or her self-esteem, sleep schedule, physical health or grades. In fact, this happy medium is what adults should strive for as well.

Texting While Driving Raises Your Crash Risk Sixfold

Our obsession with technology is also putting people at risk behind the wheel. A study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences revealed that many "secondary tasks" related to the use of hand-held electronic devices (i.e., **cellphones**) are of "detriment to driver safety."¹⁵

The researchers analyzed data from more than 900 crashes that involved injuries or property damage. They noted a dramatic shift in crash causation in previous years, noting that driver-related factors such as distraction, error, impairment and fatigue are present in nearly 90% of crashes.

Specifically, dialing a phone was the most dangerous distraction and increased the risk of a crash by 12-fold. Other dangerous activities while driving included texting (increased risk by six times) and reaching for a cellphone (increased risk by five times).

Many people are aware that using a cell phone while driving is dangerous, yet for one reason or another continue to do it anyway. To help put an end to cell phone distracted driving, The National Safety Council (NSC) recommends these tips:¹⁶

- Make a personal commitment to drive cellphone-free

- Turn your phone off or put it on silent while driving so you are not tempted to answer it
- Speak up when you are in the car with someone who uses a cell phone while driving – ask if you can do it for them or if it can wait
- Change your voicemail message to reflect that you are either away from your phone or driving and that you'll call back when you can do so safely
- If you are talking to someone who you know is driving tell him/her to hang up and call you later

Are You Addicted to Social Media?

Psychotherapist Nancy Colier, author of the book, "The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World," noted that when you have an addiction, "It gets harder and harder to derive joy from the present moment. We're in this chronic state of wanting to get our substance."¹⁷

So strong is the allure of technology that one survey described it as a "fifth sense" to youth, with half of 16- to 22-year-olds saying they'd rather give up their sense of smell than technology.¹⁸ Research also suggests the feelings of validation you get when someone "likes" your post on social media may trigger releases of feel-good chemicals like dopamine and oxytocin.¹⁹

Keep in mind, too, that social media is designed to be addictive. "The biggest tool in the social media addiction toolbox is algorithmic filtering," ComputerWorld reported.²⁰

"Sites like Facebook, Google+ and ... Twitter, tweak their algorithms, then monitor the response of users to see if those tweaks kept them on the site longer or increased their engagement. We're all lab rats in a giant, global experiment."²¹

In The Epoch Times, Silicon Valley software designer Tristan Harris even described what's known in the field as "behavior design," which is basically the practice of

designing apps and devices precisely to get you to click and scroll more. Harris even started an advocacy group called Time Well Spent, which "appeals to product designers to create software that doesn't exploit our psychological vulnerabilities."²²

Mindfulness to the Rescue

There are many strategies to break free from internet addiction – quitting cold turkey, setting a time limit or checking just once a day among them. Colier suggests another option – **mindfulness**. Mindlessly scrolling through social media feeds or distracting yourself from the present moment with various apps is essentially the opposite of mindfulness. The Epoch Times reported:

"Colier's approach starts with awareness. When you feel that habitual itch to check for messages, play a game, or dig for details on the latest celebrity scandal, first ask what you might be distracting yourself from. 'We flip it so the impulsive thought becomes an opportunity to check in on what's happening, rather than an opportunity to anesthetize,' Colier said."

Practicing mindfulness can be as simple as focusing on the flow of your breath and the rise and fall of your belly. This can help you to stay better focused on any task at hand. If you find yourself being drawn back into compulsively checking your email, text messages and social media feeds, stop yourself and focus your attention back to the task at hand.

If emotionally distracting thoughts enter your head, including the feeling that you're missing out on something by not logging in, remind yourself that these are only "projections," not reality, and allow them to pass by without stressing you out.

Four Changes to Live Better with Your Devices

Assuming you're not ready or willing to give up technology, your smartphone included, Time Well Spent compiled four simple changes you can make to "develop a more intentional relationship" with your devices.²³ These are good starting points if it's

crossed your mind that perhaps your smartphone is taking over your life – and they're worth sharing with your kids, too.

- 1. Allow notifications from people only** – Apps are designed to lure you back in with notifications. Visit Settings > Notifications in your cellphone to turn off notifications made by machines and allow only those made by people.
- 2. Create a tools-only home screen** – If your home screen is filled with a bunch of non-necessary apps, it will only tempt you to spend time on them. Instead, limit your home screen to the handful of essential tools you need on a daily basis, like Maps, Camera, Calendar and Notes.
- 3. Launch apps by typing** – Use your phone's search feature to type in the name of an app you wish to open. As Time Well Spent notes, "This turns opening apps into a more conscious choice. There is just enough effort to pause and ask, 'do I really want to do this?'"
- 4. Charge your device outside of your bedroom** – Do not bring your device into your bedroom. Leave it elsewhere while charging it overnight.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 13} [APA, Stress in America 2017: Technology and Social Media](#)
- ³ [Bloomberg February 23, 2017](#)
- ⁷ [Time February 23, 2017](#)
- ⁸ [The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens](#)
- ^{9, 14} [CNN October 13, 2015](#)
- ¹¹ [Pediatrics November 2016](#)
- ¹² [Pew Research Center April 9, 2015](#)
- ¹⁵ [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences January 26, 2016](#)
- ¹⁶ [PR Newswire, June 23, 2014](#)
- ^{17, 19, 22} [Epoch Times February 17, 2017](#)
- ¹⁸ [McCann WorldGroup May 25, 2011](#)
- ^{20, 21} [ComputerWorld December 14, 2015](#)
- ²³ [Time Well Spent, Live Better \(Archived\)](#)