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Spending Too Much Time on Social Media Could Stress You Out

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | February 19, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- About 4 in 10 U.S. adults today are almost constantly online with global screen time averaging over six hours per day
- A 7-month study of 1,490 German adults found that spending more time online — especially on mobile phones — was linked to increased stress
- Children ages 10 to 14 who use Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube had poor self-esteem, largely because they compared their own lives to those of others who looked happier or more successful online
- "Passively" scrolling through social media increased social anxiety in college students, especially women, while actively posting and interacting helped lower anxiety and supported healthier social confidence
- Simple steps like setting app limits, turning off alerts, creating screen-free days, and focusing on real-life connections can help you break the scroll cycle and protect your peace of mind

If checking your phone is the first thing you do each morning and the last thing you do each night, you're not alone — but you might be paying a hidden price. In the U.S., about 4 in 10 adults say they are almost constantly online,[1] and worldwide, people spend an average of six hours and 38 minutes a day on their devices.[2]

When life gets stressful, it's common to reach for something that provides quick comfort. For many, that means browsing social media or even treating themselves to an online purchase to feel better.

These habits show how the internet is now deeply ingrained into our everyday routines. As screen time continues to rise, researchers are gaining a clearer understanding of how constant digital engagement affects overall well-being, and oftentimes, the effects are the opposite of what we're looking for.

What Researchers Discovered About Online Habits and Stress

A longitudinal study conducted by researchers from Aalto University in Finland[3,4] examined and recorded the online activity of adults for seven months, capturing nearly 47 million website visits and 14 million app uses, which were then compared with participants' self-reported stress levels.[5] Previous studies often asked people to guess their screen time or focused only on social media.

This study, published in the Journal of Medical Internet Research, was different: It tracked exactly what people were doing online, when they did it, and whether they used a mobile phone or a desktop computer.

> *"With the aim of closing this gap, the study is among the first to use a tracking programme installed on users' devices, rather than asking subjects to self-report their usage,"* said Dr. Juhi Kulshrestha, assistant professor and senior researcher on the study.[6]

- **The study followed 1,490 German adults —** Researchers collected detailed, URL-level browsing data and analyzed these patterns to identify how, where, when, and by whom the internet was used.
- **Participants completed monthly stress surveys —** Each month, volunteers also filled out the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), which assesses feelings of being overwhelmed or anxious. The data showed that women reported more stress than

men, and people who were older and wealthier tended to have lower stress.[7]

- **Which online activities stressed people out?** People who spent more time on social media, online shopping,[8] and gaming were more likely to report higher stress levels. This was true for both phone and computer use, but it was especially strong for mobile phones.

- **Not all online activities are stressful —** In contrast, individuals who dedicated more time to productivity-related tasks, such as reading emails and browsing news websites, generally experienced lower stress levels. The researchers clarified that they only tracked the amount of time spent on news websites without considering the specific types of news accessed.

  Mohammad Belal, M.Sc., a doctoral researcher in computer science at Aalto University and the principal author of the study, stated:

  > *"Somewhat surprisingly, people who spent a lot of time on news sites reported less stress than others. On the other hand, those who already experienced a lot of stress didn't spend much time on news sites — and that's consistent with previous research that shows that stress can reduce news consumption."*[9]

- **Why these findings matter right now —** The research arrives amid growing global concern over the mental health effects of social media, including recent policy moves such as Australia's ban on social media for children, which has drawn international attention. Belal noted that, despite the increasing influence of the internet on our lives, our scientific understanding of its impact on well-being is remarkably limited.

- **The chicken-and-egg problem —** Despite associations with stress, the researchers don't believe people necessarily need to stop using the internet. Kulshrestha cautioned:

> *"Putting a blanket ban or upper limits on certain kinds of internet usage may not actually end up solving the issues and could even take away a vital support for people who are struggling ...*
>
> *As we gain increasingly accurate information about people's internet usage, it will be possible to design new kinds of tools that people can use to regulate their browsing and improve their well-being."*[10]

The authors recommend simple tools that help users recognize when stress begins to influence their browsing habits. This can include digital wellness tools that identify early signs of stress-scrolling, gentle prompts that remind people to take a quick break, and an examination of different types of news to see which kinds decrease stress.

Frequent Social Media Use Linked to Lower Self-Worth in Children

A previous two-week diary study of 200 children ages 10 to 14 showed that when kids used more Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube on a given day, they felt worse about themselves by the end of the day. The study, which was published in Communications Psychology in 2023, focused on this group because kids begin using social media around age 10; this is also the time when they are forming identity and self-worth, rely more on comparisons, and are especially sensitive to media's psychological effects.[11]

- **Upward comparison explained why heavier use made kids feel worse —** Kids who thought others looked happier or better-looking on social media felt worse about themselves. This habit of comparing, called upward social comparison, explained most of the hit to their self-esteem.
- **More daily social media use led to lower self-worth and more self-criticism —** When kids spent more time scrolling, they went to bed feeling less proud and more disappointed in themselves — their last thoughts of the day colored by comparison to curated highlight reels:

> *"On average, we found social media use across the two weeks of assessments to be related to reduced subjective well-being.*
>
> *This indicates that children and young adolescents who used more Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube than others during the course of the study also reported to be less satisfied with themselves, more disappointed by or angry with themselves, to be less proud and to feel less good and content, and more unhappy, sad, and afraid than children and young adolescents who used social media less often,"* the researchers concluded.[12]

Aside from lowering your self-esteem, prolonged social media use can affect your mental health by triggering your emotions. Read "**Excessive Social Media Use Makes You More Irritable, Study Finds**" for more information on this topic.

Passive Social Media Use Increases Social Anxiety in College Students

A large-scale study from the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health explored how different types of social media use affect anxiety levels in Chinese college students. Here, the researchers examined data from 1,740 students and discovered a clear divide: Passive scrolling increased anxiety, while active engagement reduced it.[13]

In contrast to studies that focus solely on screen time, this research distinguished between active use (posting and commenting) and passive use (browsing and lurking) and analyzed how each behavior affects self-perception and social anxiety.

- **Passive use drives anxiety scores —** Students who primarily browsed without interacting showed significantly higher levels of social anxiety.
- **Active engagement reduces anxiety —** In contrast, students who frequently posted or commented had lower social anxiety, which suggests that digital interaction — when it's interactive — can be emotionally protective.

- **Women tend to be more socially anxious —** Female students showed higher social anxiety because they define themselves more through relationships and others' opinions, making them more sensitive to judgment. Male students rely more on an independent self-view, which offers more emotional distance in social situations.

- **Communication skills are the missing link —** The ability to empathize, express emotions, and listen explained much of the difference. Students with strong communication skills were better protected from the harms of passive use. The researchers concluded:

  > *"Our research extends the previous results, showing that the relationship between social media use and social anxiety can be explained when incorporating communication capacity as a mediator. Active social media use was significantly and negatively related to social anxiety, whereas passive social networking site use was significantly and positively related to social anxiety.*
  >
  > *Reducing the use of passive social media among college students and adopting communication capacity-oriented interventions may yield benefits for improving students' psychological well-being; educators should pay sufficient attention to them."*

Are You Chronically Online or Addicted to Social Media?

As evidenced by studies like the one above, not all social media is bad. Other research has even shown it can support cognitive health in the elderly.[14] But when your digital life feels more "lived in" than your real one, or when your head is constantly halfway in a comment thread, it might be time to step back.

The term "chronically online" may sound like internet slang, but it describes a real pattern of behavior that's marked by compulsive checking, difficulty being present offline, and moods dictated by notifications or online reactions. Unlike casual browsing,

chronic online activity forms a feedback loop like slot machines: The more you scroll, the more platforms deliver content designed to keep you hooked.[15]

While being chronically online is about lifestyle and perspective, social media addiction is considered a behavioral health condition. Experts describe it as a compulsive dependency on social media platforms that interferes with mental health, daily responsibilities, and real-world relationships.[16] Here are signs you've gone from "extremely online" to chronically online — and possibly toward addiction:[17]

1. **You feel lost without Wi-Fi —** Even short offline stretches feel uncomfortable. If you feel anxious or panicked when you can't check apps, that's closer to addiction.

2. **You know influencers' lives better than your friends —** Prioritizing creators' updates over real-world connections is a hallmark of being chronically online. If you neglect relationships entirely, it may signal addictive behavior.

3. **You use content to "feel your feelings" —** Scrolling or posting becomes your default coping mechanism. Social media addiction is when you can't process emotions without the feed.

4. **You're never fully present —** Your mind is always rehearsing posts or craving validation. With addiction, this craving feels uncontrollable, like you need the dopamine hit.

Spending time online isn't the problem; losing touch with yourself is. If any of these signs hit a nerve, going on a social media detox could help you reconnect to the real world. For useful tips, you can check out "**Reducing Social Media Use for Just a Week Can Improve Mental Health**."

6 Ways to Spend Less Time on Social Media

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X are designed to pull you in with endless feeds, quick rewards, and subtle comparison traps. Social media shapes your mind in ways that can quietly drain your focus, productivity, and emotional well-

being. If quitting cold turkey isn't realistic, these simple strategies can help you limit your time online:[18]

1. **Know your screen habits —** Before reducing your social media usage, it's useful to understand how much time you currently spend. Track your time initially, then aim to decrease it gradually. Having the numbers on hand provides a clear, measurable way to monitor your progress.

2. **Set a weekly "digital day-off" —** Instead of trying to shave off minutes here and there, choose one day each week when you intentionally step away from social media altogether. You can decide how strict it is: no apps for 24 hours, or simply no screens after dinner. The point is to build predictable, distraction-free time.

3. **Turn off distracting notifications —** Alerts are designed to make everything feel urgent, which keeps you checking your phone even when nothing truly needs your attention. By disabling badges, banners, and email alerts for the platforms you overuse, you take back control of when you open each app.

4. **Make your feed feel safe —** Your feed should feel like a safe home you can retreat to. Just as you wouldn't invite negative or judgmental people into your home, you don't need to give them space in your mind. Follow accounts that promote kindness, realistic bodies, and healthy habits. Mute or unfollow pages that trigger comparison, fear, or self-doubt.

5. **Ask for help —** If stepping back from social media feels overwhelming, talk to someone you trust. There's no shame in asking for help — especially when support from a loved one or therapist can help you process your feelings and anxiety.

6. **Real life vs. online interaction —** Set boundaries by taking regular screen breaks, calling a friend instead of texting, or joining a local class, group, or volunteer activity. Even 10 minutes of in-person connection each day can reset your mind and strengthen your sense of self.

Being online often trains us to perform — constantly tweaking, posting, reacting. But you don't need to earn rest, joy, or validation; you already deserve them. You deserve to live a life without filters and to share moments without turning them into content. Reclaiming time from your screen isn't about restriction; it's about creating space for the version of you that doesn't need an audience — just room to be genuine.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Social Media Anxiety

Q: What did the 7-month German study find about internet habits and stress?

A: The study tracked real online behavior in 1,490 adults and found that higher stress was linked to mobile social media use, online shopping, streaming, and gaming. In contrast, spending more time on email and news websites was associated with lower stress levels.

Q: Why does social media affect children's self-esteem more strongly?

A: Kids ages 10 to 14 are still forming their identity and self-worth. They're more likely to believe online images reflect real life, which increases harmful comparisons and makes them especially sensitive to social media's emotional effects.

Q: What's the difference between passive and active social media use?

A: Passive use means scrolling or lurking without interacting, which raises social anxiety. Active use involves posting, commenting, or messaging, which encourages connection and communication skills that help protect emotional well-being.

Q: What does it mean to be "chronically online"?

A: Being chronically online means your mood, attention, and sense of self are heavily shaped by online activity. It often includes compulsive checking, difficulty being present offline, and using content or shopping to cope with stress.

Q: What are simple ways to reduce social media stress without quitting entirely?

A: Start by tracking your screen habits, turning off nonessential notifications, creating screen-free time, and prioritizing real-world connections. Small, consistent changes can break the stress-scroll cycle and help you feel more grounded.

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