

# Reducing Social Media Use for Just a Week Can Improve Mental Health

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January 01, 2026

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › A new JAMA Network Open study found that cutting down social media use to roughly 30 minutes per day had measurable effects on mental health, reducing anxiety by about 16%, depression by about 25%, and insomnia symptoms by 15%
- › Loneliness scores did not change much, which shows that social media can be a lifeline for connection as well as a source of stress
- › Earlier randomized trials from the University of Bath and others also found that a one-week break from platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook improved wellbeing, depression, and anxiety
- › A short reset is not a cure for depression or anxiety, and does not replace therapy, medication, or crisis care. Still, it can be a realistic experiment that helps you see how specific apps affect your mood, sleep, and focus
- › If you already struggle with your mental health, or if you rely on online communities for support, it makes sense to plan your week carefully and to talk with a trusted health professional about how this kind of experiment fits into your overall care

Social media and phone use have become woven into daily life, shaping how we communicate, work, and stay connected in an increasingly digital world. According to statistics, adults in their 20s and early 30s spend nearly two hours a day on social media, while younger age groups can go up to three hours scrolling on their phones.<sup>1</sup> That's more time than most spend exercising, reading, or even talking face-to-face.

Social media was created to connect us, but for many, it's become a way to cope with stress, fight boredom, or escape uncomfortable feelings.<sup>2</sup> Instead of bringing friends and family closer, it can sometimes create distance or even cause tension,<sup>3</sup> driven by the pressure to compare ourselves to the carefully curated lives on screens.<sup>4</sup>

These patterns lead researchers to ask an important question: If social media influences our mood so strongly, what might happen when we take a break – even just for a week?

## **What the New Research Reveals About Social Media and Mental Health**

A cohort study published in JAMA Network Open examined whether briefly cutting back on social media could lead to measurable improvements in mental health.<sup>5</sup> While many people share anecdotal benefits online, the scientific link remains debated, with past studies showing mixed results.<sup>6</sup>

- **Real-time behavior, not just screen time estimates** – Researchers tracked 373 young adults (ages 18 to 24) for over three weeks, consisting of two weeks of normal social media use, followed by an optional one-week "detox." Instead of asking participants to recall how much time they spent on social media, the team used smartphone data to measure daily screen time on five major platforms, namely TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook.<sup>7,8</sup>
- **How the data was captured** – In an NPR interview, Dr. John Torous, a psychiatrist and co-author of the study, explained that they used a digital phenotyping app called MindLAMP. This app provided the team with data such as GPS location, screen time, app pickups, and phone use patterns. He remarked, "If you ask me to estimate my own screen time, I don't think I'd be accurate."<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, participants submitted daily "in-the-moment" mental health check-ins (known as ecological momentary assessments or EMAs),<sup>10</sup> using clinical questionnaires for depression, anxiety, and insomnia.<sup>11</sup>

- **Nearly 80% chose to detox and reaped benefits** — Of those enrolled, 295 opted into the detox. During that week, their average daily social media use dropped from 1.9 hours to just 30 minutes. Across the group, mental health scores improved significantly — their depression was reduced by 24.8%, anxiety dropped by 16.1%, and insomnia symptoms dropped by 14.5%.<sup>12</sup>

There was no meaningful change in loneliness, which researchers say may be because some participants lost a key outlet for connection during detox.<sup>13</sup>

*"We speculate that the improvements observed during detox were associated more with a reduction in opportunities for problematic engagement, such as negative social comparison and addictive use, rather than by reductions in overall screen time," the authors explained.*<sup>14</sup>

- **Improvements for subjects with severe depression** — Participants with higher symptom levels at the start saw the most improvement. In those with moderately severe depression, scores fell by nearly 50% for depression, and over 35% for anxiety and insomnia.<sup>15,16</sup>
- **Behavior changes were subtle** — During the detox, participants spent slightly more time at home and had longer screen durations, but these changes were small and highly variable. As the authors explain, "Interventions may be more effective if they target reducing problematic engagement rather than focusing exclusively on overall reduction in use."<sup>17</sup>
- **Changes in a short span of time** — While the study wasn't designed to show long-term outcomes, the findings suggest even short-term detoxes could be a valuable part of mental health strategies for young adults. As the study authors wrote:

*"These findings suggest that reducing social media use for 1 week may improve mental health outcomes in young adults; however, the durability of these therapeutic outcomes and their associations with behavior require further investigation."*

- **Takeaways from the study** – Mental health experts say the study's real value is how it measured behavior, especially in young people. The report's authors explained the value of the study results:<sup>18</sup>

*"This developmental stage, often described as emerging adulthood, is marked by heightened vulnerability and transition ... Our findings contribute to the growing body of evidence suggesting that brief digital detox interventions may offer meaningful mental health benefits."*

Other experts who were not involved in the study said that the results are unusually strong for a short behavioral change. Psychologist Mitch Prinstein, chief science officer at the American Psychological Association, noted:<sup>19</sup>

*"It usually takes 8 to 12 weeks of therapy to get those kinds of improvements. To see that in one week, just from changing how people use social media, is powerful."*

## **Can Shorter Screen Times Really Cut It?**

Telling people to spend less time on their phone seems simple, but it misses the real issue: Not all screen time is equal. The most significant mental health gains didn't come from tossing phones aside – they came from reducing the most stimulating social feeds that fuel late-night scrolling, constant checking, and unhealthy comparison.

In the featured one-week experiment, participants kept their phones but cut social media use sharply – from about 1.9 hours per day to roughly 30 minutes. Overall phone time didn't always decrease significantly, yet anxiety, depression, and insomnia symptoms improved. This suggests that what you do on your phone matters more than how long you use it.

The table below highlights these results, showing the drop in social media use alongside improvements in mental health outcomes.

Measure	Before week	During week	Approx. change	What that feels like
Social media time (per day)	~1.9 h	~0.5 h	-1.4 h	You reclaim ~90 minutes/day from feeds
Anxiety (GAD-7)	Mild	Closer to minimal	-16%	Fewer "on edge" days
Depression (PHQ-9)	Mild	Leaning minimal	-25%	More energy and interest
Insomnia (ISI)	Mild insomnia	Less severe	-15%	Quicker sleep onset, fewer wakes
Loneliness	Moderate	About same	~0%	Connection needs separate attention

## Can You Go for A Week Without Social Media?

In 2022, researchers at the University of Bath published a randomized controlled trial in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* to answer a simple question: What happens when people log off completely for seven days?<sup>20</sup> Unlike app-based interventions that use timers or tracking tools, this study relied on a trust-based system — participants were asked to stop using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok entirely, with no technical restrictions.

- **How the study was designed** – Researchers randomly assigned 154 adults, mostly in their late 20s, to either maintain their usual habits or take a complete social media break. This randomized controlled trial design helps reduce bias and strengthens the evidence.
- **A full break, not just a "cut"** – Unlike studies that encourage moderation, the Bath trial asked participants to step away from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok entirely for a week.
- **What changed after one week** – The results of going "cold turkey" for a few days seem to have its merits. According to the researchers:

*"The present study shows that asking people to stop using SM for 1 week leads to significant improvements in well-being, depression, and anxiety. Future research should extend this to clinical populations and examine effects over the longer term."*<sup>21</sup>

## Which One-Week Social Media Strategy Works Best for You?

Not all digital detoxes look the same. Some people go completely offline, while others just cut back or take a break from one app that drains them the most. Each approach has trade-offs depending on your goals, lifestyle, and how attached you are to the scroll.

Researchers have tested different strategies, from full abstinence to reshaping how you engage. The best choice is usually the one you can stick to without turning it into a punishment. The table below breaks down these common one-week detox styles and what each might reveal about your relationship with social media.

Strategy	What to change	Main upsides	Main trade-offs
<b>Full abstinence</b>	Log out or delete all major social	Big drop in emotional triggers;	Tough to stick with if your work,

Strategy	What to change	Main upsides	Main trade-offs
	apps for the full 7 days	clear cause-and-effect insight	school, or social life relies on apps
<b>Strict time limit</b>	Cap usage to 30 mins/day via built-in timers or screen tools	Easier to maintain; can become a regular habit	Still requires willpower; easy to override when stressed
<b>Platform-specific break</b>	Step away from only one or two platforms that feel toxic	Keeps helpful apps; cuts the worst offenders	You might just shift your attention to another app
<b>Content cleanse</b>	Mute or unfollow draining accounts, without leaving the app	Reshapes your feed; feels less extreme	Doesn't reduce overall time or help with late-night scrolling

## The Negative Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

**Social media shapes your mind.** Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X are designed to keep your attention by rewarding engagement and amplifying comparison. While they offer communication and entertainment, they also carry real mental health downsides, especially when use becomes excessive or compulsive. Here are five common effects experts link to heavy or problematic social media use:

- **It increases irritability** — Constant notifications, pressure to respond, and fear of missing out (FOMO) can leave you feeling tense. A 2023 study in JAMA Network Open found that U.S. adults who spent most of their day on social media were significantly more irritable than those who didn't use it at all.<sup>22</sup>

In a sample of 42,597 participants, those with high daily usage scored 1.55 points higher on the Brief Irritability Test (BITe), even after accounting for depression and anxiety. That score reflects symptoms like mood swings, frustration, and a shorter temper – suggesting social media may act as a trigger for emotional instability.<sup>23</sup> According to a release in Medical Xpress:<sup>24</sup>

*"Participants completed the Brief Irritability Test (BITe), which consists of five statements evaluating irritability symptoms over the previous two weeks. Scores range from 5 to 30, with higher scores indicating higher levels of irritability. The analysis also included depression and anxiety metrics to account for overlapping psychological symptoms."*<sup>25</sup>

The researchers also adjusted for demographic and psychological factors, confirming that social media engagement was independently associated with emotional reactivity, not just a side effect of other conditions.

- **It distorts women's self-perception** – There's growing evidence that high social media use can worsen body image and increase pressure to change how you look. A 2023 national study published in *Frontiers in Public Health* surveyed 1,483 Saudi adults and found that 24.4% met the criteria for body dysmorphic disorder (BDD).

Those who spent four to seven hours a day on Instagram and Snapchat had the highest BDD rates (29%), compared to only 19% among those using these apps for under an hour.<sup>26</sup>

People with BDD were also much more likely to support or pursue cosmetic surgery. The researchers called the rise of photo-editing apps and passive scrolling a serious public health concern, noting: "The dramatic increase in the use of photo-editing apps and their well-established effects on mental health is a public health concern."<sup>27</sup>

*"A growing body of evidence suggests that social media may impact mental health in different ways. This study reveals that heavy use of these platforms is associated with negative appraisals about one's physical*

*appearance, and it fosters one's tendency toward cosmetic surgery, especially among females,"* the researchers concluded.

- **It's getting young kids hooked** — A study published in JAMA Network Open surveyed 1,005 U.S. parents of 9- to 15-year-olds and found that concern about internet addiction has overtaken concern about substance use. Specifically, 22.4% of parents were solely worried about internet addiction, while only 9.8% cited substance addiction alone. Another 32.9% were equally concerned about both.<sup>28</sup>

Parents cited links between excessive screen time and depression, anxiety, insomnia, and social dysfunction, as well as long-term effects on their children's cognitive, social, and physical development. Over half (51.1%) were concerned about social development, 46.2% about cognitive effects, and 46.7% about physical effects from overexposure to screens and apps. According to the research:<sup>29</sup>

*"Perceived benefits of internet use were balanced by parental concerns about the potential of social networking platforms to contribute to internet addiction, echoing recent warnings by the U.S. Surgeon General."*<sup>30</sup>

- **It's keeping people from seeking meaningful connections** — A 2022 cross-sectional study published in Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine found that people who use social media mainly to seek out friendships and keep friend groups together might be in for an unpleasant surprise. In that survey of social media users whose primary motive was relationship maintenance scored significantly higher on loneliness measures, the authors reported:<sup>31</sup>

*"Our findings suggest that people who use social media for the motive of maintaining their relationships feel lonelier than those who spend the same amount of time on social media for other reasons."*

For a more in-depth discussion about social media's adverse effects on today's society, read "[Is Social Media Driving Americans Insane?](#)"

## **Why a Social Media Detox Might Be Exactly What You Need**

Social media is everywhere, but let's be honest – it can also feel overwhelming. Endless scrolling, constant notifications, and the pressure to keep up can leave you stressed, distracted, and even anxious. For many people, that daily habit starts to feel less like fun and more like a drain on mental health.

That's where a social media detox comes in. A detox isn't about quitting forever – it's about taking a short, intentional break to reset your mind and your habits. In this guide, you'll find a simple seven-day plan to help you unplug without feeling punished. <sup>32</sup>

- 1. Define your goals** – Start by asking why you want this break. Is it for better focus, mental health, or productivity? Write down your goals – they'll keep you motivated and accountable. <sup>33</sup>
- 2. Silence notifications** – Alerts are one of the biggest triggers for mindless scrolling. Turn off non-essential notifications, so you control when you check your apps, not the other way around. <sup>34</sup>
- 3. Swap scrolling for something positive** – Fill the time you'd spend online with activities that recharge you, such as reading, exercising, cooking, or trying a new hobby. Replacing old habits makes the detox easier and more rewarding.
- 4. Get active** – Take a walk, enjoy a screen-free meal, or spend time outdoors. Being present in the real world helps clear mental clutter and reduce stress. <sup>35</sup>
- 5. Practice mindfulness and journaling** – Notice how you feel without social media. Write down your thoughts and moods. Mindfulness and journaling help you stay grounded and track your progress. <sup>36</sup>
- 6. Connect face-to-face** – Reach out to friends or family in person. Real conversations and shared experiences boost emotional well-being in ways likes and comments can't. <sup>37</sup>

**7. Reflect and plan ahead** – Think about what changed during the detox. What habits do you want to keep? Use these insights to create a long-term plan or if you might need to seek out professional help.<sup>38</sup>

Don't forget to give yourself some grace as you try to wean yourself off the destructive cycle of seeking validation through likes; be patient with yourself, and if things get too heavy to handle, you can always seek a trusted healthcare provider.

### **A Simple 7-Day Social Media Detox Plan**

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1. Know why you're taking a break.
2. Turn off your triggers (notifications).
3. Stop doomscrolling, pick up a hobby or book.
4. Enjoy the outdoors.
5. Journal and reflect.
6. Spend time with loved ones.
7. Reflect and assess your progress.

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Did you know that it's not just young adults who suffer from social media addiction? Read "[Parents Are Growing More Concerned About This Type of Addiction](#)" to know more.

## **How to Reduce Social Media Use**

A few intentional changes can go a long way in protecting your emotional well-being. Remember, you have the freedom to step away from anything that compromises your mental health. Not all online content is created to uplift you, so don't forget to savor life beyond the screen. Here are some practical tips to help you limit your social media exposure:

- **Cut back on your screen time** — If you're checking social media every few minutes, it's time to set limits. Research shows heavy posting and constant engagement can worsen mood. Try scheduling short blocks — 20 to 30 minutes a day is plenty to stay connected without falling into the scroll trap. Use built-in screen time tools or apps to help you stick to your goal.
- **Post less often** — Constant posting can fuel stress and dependence on likes for validation. If you share multiple updates daily, scale back to a few times a week or only when something truly matters. Less posting means less pressure — and more peace of mind.
- **Curate your feed** — What you consume matters. Social media algorithms often push content that sparks outrage or comparison. Pay attention to how posts make you feel. Unfollow accounts that drain you and follow those that inspire or educate. A positive feed can reduce emotional triggers and make scrolling less toxic.
- **Opt for real-life connections** — Social media gives the illusion of connection, but nothing beats real-life interaction. If you're scrolling out of boredom or loneliness, call a friend, plan a meetup, or dive into a hobby. Building deeper offline relationships does more for your mental health than any number of likes ever could.
- **If you're having a hard time, seek help** — There's no shame in seeking professional help, especially when doing a social detox on your own is getting too hard. Talk to family and loved ones about it to help ease out the emotional load and anxiety that giving up social media can bring.

If you've made it through a social media detox, take pride in that — it's proof you can reclaim your time and peace. Even a short break shows how much energy scrolling can steal. Use this momentum to set boundaries that feel realistic for your life.

Social media has changed — and so should the way you use it. Be intentional about what you consume and how much time you give away. Life isn't meant to be swiped; it's meant to be lived. If you find yourself chasing happiness through likes and strangers' posts, pause and look around — your real blessings are offline.

# **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Social Media and Mental Health**

**Q: Does taking a week off social media reduce anxiety and depression in young adults?**

**A:** Evidence shows one week off social media can meaningfully reduce depressive symptoms (~25%) and anxiety (~16%) in 18- to 24-year-olds. These effects of social media on mental health appeared even when overall phone time changed little, indicating that platform choice and habits matter most.

**Q: How does a short social media break affect sleep and insomnia?**

**A:** After a short-term social media break, insomnia symptoms drop about 14% to 15% on average. Benefits often appear quickly despite minimal change in total screen time, supporting the view that, within social media and mental health, what people do on phones matters more than minutes accrued.

**Q: Will taking a break from social media make people feel lonely or more connected?**

**A:** During a break from social media, loneliness typically changes little over a single week, even while anxiety, depression, and sleep improve. Connection patterns usually need longer to shift, so social contact should be planned alongside the break to protect supportive relationships.

**Q: How long should a social media detox last to help mental health?**

**A:** A social media detox lasting one week is often sufficient to produce measurable improvements. Some individuals prefer time-caps – e.g., 30 minutes daily – over full abstinence. Treat the week as a practical, short-term social media break that's realistic to complete and easy to repeat.

**Q: Is a social media break enough, or is therapy or medication still needed?**

**A:** A social media break is a helpful tool, not a replacement for professional care. Persistent or severe symptoms warrant therapy and, when appropriate, medication. Short resets can complement treatment plans addressing social media and mental health without substituting for clinical support.

**Q: How can someone take a week off social media without missing important updates?**

**A:** Set alternate contact channels (texts or email), apply app timers or temporary deletions, and schedule a post-week catch-up. This approach helps reduce social media use while keeping lines of communication with friends and loved ones open.

**Q: Are social media breaks safe for teens who rely on online communities?**

**A:** For social media and teen mental health, safety improves when breaks are moderated: try platform-specific pauses or strict time caps rather than total disconnection. This preserves supportive communities while limiting social media dangers such as late-night doomscrolling and comparison-driven distress.

**Q: What should people do with their time during a social media detox?**

**A:** Pair a social media detox with replacements linked to wellbeing: earlier bedtimes, morning light, short walks, and scheduled conversations. Purposeful activities like tiny projects, journaling, or hobbies convert reclaimed time into the benefits of quitting social media patterns that strain mood and sleep.

**Q: How often should a one-week social media break be repeated?**

**A:** Cadence varies. Many repeat a social media break quarterly or adopt one social-free day weekly to sustain gains. The goal is to find a workable rhythm that stabilizes social media and mental health benefits without demanding rigid, long-term abstinence from all platforms.

**Q: Can a social media break backfire and make overall phone use increase?**

**A:** Sometimes total phone time changes little because people shift to other apps. Even so, reducing feeds still improves core effects of social media on mental health – notably mood and sleep – implying that one week off social media targets the most aggravating parts of usage.

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