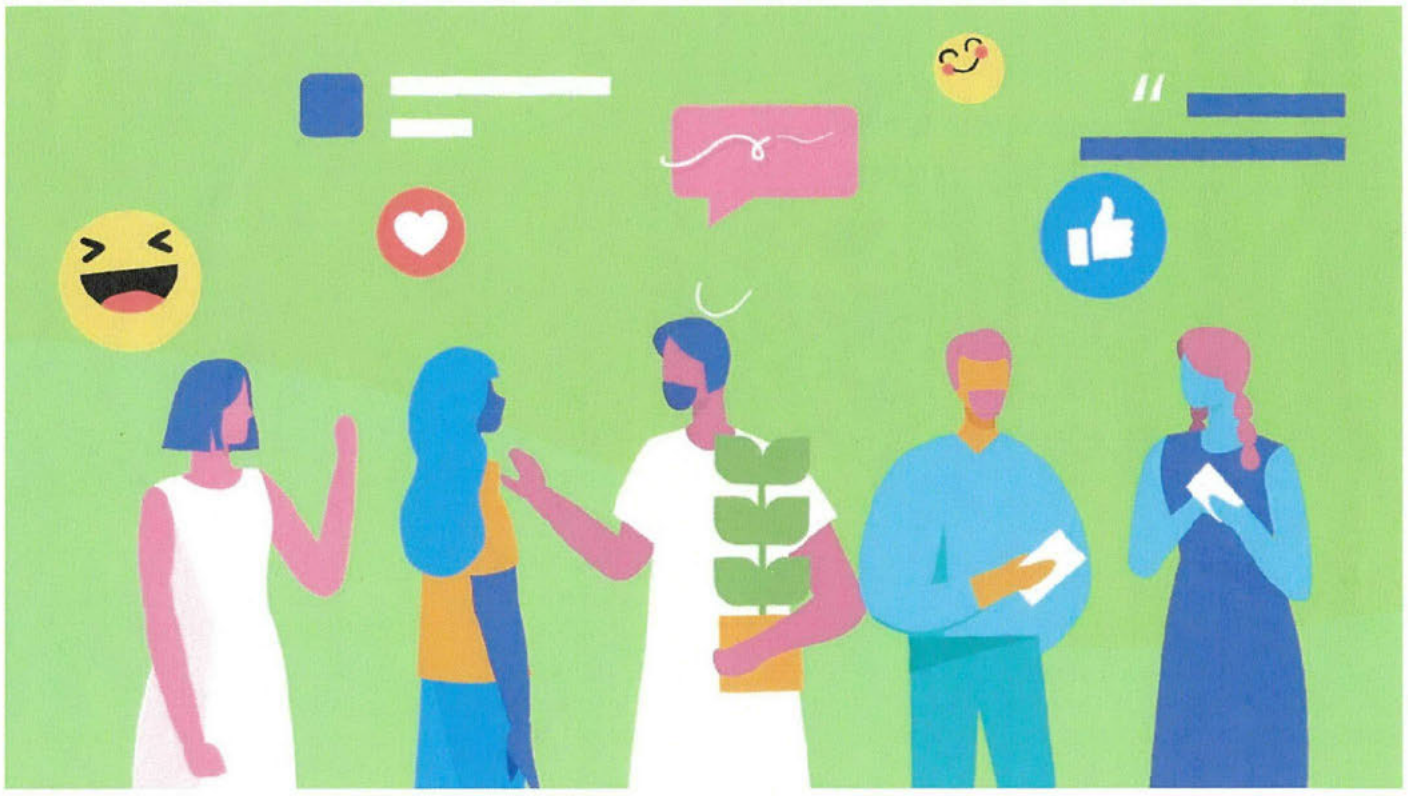
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Hard Questions: Is Spending Time on Social Media Bad for Us?

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By David Ginsberg, Director of Research, and Moira Burke, Research Scientist at Facebook

With people spending more time on social media, many rightly wonder whether that time is good for us. Do people connect in meaningful ways online? Or are they simply consuming trivial updates and polarizing memes at the expense of time with loved ones?

These are critical questions for Silicon Valley — and for both of us. Moira is a social psychologist who has studied the impact of the internet on people's lives for more than a decade, and I lead the research team for the Facebook app. As parents, each of us worries about our kids' screen time and what "connection" will mean in 15 years. We also worry about spending too much time on our phones when we should be paying attention to our families. One of the ways we combat our inner struggles is with research — reviewing what others have found, conducting our own, and asking questions when we need to learn more.

A lot of smart people are looking at different aspects of this important issue. Psychologist Sherry Turkle asserts that mobile phones redefine modern relationships, making us "alone together." In her generational analyses of teens, psychologist Jean Twenge notes an increase in teen depression corresponding with technology use. Both offer compelling research.

But it's not the whole story. Sociologist Claude Fischer argues that claims that technology drives us apart are largely supported by anecdotes and ignore the benefits. Sociologist Keith Hampton's study of public spaces suggests that people spend more time in public now — and that cell phones in public are more often used by people passing time on their own, rather than ignoring friends in person.

We want Facebook to be a place for meaningful interactions with your friends and family — enhancing your relationships offline, not detracting from them. After all, that's what Facebook has always been about. This is important as we know that a person's health and happiness relies heavily on the strength of their relationships.

In this post, we want to give you some insights into how the research team at Facebook works with our product teams to incorporate well-being principles, and review some of the top scientific research on well-being and social media that informs our work. Of course, this isn't just a Facebook issue — it's an internet issue — so we collaborate with leading experts and publish in the top peer-reviewed journals. We work with scientists like Robert Kraut at Carnegie Mellon; Sonja Lyubomirsky at UC Riverside; Dacher Keltner, Emiliana Simon-Thomas, and Matt Killingsworth from the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, and have partnered closely with mental health clinicians and organizations like Save.org and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

What Do Academics Say? Is Social Media Good or Bad for Well-Being?

According to the research, it really comes down to *how* you use the technology. For example, on social media, you can passively scroll through posts, much like watching TV, or actively interact with friends — messaging and commenting on each other's posts. Just like in person, interacting with people you care about can be beneficial, while simply watching others from the sidelines may make you feel worse.

The bad: In general, when people spend a lot of time **passively consuming** information — reading but not interacting with people — they report feeling worse afterward. In one experiment, University of Michigan students randomly assigned to read Facebook for 10 minutes were in a worse mood at the end of the day than students assigned to post or talk to friends on Facebook. A study from UC San Diego and Yale found that people who clicked on about four times as many links as the average person, or who liked twice as many posts, reported worse mental health than average in a survey. Though the causes aren't clear, researchers hypothesize that reading about others online might lead to negative social comparison — and perhaps even more so than offline, since people's posts are often more curated and flattering. Another theory is that the internet takes people away from social engagement in person.

The good: On the other hand, **actively interacting with people** — especially sharing messages, posts and comments with close friends and reminiscing about past interactions — is linked to improvements in well-being. This ability to connect with relatives, classmates, and colleagues is what drew many of us to Facebook in the first place, and it's no surprise that staying in touch with these friends and loved ones brings us joy and strengthens our sense of community.

A study we conducted with Robert Kraut at Carnegie Mellon University found that people who sent or received more messages, comments and Timeline posts reported improvements in social support, depression and loneliness. The positive effects were even stronger when people talked with their close friends online. Simply **broadcasting status updates wasn't enough**; people had to interact one-on-one with others in their network. Other peer-reviewed longitudinal research and experiments have found similar positive benefits between well-being and active engagement on Facebook.

In an experiment at Cornell, stressed college students randomly assigned to scroll through their own Facebook profiles for five minutes experienced boosts in self-affirmation compared to students who looked at a stranger's Facebook profile. The researchers believe self-affirmation comes from reminiscing on past meaningful interactions — seeing photos they had been tagged in and comments their friends had left — as well as reflecting on one's own past posts, where a person chooses how to present themselves to the world.

In a follow-up study, the Cornell researchers put other students under stress by giving them negative feedback on a test and then gave them a choice of websites to visit afterward, including Facebook, YouTube, online music and online video games. They found that stressed students were twice as likely to choose Facebook to make themselves feel better as compared with students who hadn't been put under stress.

In sum, our research and other academic literature suggests that it's about *how* you use social media that matters when it comes to your well-being.



So what are we doing about it?

We're working to make Facebook more about social interaction and less about spending time. As our CEO Mark Zuckerberg recently said, "We want the time people spend on Facebook to encourage meaningful social interactions." Facebook has always been about bringing people together — from the early days when we started reminding people about their friends' birthdays, to showing people their memories with friends using the feature we call "On This Day." We're also a place for people to come together in times of need, from fundraisers for disaster relief to groups where people can find an organ donor. We're always working to expand these communities and find new ways to have a positive impact on people's lives.

We employ social psychologists, social scientists and sociologists, and we collaborate with top scholars to better understand well-being and work to make Facebook a place that contributes in a positive way. Here are a few things we've worked on recently to help support people's well-being.

News Feed quality: We've made several changes to News Feed to provide more opportunities for meaningful interactions and reduce passive consumption of low-quality content — even if it decreases some of our engagement metrics in the short term. We demote things like

clickbait headlines and false news, even though people often click on those links at a high rate. We optimize ranking so posts from the friends you care about most are more likely to appear at the top of your feed because that's what people tell us in surveys that they want to see. Similarly, our ranking promotes posts that are personally informative. We also recently redesigned the comments feature to foster better conversations.

Snooze: People often tell us they want more say over what they see in News Feed. Today, we launched Snooze, which gives people the option to hide a person, Page or group for 30 days, without having to permanently unfollow or unfriend them. This will give people more control over their feed and hopefully make their experience more positive.

Take a Break: Millions of people break up on Facebook each week, changing their relationship status from "in a relationship" to "single." Research on peoples' experiences after breakups suggests that offline and online contact, including seeing an ex-partner's activities, can make emotional recovery more difficult. To help make this experience easier, we built a tool called Take a Break, which gives people more centralized control over when they see their ex on Facebook, what their ex can see, and who can see their past posts.

Suicide prevention tools: Research shows that social support can help prevent suicide. Facebook is in a unique position to connect people in distress with resources that can help. We work with people and organizations around the world to develop support options for people posting about suicide on Facebook, including reaching out to a friend, contacting help lines and reading tips about things they can do in that moment. We recently released suicide prevention support on Facebook Live and introduced artificial intelligence to detect suicidal posts even before they are reported. We also connect people more broadly with mental health resources, including support groups on Facebook.



What About Related Areas Like Digital Distraction and the Impact of Technology on Kids?

We know that people are concerned about how technology affects our attention spans and relationships, as well as how it affects children in the long run. We agree these are critically important questions, and we all have a lot more to learn.

That's why we recently pledged [redacted] toward research to better understand the relationship between media technologies, youth development and well-being. We're teaming up with experts in the field to look at the impact of mobile technology and social media on kids and teens, as well as how to better support them as they transition through different stages of life.

We're also making investments to better understand digital distraction and the factors that can pull people away from important face-to-face interactions. Is multitasking hurting our personal relationships? How about our ability to focus? Next year we'll host a summit with academics and other industry leaders to tackle these issues together.

We don't have all the answers, but given the prominent role social media now plays in many people's lives, we want to help elevate the conversation. In the years ahead we'll be doing more to dig into these questions, share our findings and improve our products. At the end of the day, we're committed to bringing people together and supporting well-being through meaningful interactions on Facebook.

Read more about our Hard Questions series.

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