

Social Media's Impact on Teen Mental Health & Self-diagnosis Tip Sheet

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We may often think of the ability to connect on social media and access to endless content online as a huge benefit to awareness of a variety of mental health challenges. While there is certainly something to be said for increase accessibility to resources for those in communities where it is lacking, and the ability to find a wider circle of support of people dealing with similar challenges, [a recent article from Mashable](#) has highlighted that it can also come with some risks for children, teens, and young adults, most notably self-diagnosis.

Brina Tiemeyer, Community Mental Health Services Clinical Supervisor at Wedgwood Christian Services, shares her key takeaways from the article and tips for parents on how to best support kids:

▶ There's good and bad

- There's no doubt that social media has done a fair amount of good – including raising awareness, helping to normalize mental health challenges, and giving under resourced or supported individuals a way to find and build community, but when left unchecked or monitored, social media can do a lot of harm.
- The Surgeon General just [released a statement](#) detailing the impact social media can have on teens.
- It is an unfiltered resource that largely under-equipped kids have free access to.

▶ Social Media often doesn't leave much room for nuance

- On Tik Tok in particular, short form, list-based content about mental health prevails. Kids see these lists and use them as a checklist for their own challenges. **But what this content often doesn't address is the complexity and variation of mental illness presentation.** For example, anxiety disorders can present differently between age groups, genders, life experiences, other health factors, and severity.
- Just because a teen feels like they 'checked all the boxes' on a video made about OCD, may not account for all the other aspects of OCD, or their life and experience.

▶ Online Advice is not always the best...

- Because social media in particular is such an open forum, platforms are full of advice, treatment suggestions, and tips that aren't so helpful by people who don't have proper education, credentials, or experience
- Influencers aren't professionals – their advice may work in their own lives (for better or worse) but when kids incorrectly self-diagnose, they also incorrectly put together their own "treatment plans" – which can be best-case scenario unhelpful, and worst-case scenario harmful.
- We've even seen some kids who choose to believe what an influencer says over the expertise of a therapist. They have their mind set on a certain diagnosis and have a hard time accepting feedback that might state otherwise.

▶ What to do?

- Kids are [lonely](#). Social media can be so enticing to kids and young adults because they are **searching for community, a place where they are understood, and where they can openly talk about what they are dealing with.**
 - Provide guidance and oversight to social media use. **Remind kids (and probably ourselves, too!) that most things on social media are oversimplified.** It's also important to have conversations about what makes for a reliable, trusted source of information.
 - **Create a space for them to have these conversations in real life** – whether that be with parents, teachers or school guidance counselors, or with therapists. Having someone who knows the child, and can understand the big picture and context is useful.
 - **Kids need to feel believed, capable, and safe.** Even if you don't totally understand what your child is dealing with or feeling, approach the conversations with an open mind, curiosity to understand and learn more.
 - Reach out to a mental health professional who can help your child navigate their challenges, and support you as you parent them through this.
 - Wedgwood Christian Services' Bouma Counseling Center can quickly connect you with services and providers that can address a variety of needs. **Call 616.942.7294 or email counseling@wedgwood.org.**