Whenever there's a significant technological advance that fundamentally changes the way people live, it generates debate over the nature of that change and whether it's "good" or "bad." Such is the case with social media—internet-based, mobile tools like email, Facebook, and YouTube that have revolutionized the way human beings get information and communicate and interact with one another. In the relatively short time they've been in existence, social media have had some very positive effects in terms of empowering and connecting people. At the same time, they have provided new platforms for some decidedly unhealthy and destructive behaviors.

Some of the leading arguments for and against this new technology are outlined below. There's plenty of anecdotal evidence to support either assessment; however, research into the effects of social media is still in its infancy, so scientific data are relatively scarce. What is clear is that the internet, social media, and the digital devices on which they operate are here to stay. Therefore, it is incumbent on each of us to understand, and help others to understand, how to use them productively and responsibly.

THE GOOD

Social media nurture and expand relationships. Improving communication and strengthening human connection is the reason social media emerged. Facebook, Twitter, chat groups, LinkedIn and countless other websites help people build on existing relationships, create new ones, and reinvigorate those that have lapsed over time. Regardless of where a person lives, it's possible to find others who share the same interests and concerns.

Social media have exponentially increased the resources for mental health information and support. Research shows that people who get support from peers (those struggling with the same problems) have better health outcomes, whether they have a physical condition like diabetes or a psychological one like depression. Internet support groups, discussion boards, and blogs have significantly enhanced the resources for individuals wrestling with mental health, behavioral, and/or addiction issues. Online support offers certain advantages that make it attractive to individuals who might not otherwise seek help, for example:

1. Anonymity. Many people find it easier to share problems and feelings openly when there's minimal risk of identification or "real-life" consequences.
2. 24/7 availability. The internet never sleeps. In the event of a crisis, this can truly be life-saving; web-based support communities have been credited with saving people from suicide and accidental drug overdoses.
3. No geographic limitations. Location can be an obstacle to participating in traditional support groups that require physical attendance. Online groups pull members from all over and can host larger numbers of people, adding to the pool of knowledge and experience.

The internet and social media boost productivity. These tools offer more information—including real-time news—than a library full of encyclopedias, and the information's accessible at any time of day or night. Studies have linked internet/social media use with greater success in academics as well as improved job performance and employment prospects.

THE BAD

The very same attributes that make social media a positive force in our lives make it potentially dangerous. For example, anonymity allows cyberbullies to prey on vulnerable peers without taking personal responsibility; online casinos are accessible around the clock and from virtually anywhere, as are bank accounts and instant-loan sites, making it harder than ever to address a gambling addiction. Just as they bring people together for constructive reasons, social media can connect dissatisfied, disgruntled, and misguided people together, further fueling negative attitudes and beliefs.

Teens and young adults are considered particularly at risk. They're a generation raised on the internet, social media, and digital technology so these things are integral, indispensable parts of their lives. Young people also are impressionable, eager for acceptance, and relatively inexperienced, which can cloud judgment. Most adults today remember what life was like before the internet, social media, and mobile communication

devices so it's easier to step away from them. But it has still proved problematic, especially for adults who are prone to addictive behavior or have pre-existing mental health issues.

Social media is addictive. "Internet addiction" is not officially listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the mental health profession's guide to classifying psychological disorders. However, in the recently revised DSM-5, "Internet Gaming Disorder" is mentioned as "a condition warranting more clinical research and experience" for possible inclusion as a "formal disorder." Lack of formal recognition hasn't stopped people from referring to compulsive internet use—for gaming or any other reason—as an "addiction." Several recent studies seem to support this conclusion, including brain imaging studies of compulsive internet users that have showed structural and functional brain abnormalities similar to those found in people with substance abuse problems.

While it remains to be seen when and if "Internet Addiction" will make it into the DSM, the characteristics of pathological internet use are very similar to the ones listed for "Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders":

- Preoccupation with substance/activity
- Use to improve one's mood
- Increasing tolerance (need to spend more time or take larger quantities to achieve same "high")
- Loss of other interests
- Continued use despite awareness of the harm it's causing
- Withdrawal symptoms when the object of the addiction is no longer available
- Unsuccessful attempts to quit

Social media invite us to compare ourselves with others. For people with self-esteem issues and insecurities, hearing about other people's happiness and successes can deepen feelings of inferiority. It's easy to forget that social media posts, like photos of air-brushed models in magazines, can present an idealized, heavily edited version of what's actually going on.

Social media is detrimental to face-to-face human interaction. It's hard not to be concerned when you see a group of people sitting together, each engrossed in his or her own smart phone or iPad. And studies indicate that irresponsible use of social media can have that effect.

Social media allows unreliable/false information to spread quickly.

Once something's out there, you can't take it back.

...AND THE MIDDLE GROUND

Ultimately, whether social media is "good" or "bad"/"healthy" or "unhealthy" for a person's mental health and well-being is directly related to how they are used (or abused), by whom, and to some degree by who is passing judgment. Key to enjoying the benefits while avoiding the problems is to use these powerful tools sensibly, constructively, and in moderation. Like food, which we truly can't live without, the right choices in the right amounts keep people healthy and satisfied, while poor choices and excess consumption can lead to significant, potentially life-threatening health conditions.

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