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Teens, Technology, Social Media and Mental Health

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Teens raised in the digital age are presented with a host of challenges that were unknown to the previous generations. Social media in particular has had a steady hand in creating new opportunities and stressors. Today's parents are at an interesting disadvantage because they weren't raised in the same culture as their children. Although they may be fully immersed in the digital age, being born into a culture and being immersed in it are not the same.

Today's teens do not know a world without the availability of consistent communication. Their lives are lived in real time, which creates a pressure that many adults don't understand. This need to always be connected can result in overwhelming stress and anxiety. Fear of missing out (FOMO) can be an intolerable experience for some teens. When well-meaning parents respond by taking away technology, they sometimes fail to realize the impact this can have. The experience can be likened to losing a limb. This may sound dramatic, but being connected is all many teens have ever known. Losing these connections is like isolating them on a desert island.

A good rule to live by is nothing in excess. Parents should monitor their teen's social media and technology use, and work together to discuss appropriate limits on usage. Social Media is a powerful influencer, and when teens are too invested in how other people view them, their self-worth is vulnerable. A mean comment or lacking response to a post can feel devastating.

The need to always be in the know can result in obsessive behaviors such as constantly checking phones at the

expense of living their lives in the moment. When other responsibilities start to fall to the wayside because of technology and social media use, parents and other concerned adults should raise the red flag. Common indicators of obsessive behaviors include academic decline, social isolation, failure to complete chores, disinterest in activities in which they were previously involved, increased irritability – especially when directed to put away technology and excessive worry that one must always be connected otherwise they might miss out. Some teens may even experience extreme social anxiety and/or paranoia because they feel the world is always watching them. Though this is not unusual for teens, when it results in a paralyzing fear or concern, it is a problem that should be addressed.

Sleep can also be greatly affected by overuse. Teens who become too engrossed in their laptop, tablet, or phone may surrender sleep in order to keep themselves entertained. What they don't realize is that looking at a bright screen stimulates the brain and makes it difficult to sleep.

It is important to accept that technology and social media are here to stay. Begin by acknowledging the need for balance and set firm limits on when and how technology is to be used. In addition, adults must make sure they have the knowledge they need to address the issues of technology and social media, or else they might fail to take appropriate action when teens are in duress as a result of their social media usage habits. When used appropriately, technology and social media can provide today's teens with opportunities to engage with the world in wonderful ways, but it is up to the adults in their life to keep them from abusing it.

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