

Social Media and Youth Suicides

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Introduction

- Northwest Ohio (Toledo)
- Children's hospital within ProMedica Toledo Hospital
- 24 counties in OH and 3 counties in southeast MI
- Urban setting with a diverse population
- Pediatric inpatient psychiatric unit on site
- Intensive outpatient program
- Outpatient behavioral health counseling
- Developmental behavioral pediatrics clinic
- Autism center



Self-Care

Please prioritize your well-being and step away at any time if the conversation becomes uncomfortable. Feel free to rejoin if/when you are ready.

If you need additional support, we encourage you to consider these options:

- Take a break
- Practice a coping strategy (deep breathing, meditation)
- Engage in a self-care activity (fresh air, drink of water)
- Reach out to your organization's employee assistance service
- Dial, text, or chat **988** to contact the **Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**



Learning Objectives

1

Describe the relationship between youth social media use and suicide risk, including how social comparison, harmful content exposure, and isolation may affect adolescent mental health.

2

Identify clinically relevant social media-related risk and protective factors that should be considered during adolescent assessment and suicide prevention planning.

3

Apply evidence-informed strategies to integrate social media-related suicide risk considerations into clinical decision-making, family guidance, and prevention planning.

Speaker



Tanvir Singh, MD

Dr. Tanvir Singh is a Professor and Vice Chair in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toledo. Dr. Singh is board certified in Psychiatry and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, with additional certification in Addiction Medicine. Dr. Singh has extensive experience in child and adolescent behavioral health, including leadership roles in inpatient, partial hospitalization, and intensive outpatient psychiatric services. He currently serves as Medical Director of ProMedica's Pediatric Intensive Outpatient Program and supports The Kobacker Center and ProMedica's Pediatric Inpatient Psychiatry Departments.

Dr. Singh has been involved in state-level behavioral health initiatives, including work related to psychotropic medication quality improvement, Ohio Medicaid initiatives, and pediatric psychiatric care standards. He has also presented and published on topics including adolescent depression, pediatric bipolar disorder, addiction, suicide, and the care of suicidal patients.



Destiny Wholf, MSN, CNP-C

Destiny Wholf is a certified Family Nurse Practitioner with experience in child and adolescent psychiatry. She has served as a Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Nurse Practitioner at the Kobacker and Ruppert Center since 2019, working with youth and families experiencing complex behavioral health needs. Prior to becoming a nurse practitioner, Destiny worked as an intensive care and rapid response nurse, bringing a strong acute-care background to her current work in pediatric behavioral health. She is also pursuing additional psychiatric nurse practitioner training to further support her clinical practice.

Social Media and Youth suicide

- ▶ Recent studies indicate a troubling increase in youth suicide rates, with well over 60% increase in suicide death rates among individuals aged 10 to 24 in last 15 years.
- ▶ This increase coincides in timeline with the growing prevalence of social media use among young people
- ▶ Youth are highly suggestible and social media profoundly shapes them by affecting their mental health, social interactions, identity formation, and behavior

What is - Social media

- ▶ Social media is defined as any digital tools or applications that allow users to interact socially, and can be distinguished from traditional media (eg, television) by the fact that users can both consume and create content.
- ▶ Under this broad definition, “social media” may include social networking sites (eg, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok), text messaging and messaging apps, social gaming tools, YouTube, and more.

Youth and social media

- ▶ Ninety-seven percent of U.S. adolescents, defined here as individuals aged 10-19 years, report going online daily.
- ▶ The five most popular online platforms among this group are the social media platforms YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook.
- ▶ Thirty-five percent of adolescents say that they are on at least one of these platforms “almost constantly” (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Social media influence on youth

- ▶ Social circuitry is one of the survival tracks and heighten sensitivity to social information, as obtained from social media .
- ▶ Important developmental tasks of adolescence include the establishment of intimate peer relationships, self esteem(influenced by peer acceptance/rejection), self identity
- ▶ Social media influence is hastened as: peers are constantly available, personal information is displayed publicly and permanently, and quantifiable peer feedback is instantaneously provided in the form of “likes” and “views”

Teen brain

- ▶ Think of the teen brain as a highway under construction. The emotional expressway – the limbic system – is wide open for speeding.
- ▶ The pre-frontal cortex – the brain's traffic-control center responsible for judgment and impulse control – is still being built.
- ▶ This imbalance means that the fast emotional traffic often outruns the signals from the control center, resulting in mishaps in judgment and impulsive reactionary behavior
- ▶ Majority of suicides and suicide attempts in youth are reactionary as well escape responses to intense negative emotions.

Preteen Brain

- ▶ Between the ages of 10 and 12, changes in the brain make social rewards—compliments on a new hairstyle, laughter from a classmate—start to feel a lot more satisfying.
- ▶ Specifically, receptors for the “happy hormones” oxytocin and dopamine multiply in a part of the brain called the ventral striatum, making preteens extra sensitive to attention and admiration from others.

Passivity leads to isolation

- ▶ Most time spent on social media is not active or social — it is passive.
- ▶ Trial data show that only a small fraction of time on Meta platforms involves engaging with friends — about 10- 15 %.
- ▶ The rest is mostly scrolling and watching rather than interacting.
- ▶ Unfortunately, majority of interaction is an illusion of connection while actually deepening a sense of isolation.
- ▶ And isolation makes you more vulnerable and hinders any resilience.

Sensitivity of comparison

- ▶ Social comparison may be another risk associated with adolescents' social media use.
- ▶ Individuals frequently engage in selective self-presentation on social media, resulting in a stream of posts and images that are often carefully crafted to portray users in a positive light.
- ▶ This may lead some youth to engage in negative social comparisons regarding their own accomplishments, abilities, or appearance.
- ▶ Studies have shown that higher levels of online social comparison are associated with depressive symptoms, poor self esteem, hopelessness, which in turn increase suicidal behaviors

FOMO

- ▶ Two cross-sectional surveys of American and German university students, respectively, found that students who spent more time on the social media platform Facebook were more likely to endorse feeling envy or sensing that others in their social network were better off than they were.
- ▶ The term “FOMO” – fear of missing out – has been defined as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent,” and has been associated with increased stress and pressure related to social media use.

Search for validation and Social media

- ▶ One of the main worries is that youths are repeatedly driven to engage in social media use by their increased sensitivity to social feedback and a strong need to belong .
- ▶ Receiving likes on social media is experienced as socially rewarding by recipients , results in temporary increases in self-esteem , and is reported to provide youth with a sense of belonging
- ▶ Furthermore, not receiving feedback can be experienced as social rejection and can reduce self-esteem .
- ▶ Adolescence is a developmental period during which both reward and rejection sensitivity are particularly strong and have, respectively, been linked to increased impulsive behavior like self harm, suicide

Increase feeling of inadequacy

- ▶ As Sara scrolled through images of seemingly perfect lives, she felt increasingly inadequate.
- ▶ Envy, insecurity and fear of missing out chipped away at her confidence.
- ▶ At the same time, social media encouraged constant self-monitoring, as she tracked her likes, comments and appearance online.
- ▶ Research links this kind of inward focus to higher levels of anxiety, obsessive ruminations, hopelessness and increase risk of suicidal behaviors.

Social media and body image

- ▶ A systematic review of 20 studies found that use of social media was associated with body image concerns and disordered eating.
- ▶ In a randomized study, female participants reported more negative mood after just 10 minutes of browsing their social media account compared with those who browsed an appearance-neutral control website.
- ▶ Moreover, participants who were high in appearance comparison tendency reported an increased desire to change the appearance of their face, hair or skin.

Social media, poor sleep, Impulsivity

- ▶ An analysis of US annual survey data found an abrupt increase in the proportion of adolescents getting insufficient sleep with more than 40% sleeping less than 7 hours most nights.
- ▶ The study also showed an exposure-response relationship between daily electronic media use beyond 2 or more hours per day, and insufficient sleep.
- ▶ An analysis of survey data from Ontario found that 63.6% of 5242 students aged 11-20 years slept less than recommended

Social media and poor sleep

- ▶ 14-day, randomized, crossover experimental study under well-controlled conditions, use of electronic screens before bedtime was shown to disrupt sleep in multiple ways: longer time to fall asleep and decreased evening sleepiness, reduced melatonin secretion, circadian clock delay, reduced amount and delay in rapid eye movement sleep, and reduced next-morning alertness..
- ▶ Of note, the mere presence of portable screen-based media devices in the bedroom was shown to disrupt sleep, possibly related to the temptation to check media devices when they are present or owing to a conditioned response involving increased arousal.

Poor sleep and suicide risk

- ▶ Poor sleep is an **independent and modifiable risk factor** for suicide.
- ▶ A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis of 19 studies (628,525 adolescents with sleep disturbances vs. 567,746 controls) found that adolescents with sleep disturbances were **3.10 times more likely to attempt suicide** and **2.28 times more likely to experience suicidal ideation** than controls, even without diagnosed psychiatric disorders
- ▶ **Cognitive effects:** Poor sleep can impair decision-making and increase risk-taking, which may contribute to suicide attempts
- ▶ **Mood regulation:** Sleep disturbances are linked to depression, anxiety, and irritability, all of which are suicide risk factors.
- ▶ **Biological stress:** Sleep loss disrupts stress hormone regulation and brain regions involved in emotional control.

Time on social media

- ▶ In a study focusing on 12- to 15-year-olds in the United States, spending three hours a day using social media was linked to a higher risk of mental health concerns. That study was based on data collected from more than 6,500 participants.
- ▶ Another study looked at data on more than 12,000 teens in England between the ages of 13 to 16. The researchers found that using social media more than three hours a day predicted poor mental health and well-being in teens.

Time on social media

- ▶ Spending more than 2 hours a day on social networking sites and personal electronic devices results in high rates of suicidality and depressive symptoms among adolescent girls.
- ▶ Although youth who sustained high levels of face-to-face socializing were relatively protected against the negative consequences of too much time online.

Who is more vulnerable

- ▶ Conflictive parent-child relationships, such as poor communication and frequent serious arguments, increase social media influence.
- ▶ Parents' media use has been found to be associated with impaired parent-child communication, characterized by slower, less attentive, and more passive interaction with their children
- ▶ Severe SMU in parents has been associated with problematic SMU in their children.
- ▶ Increased parental internet use has been observed to lead to less parent-child interaction and less sensitivity to the child's wishes

Who is more vulnerable

- ▶ The relationship between SMU and depression/suicide risk may be significantly mediated by personality traits such as jealousy, rumination, extraversion, and cyber-bullying, perceived social support, negative comparison in social settings, and distorted body image with increased physical anxiety .
- ▶ individual strengths and vulnerabilities that may predispose certain adolescents to engage with and respond to social media in adaptive or maladaptive ways.

Mere presence of phone

- ▶ Youth do increasingly interact online rather than in person, and smartphones can interfere even with face-to-face interactions via what has been termed “phubbing”: attending to one’s phone when in the presence of others.
- ▶ A recent empirical field study showed that even the mere presence of phones on a table caused participants who were randomly assigned to that condition to feel more distracted and have lower enjoyment during social interactions compared with those who were randomized to putting their phone away.
- ▶ Phone use was also found to predict distraction, which in turn predicted greater boredom, isolation and increasing mental health risks and suicide.

Social media influence

- ▶ Youth communicate thoughts of suicidality and self-harm behaviors online, including sharing images of self-inflicted injuries. Explicit depiction of self-injury — particularly cutting — on social media is common, as shown by site content studies that found photographs or live videos of self-injurious behavior, many of which had no warnings about graphic content.
- ▶ Of particular concern were viewers' comments, which typically contained positive feedback or personal disclosures about self-injury experiences, and rarely offered encouragement or discussion of recovery. Such findings show the potential for mental illness romanticizing and messaging that normalizes self-harm, suicidal behaviors among youth.
- ▶ Indeed, a systematic review that included 26 studies (using qualitative, descriptive or cross-sectional methodology) found that social media platforms included normalization of self-harm behavior, discussions about practical issues regarding suicidality and live depictions of self-harm acts.

What Social media can do to youth

- ▶ Distract from homework, exercise and family activities.
- ▶ Disrupt sleep.
- ▶ Lead to information that is biased or not correct.
- ▶ Become a means to spread rumors or share too much personal information.
- ▶ Lead some teens to form views about other people's lives or bodies that aren't realistic.
- ▶ Expose some teens to online predators, who might try to exploit or extort them.
- ▶ Expose some teens to cyberbullying, which can raise the risk of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Social media and youth suicides

- ▶ Social media may act as an amplifier of known risks for suicide in youth, such as sleep disturbance or insomnia, distress, depression, hopelessness, withdrawal or social isolation, social stressors, bullying, and exposure to suicidal behavior in inspiring role models.
- ▶ This relationship can interact with more consistent individual risk factors such as sex, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, prior suicidal behavior, and prior adverse experiences.

Social Media and Youth suicides

- ▶ **Exposure to cyberbullying:** Teens experiencing cyberbullying (e.g., Instagram) have **68% prevalence of suicidal ideation** compared to 12% in non-cyberbullied peers (n=15,600).
- ▶ **Engagement with harmful content:** Viewing or interacting with self-harm or suicide-related materials correlates strongly with increased risk. For example, teens following 10+ self-harm accounts are **3.1x more likely to attempt suicide**.

Social media and youth suicides

- ▶ **Platform-Specific Risks**
- ▶ **TikTok:** Users aged 10-17 are **40% more likely** to report suicidal ideation.
- ▶ **Snapchat:** Users aged 13-17 show a **35% higher suicide attempt rate** than average users.
- ▶ **Instagram:** Exposure via the 'Explore' page increases body image issues with a subsequent **41% higher suicide risk** in teen girls.
- ▶ **Social behaviors:** Escalated social media flirting in distressed teens increases risk by **2.7x**; doomscrolling correlates with **2.3x higher suicidal ideation**.

Positive social media influence

- ▶ Providing a platform for social engagement, social media initiatives could promote positive mental health. For instance, teenagers in O'Reilly et al. (2018) described participating in 'challenges' to improve their wellbeing, like posting a photo everyday of something personally uplifting. They then 'tagged' friends to participate, spreading positivity.
- ▶ Social media could also be a place for discussion around mental health. Viewing celebrities' recovery stories reduced isolation amongst individuals facing similar experiences, (O'Reilly et al., 2018) and enabled formation of support networks for those with related diagnoses.
- ▶ Educational resources on maintaining positive mental health were accessible and spread quickly online.

Positive influence by social media

- ▶ Further, social media can have protective effects against suicidal behavior among at-risk adolescents (Nesi et al., 2022).
- ▶ It can provide a platform for social connection and support as well as a place to find resources for help (e.g., Dodemaide et al., 2019; Weinstein et al., 2021).

Positive social media influence

- ▶ Several studies explored the value of online discussion forums, moderated by healthcare professionals, for those suffering from physical and mental health problems (Fergie et al., 2016; Kendal et al., 2017).
- ▶ Users valued the massive support network provided, and having a safe space to share their feelings. Importantly, forums helped individuals overcome fears of seeking professional help, with reassurance from others that this had aided in their recovery (Kendal et al., 2017).
- ▶ Similarly, social media could be an effective platform for education around sensitive topics (Aragao et al., 2018).

Positive social media influence

► Targeted interventions:

- **6-week social media interventions** reduced suicidal ideation by ~22%.
- Restricting social media use (parental control) reduces suicidal ideation by 30%.
- Mental health apps (e.g., Sanvello, MoodMission) increase connectedness to support groups for 58% of users.

► Platform-driven safety features:

- 'Suicide prevention reminders' on Facebook reduced harmful content searches by 60%.
- TikTok's Mental Health Hub served **2.1 million teens** accessing support within 6 months.
- Negative content flags, digital well-being tools, emotion detection features, and influencer-led campaigns have all shown measurable reductions in risk and increased mental health awareness.

How to protect the kids

- ▶ **Set rules and limits as needed.** This helps prevent social media from getting in the way of activities, sleep, meals or homework.
- ▶ For example, you could make a rule about not using social media until homework is done. Or you could set a daily time limit for social media use.
- ▶ You also could choose to keep social media off-limits during certain times. These times might include during family meals and an hour before bed.
- ▶ Set an example by following these rules yourself. And let your teen know what the consequences will be if your rules aren't followed.
- ▶ **Manage any challenging behaviors.** If your teen's social media use starts to challenge your rules or your sense of what's appropriate, talk with your teen about it. You also could connect with parents of your teen's friends or take a look at your teen's internet history.
- ▶ **Turn on privacy settings.** This can help keep your teen from sharing personal information or data that your teen didn't mean to share. Each of your teen's social media accounts likely has privacy setting that can be changed.
- ▶ **Monitor your teen's accounts.** The American Psychological Association recommends you regularly review your child's social media use during the early teen years.

How to protect your kids

- ▶ One way to monitor is to follow or "friend" your child's social accounts. As your teen gets older, you can choose to monitor your teen's social media less. Your teen's maturity level can help guide your decision.
- ▶ **Have regular talks with your teen about social media.** These talks give you chances to ask how social media has been making your teen feel. Encourage your teen to let you know if something online worries or bothers your teen.
- ▶ Regular talks offer you chances to give your child advice about social media too. For example, you can teach your teen to question whether content is accurate. You also can explain that social media is full of images about beauty and lifestyle that are not realistic.
- ▶ **Be a role model for your teen.** You might want to tell your child about your own social media habits. That can help you set a good example and keep your regular talks from being one-sided.

How to protect your kids

- ▶ **Explain what's not OK.** Remind your teen that it's hurtful to gossip, spread rumors, bully or harm someone's reputation — online or otherwise.
- ▶ Also remind your teen not to share personal information with strangers online. This includes people's addresses, telephone numbers, passwords, and bank or credit card numbers.
- ▶ **Encourage face-to-face contact with friends.** This is even more important for teens prone to social anxiety.

How to help

- ▶ A motivational interviewing approach may be useful to help young people start to make changes in their pattern of online behavior.
- ▶ Motivational interviewing is an intervention with established effectiveness for adolescents with substance use, which could be useful for youth who appear to have poor self-control in their use of social media or smartphone.
- ▶ This approach should involve open, nonjudgmental exploration of all aspects of a youth's digital life, including positive and negative. Some youth might benefit from habit reversal training to address compulsive use, including having daily “non-screen” time” that can be progressively increased.
- ▶ Sharing evidence that a randomized controlled trial found that participants assigned to not using social media reported significantly greater “life satisfaction” and positive emotions after 1 week, compared with controls who were told to continue using the site as usual, may be helpful in effecting change.

Social media influence on mental health in youth- Factors

- ▶ Platform content
- ▶ Time spend
- ▶ Individual traits
- ▶ Personal life
- ▶ Biggest of all- Regulation or lack of it by caregivers

KEY POINTS IN PREVENTION

- ▶ To reduce adolescent suicide risk with social media use, educate adolescents on safe communication practices.
- ▶ Developing a family media plan may help adolescents to use social media more safely.
- ▶ Key stakeholders can assist by targeting suicide prevention efforts to certain social media users.

Q & A

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THANK YOU!