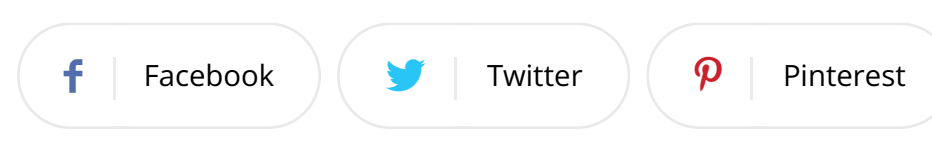


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Magazine

Social Media And Your Sanity

By **Cathy Cassinos-Carr** - March 26, 2014



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People are often reluctant to admit it. But if you coax them a little, the truth invariably rolls out: Yes, those voluminous vacation photos posted on Facebook—or cheery tweets about new jobs or relationships—sometimes makes them feel lousy. This is not just anecdotal mumbo jumbo. When some 600 Facebook users were surveyed in a recent study conducted by two German universities, more than one-third of the respondents reported predominantly negative feelings, with “lack of attention” and “loneliness” among the most frequent complaints. But the most commonly cited feeling was envy—with travel and leisure, social interactions and happiness identified as the three most common triggers.

The median age of survey respondents was 24. But emotional fallout from social media is not limited to the young. The two individuals who stepped forth to share their stories of Facebook envy for this story are in their 40s and 50s—and I, being in the latter category, confess to a certain bittersweet feeling that sometimes stings when I view posts from friends who are living large in New York City. I say “bittersweet” because while I am genuinely happy for them, it’s a painful reminder of the exciting life I left behind, and often miss.

A comparison issue

Not surprisingly—and as my personal anecdote suggests—it’s the “comparison” aspect of social media that tends to wreak the most havoc.

“It’s human nature for us to compare ourselves to others, and to compare what we consider our weakest or worst parts with others’ strengths,” says Dawn T. Barry Hulme, a licensed marriage and family therapist and founder of Windows of Hope Counseling Center in Roseville and Sacramento. The problem with social media, she says, is that it often invites a skewed portrait of a person’s life, as most tend to display only the pretty, smiley-faced side—everything coming up roses. Indeed, researchers from the German Facebook study found that most users shared only positive things about themselves.

“With clients, I help them know that people are creating a *story* on social media, one that’s usually more in a positive light than negative,” says Hulme. To counteract that, Hulme works with her clients to acknowledge *their* unique gifts and strengths—to focus on the positive—instead of comparing themselves negatively with others.

While the social-media environment can encourage self-promotional or narcissistic behavior—another finding of the German study—even ordinary posts can conjure up envy or sadness for some.

For Susan (not her real name), a Facebook user and 50-something single who occasionally gets the blues about not having a husband and family, “Seeing other people’s get-togethers and vacations and family celebrations can drag me down, especially when my mood is already a bit dark. I don’t have many of the things that most people take for granted, so there’s lots of potential for envy and regret.”

Another local Facebook user in her mid-40s who also spoke on condition of anonymity says she sometimes gets envious “when I see people posting about their amazing vacations, jobs or homes. It’s natural to compare yourself to others, but it’s a bad and dangerous idea. Facebook tends to reinforce that feeling, to a degree. The last thing I want is to get depressed over someone’s post.”

Teens, Tweens and Young Adults

Among her clients, who are “little-little all the way to 80 years old,” Hulme has observed that social media is an equal-opportunity employer, affecting people of all ages. “It’s across the board, all the way from teenagers to older clients,” she says. While the “comparison” aspect of social media has the power to make people of any age feel bad, Hulme says there are certain themes she sees more frequently among younger clients, including more cyberbullying and feeling distressed about being “unfriended.” Another common theme: emotional fallout from negative posts others have written about them.

Dan Delaney, a licensed marriage and family therapist who works primarily with tweens and adolescents (the under-21 crowd) at Dignity Health Medical Foundation in Sacramento, says teenagers may be particularly prone to nasty online swipes. “People—especially teenagers—will say some really extreme things online that they wouldn’t if it were a face-to-face exchange,” he says. “I think because they don’t see the effects of what they say, people often can be harsher and more intense, more spiteful.” Those with low self-esteem may be especially vulnerable to social media’s effects, he notes. “When a person’s self-esteem is heavily reliant on external validation, social media may be more likely to conjure up bad feelings, such as when they don’t get a lot of ‘likes.’”

Another hot button for his young clients, Delaney says, is “seeing that someone [on Facebook messenger] has read their message, but hasn’t responded. I see a lot of young people really stressing out when this happens.” Stress is part of depression, he adds, suggesting the psychological cost of negative social-media experiences may run high for some.

One University of Michigan study, published in the journal PLOS One last August, suggests some young adults may derive more harm than good from social networking tools such as Facebook, the basis of the study. Using a pool of 82 college-aged participants, researchers sent text messages five times a day for two weeks to explore Facebook’s impact on the two components of subjective well-being: how people feel moment to moment, and how satisfied they are with their lives. The finding? Declines in subjective well-being on both counts. The more participants used Facebook, the worse they felt the next time the researchers text-messaged them. Researchers in the German study were also able to establish a negative link between the envy that bubbles up while on Facebook and users’ general life satisfaction.

It’s not all about facebook

With some 1.19 billion monthly active users as of September 2013, Facebook is the world’s No. 1 social networking tool. But with Snapchat, Twitter, Pinterest and dozens of other popular social-media sites, it hardly stands alone as the only potential perpetrator of foul feelings. Eclipsing all of them in terms of envy-mongering, some say, is Instagram, a site whose near-singular focus is on sumptuous photos, inspiring users to create “art-directed magazine layouts of their lives, as if everyone is suddenly Diana Vreeland,” as one New York Times reporter put it. In 2013 alone, Instagram grew from 80 million to 150 million users worldwide, and it’s particularly popular among the younger generation, according to experts interviewed for this article (as well as a few parents whose brains I picked). “Teens are getting into Instagram and away from Facebook, and my older clients [are more commonly on Facebook,” says Hulme.

But it’s not so much about the site as the person who is using it—and the hows and the whys matter, too. Passive users who mainly follow others’ posts are more likely to wind up feeling bad than are active communicators, most studies show. Researchers in the German study hypothesized that the intensity of passive following on Facebook is negatively associated with life satisfaction, and is also positively associated with feelings of envy

more good than harm?

For many, the upsides of social media far outweigh the bad. Feelings of connectivity, increased self-esteem, decreased loneliness and warm feelings of nostalgia are among the benefits cited in some studies, and by some individuals interviewed for this article. As Susan, the 50-something who shared her feelings of Facebook envy, puts it, “Facebook is a double-edged sword. I’ve also made connections with people whose posts brighten my day, and those connections often lead to actual face-to-face meetings, every one of which has been wonderful. I’ve even been invited to things I wouldn’t have been invited to before, and I am always touched by the way people step up on Facebook to support people who are having a tough time.”

But what if the bad outweighs the good? Should we withdraw from social media entirely? Or are there less-drastric measures we can take to protect our mental health and increase the odds of a positive experience?

Delaney and Hulme offer these tips.

- Do a self-survey. “Ask yourself : What are your reasons for using social media?” offers Delaney. “Is it an innocuous reason, such as growing your business network or staying connected to family and friends? Or are you looking for validation looking to get your ego stroked?” Once you determine what you’re looking for, you can set more realistic expectations, or rein in usage if needed.
- Curb the comparisons. “Ask yourself, ‘Am I comparing my perceived weaker areas to someone’s strengths?’” suggests Hulme. If you are, she says, it’s important to acknowledge that and to manage it. Simply reminding yourself that the majority of social-media users are presenting highly glossed versions of themselves should help.
- Monitor your thoughts. Pay attention to whether you’re having negative thoughts about yourself or a fluctuation in your self-worth, or if your mood changes for the worse when using social media, suggests Delaney. And make sure you’re not replacing face-to-face interactions with time in the virtual world. “When interactions are stacked really high on the social-media side and low on human interaction, people are more vulnerable to a negative emotional experience,” says Delaney.
- Trim the fat. Who’s bumming you out? Who’s making you feel bad? “If it’s not working for you,” Delaney says, “trim the fat—both on social media and in real life.”
- Aim for moderation. While one of her clients had to cut off from social media completely, that doesn’t work well—nor is it necessary—for most, says Hulme. “It’s all about moderation,” she says. A weekly check-in, instead of daily or multiple daily visits, may be helpful for those who are struggling with less-than-savory social-media experiences.

keep it real

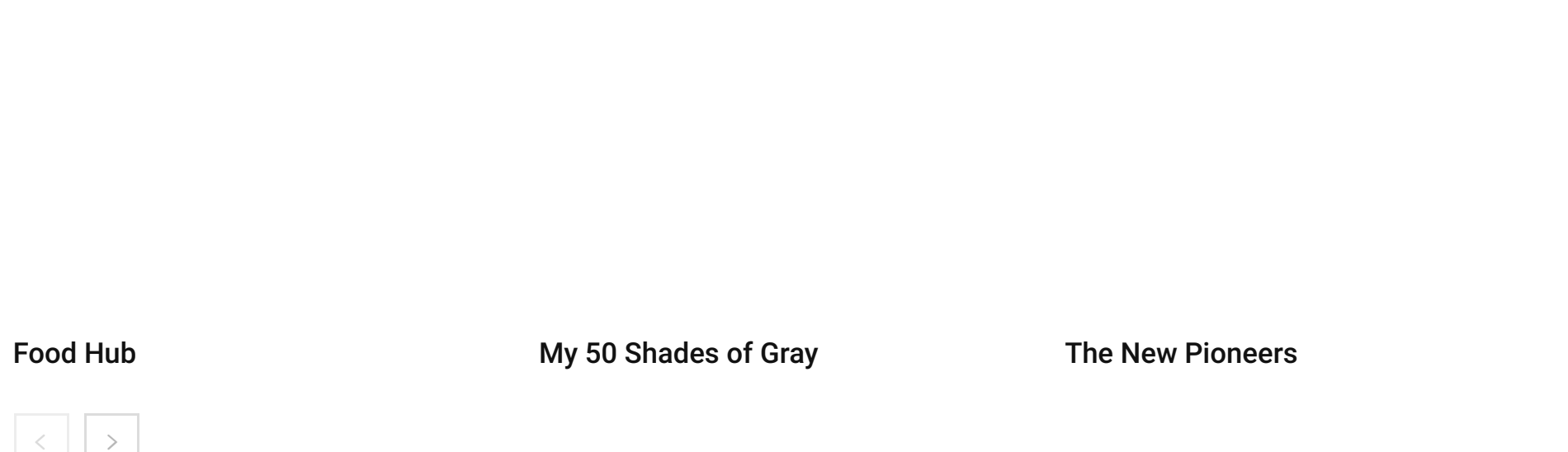
Above all, Hulme says, keeping it real—posting your tribulations right alongside your triumphs—may help to improve the social-media experience for everyone.

“Sometimes people have fears of posting something that seems negative,” she says. “But if we would post more *real* experiences, as I like to call them, and model that behavior, it would reduce the comparisons and may possibly generate support.”



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JULY 2023						
M	T	W	T	F	S	S
26	27	28	29	30	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

- MON 31** **A Taste of the Delta Tasting Tour**
April 15 @ 11:30 am - December 31 @ 3:30 pm
- MON 31** **Exhibit It! A Community Art Exhibit**
July 5 @ 11:30 am - August 18 @ 5:00 pm
- MON 31** **"Meow Meow Meow" The Cat, Wild and Domestic.**
July 7 - July 31
- MON 31** **Slice: A Juried Exhibit of Regional Art 2023**
July 11 @ 11:30 am - August 20 @ 5:00 pm
- MON 31** **Geeks Who Drink Trivia Night at The Flamingo House Social Club**
July 17 @ 8:00 pm - September 25 @ 10:00 pm

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