Be Kind Online Guide

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Kindness and Social Media: How Are They Connected?

What's your daily screen time? How often do you check social media? TikTok has more than 100 million accounts in the U.S., and according to 2021 Pew Research Center data, more than half of social media users visit sites like Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook (which has over 2.9 billion accounts) every day.[1] Paired with the popularity of virtual reality and immersive platforms, we spend more and more of our lives online.

While social media originally began as a way to connect with people we already know, the experience is now centered around content creation, entertainment, and escapism. However, despite distance and time, these platforms also give us the ability to interact with the people and causes that we care about and, increasingly, people we wouldn't otherwise meet. The same norms, and the same kindness skills we would use offline, should guide our actions online.

Because social media has an array of uses, and can in some cases be problematic and harmful, it's important to talk about our own relationship to social media use. Practices and skills developed as part of a Kind Campus can help us navigate the difficulties of social media and respond to challenges with kindness. Let's begin by asking ourselves some questions:

Developing Awareness

- Do you catch yourself not being able to log off? Try working, sleeping, or doing any other activity in silence. Do you feel bored? Stressed? Think about how that lack of stimulation affects you.

- Ask yourself why you're posting. Is it for likes? Are you finding value in sharing this?

- Be intentional about what you consume. Is it making you happier? Is it enjoyable? Is it adding value to your day? Unfollow, block, or mute people/accounts that are unkind or don't add joy to your life.

- Be mindful of who you interact with online. Do you know them in real life? Be careful about talking to strangers online, even if they seem legitimate.

- Try to keep big feelings (emotional attachment) out of others' social media. Most people don't consider the impact of what they post, so try not to give them too much power.

- Ask for support and support others in times of need. Vulnerability is a transformative quality that deepens our sense of love and belonging, inside and outside of social media spaces.[2]

- The internet can be a place for criticism. Try not to interact with social media during times when you feel as though you can't handle seeing or receiving hate.

- Information online can be seen by anyone, so be careful about posting identifiable information about yourself such as where you live, your full name, or your school.

- If you see an emergency situation online, contact someone you trust for help (a parent, teacher, etc.).

Internet and Intentionality

Kindness requires knowledge and action. Social media gives us knowledge of what's going on in our friends' lives, and we have the power to use it to support others, like by sharing positive comments and cheering on our friends. Using social media in this purposeful way may lead to a "sense of emotional connection" and, ultimately, happiness.[3]

Because social media is about speed, we can easily allow our unconscious brain to take the driver's seat while our negativity bias discounts vast amounts of positive and neutral content we see. The pressure to present in a certain way can lead to being unkind to ourselves. For example, studies show that approximately half of young adults feel unattractive when comparing themselves to idealized images, which leads to habitually deleting photos, comments, or even accounts.[4]

Many assume that the best way to avoid negativity caused by social media is to cut usage out of our lives entirely. However, researchers found that an adolescent's mental well-being actually improves up until approximately one hour of screen time.[5] For instance, young people find community on the internet regarding big issues like depression and sexuality.[6] Therefore, it's best to find a healthy balance in how often we interact with social media.

In order to undermine unkind impulses, we can practice labeling our thoughts. Noticing a thought and acknowledging it with a statement like, "Oh, I'm feeling self-critical after seeing this post," helps bring awareness to our thoughts before we take an action. Then, we can utilize a positive affirmation such as, "I am more than the images I post," to confirm our humanity and self-worth. This helps us to choose kind reactions.

We can also practice non-attachment, acknowledging that we are not the person we see on screen—and that's okay! Take pride in your personality and who you are. And don't feel the need to conform to what is cool, interesting, or trendy. Because in the end, social media is for you to feel more connected, not more isolated.

Lastly, virtual emotions are contagious. Each positive Facebook post—even those simply regarding the weather—yields an additional 1.75 positive posts amongst one's friends. A negative post yields 1.29 more negative posts by friends.[7] We are more likely to see positive content if we make positive content. So post with kind intention, because it may brighten someone's day!

Kindness and Social Media Dilemmas

A new school account appears on social media, but when you look at it, you realize each post makes fun of individual students. Someone is using this account to harm others. Who do you talk to about this? How would it feel if one of those posts was about you?

You are in bed during a school night scrolling through YouTube shorts. These clips are making you feel less stressed about a test tomorrow, yet, you can't help but notice that it's getting late.

You notice your friend edits themselves to look different in a photo they post, and they post as though this is how they always look. Do you talk to them about it? What do you say?

Want to Know More?

Konner Sauve used Instagram as a tool for kindness at his high school, offering a great source of inspiration.

Watch

Dylan Marron's 2018 TED Talk showcases how Marron reaches out to people who have left negative comments on his social media posts, creating a connection between those who might disagree.

Watch

This 2020 Pew Research article "Parenting Kids in the Age of Screens" provides data to inform discussions about technology at home.

Watch

In an article from MarketWatch, neuroscientist Arash Javanbakht proposes biological reasons why we can be emotionally vulnerable to the information we see in the media, such as how our negativity bias could be rooted in tribalism. He also describes how politicians and the media can expose our vulnerability.

Watch

The Pew Research Center's study "Crossing the Line: What Counts as Online Harassment?" demonstrates people's differing perceptions of harassment, in conjunction with the factors of race and gender. This can be used as a tool to inform your own opinion of where to draw the line and as a foundation to create a Virtual Kind Code of Conduct.

References

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