

Anticipatory Guidance: Media and Mental Health

Adolescents are spending increasing amounts of time with technology and often turn to media to express how they feel and to have their feelings validated, such as listening to sad music when they are feeling depressed or expressing joy about a recent accomplishment through social media. Subsequently, it is important to be aware of what types of media messages adolescents are consuming and how these messages affect their mental health and well-being.

What the Evidence Says

- Excessive screen media use can have significant effects on an adolescent's mental health. Such use has been associated with general psychological distress,¹ anxiety,² depression,³ and suicidal ideation.⁴ LGBTQ adolescents are particularly vulnerable⁵ and cyberbullying can also have a severe effect on adolescent mental health.⁶
- Continually positive online self-presentations may lead adolescents (who compare themselves to peers they see) to believe that they should also be continually happy—leading to self-esteem issues⁷ and pressure to post curated images on social media.⁸
- Fear of missing out (FOMO) can cause adolescents to feel pressure to keep up with the latest online trends, or to post updates on social media that portray an image that may not reflect how they think and feel.⁹
- Adolescent's music preferences may indicate that a teen is struggling with deeper emotional issues, as music is often used by youth as a coping mechanism.¹⁰

Recommendations

- Advise parents to be mindful of who their teen follows online and what kinds of images they see. Encourage parents to talk to their teen about how people edit and filter photos, and only share their “best selves” on social media. Discuss how these images and posts do not tell the entire story of how a person lives or feels all the time.
- Recommend that parents guide their teen's media choices to use apps and view content that positively influences their life, and supports healthy relationships, their creativity, and who they are and want to become.
- Recommend that parents talk to their teen about FOMO, and help them focus on things that are happening outside of the screen. Encouraging a mix of both online and offline activities may help teens feel less connected to their phones and online life.
- If parents are concerned about their teen's mental health, refer to a behavioral health specialist for a thorough psychological evaluation as soon as possible.

Future Directions

Suicide is one of the leading causes of adolescent mortality. We need to continue to promote screening for underlying mental health issues in adolescents throughout their development, especially as they spend more time online.

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Suggested Reading

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