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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY ON MENTAL HEALTH

In the dynamic landscape of modern medicine, the influence of technology and social media on mental health is undeniable. As physicians, it's crucial to understand the complex interplay between these digital platforms and the human mind. This article delves into the multifaceted dimensions of this relationship, examining its evolution, effects, and potential strategies for mitigating adverse outcomes.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL ERA AND THE HUMAN MIND

In the era of rapid technological advancement, our minds are continually exposed to an influx of information and stimuli. This digital revolution has reshaped how we communicate, consume information, and perceive the world around us. As our reliance on technology deepens, it becomes imperative to scrutinise its impact on mental well-being.

Social media platforms have transformed the way we connect and interact with others, fostering virtual communities and amplifying social dynamics. From Facebook to Instagram, Twitter to TikTok, these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, collaboration, and networking. However, they also present challenges in managing privacy, comparison, and digital overload.

MENTAL HEALTH & INCREASED USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

The psychiatric risks associated with

prolonged exposure to social media and technology are diverse and far-reaching. One notable concern is the exacerbation of preexisting mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder. Studies have shown a correlation between excessive screen time and depressive symptoms, attributed to factors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and decreased face-to-face interaction. For individuals with bipolar disorder, disruptions in sleep patterns caused by late-night screen use can trigger manic episodes or destabilise mood regulation. Furthermore, anxiety disorders, including generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) and social anxiety disorder (SAD), are significantly impacted by the pervasive nature of social media. The constant stream of notifications, likes, and comments can perpetuate feelings of hypervigilance and social scrutiny, amplifying anxiety symptoms.

Moreover, the phenomenon of "doomscrolling," wherein individuals compulsively consume negative news and distressing content online, can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and exacerbate catastrophic thinking patterns.

Another concerning implication is the potential for technology addiction, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) and Smartphone Addiction Disorder (SAD) are recognised as behavioural addictions characterised by excessive gaming or smartphone use, respectively. These addictive behaviours can

lead to functional impairment, social withdrawal, and neglect of real-life responsibilities.

Additionally, emerging research suggests a link between excessive social media use and disordered eating behaviours, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The pervasive nature of body image ideals portrayed on social media platforms can contribute to distorted self-perception and unhealthy weight control practices. Moreover, exposure to content promoting extreme dieting, detox teas, and cosmetic procedures can fuel body dissatisfaction and perpetuate harmful behaviours associated with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. The implications of these psychiatric risks extend beyond individual well-being to encompass broader societal concerns, including healthcare utilisation, academic performance, and social cohesion.

TEENAGERS, SELF-ESTEEM, AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterised by heightened self-awareness and a quest for identity, making teenagers particularly susceptible to the influences of social media on self-esteem. The curated nature of social media profiles often fosters unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and popularity, leading adolescents to engage in social comparison and experience feelings of inadequacy.

The prevalence of image-centric

platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat emphasises physical appearance and external validation, further exacerbating self-esteem issues among teenagers. Research has shown a correlation between excessive social media use and negative self-perception, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating behaviours, particularly among adolescent girls. Additionally, the pursuit of online validation through likes, comments, and followers can create a perpetual cycle of seeking external affirmation, undermining authentic self-esteem and fostering dependency on digital feedback. The pressure to maintain a carefully curated online persona can also contribute to feelings of inauthenticity and disconnection from one's true self.

Encouraging teenagers to cultivate offline relationships, pursue meaningful activities, and engage in self-reflection can help counteract the negative effects of social media on self-esteem. Moreover, fostering resilience, self-compassion, and a strong sense of identity can empower teenagers to navigate the digital landscape.

TECH AND TEENAGE SUICIDE

The rise of technology and social media has coincided with concerning trends in teenage suicide rates. Researchers have observed a troubling association between increased screen time and suicide risk among adolescents. The constant connectivity afforded by smartphones and social media platforms has blurred the boundaries between online and offline interactions, creating new challenges for mental health professionals.

Cyberbullying, defined as the use of digital communication to harass, intimidate, or humiliate others, has emerged as a significant risk factor for suicidal ideation and behaviour among youth. Victims of cyberbullying may experience feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and worthlessness, leading to an increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts. The anonymity afforded by online platforms can embolden perpetrators to engage in more aggressive and harmful behaviour, exacerbating the psychological distress experienced by victims.

The phenomenon of "suicide contagion" on social media platforms

has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Exposure to posts or content depicting suicidal behaviour or self-harm may inadvertently normalise or glamorise these actions, particularly among impressionable individuals. This contagion effect can contribute to a clustering of suicide attempts within social networks and communities, amplifying the risk of copycat behaviour and escalating the public health impact of suicide. Added to this the proliferation of online communities and forums dedicated to discussing suicide and self-harm poses unique challenges for suicide prevention efforts.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELF-IMAGE

The prevalence of filtered photos, edited images, and curated lifestyles on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat can create unrealistic beauty standards and foster feelings of inadequacy among users. Research has shown a correlation between excessive social media use and negative self-image, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating behaviours, particularly among young adults and adolescents. The culture of comparison inherent in social media can exacerbate insecurities and fuel a cycle of self-criticism and validation-seeking behaviour.

The pressure to conform to beauty ideals perpetuated by influencers and celebrities can erode self-confidence and perpetuate harmful beauty standards. Recognising the impact of social media on self-image is essential for promoting body positivity and self-acceptance in the digital age. Encouraging users to curate their online feeds mindfully, follow body-positive accounts, and engage in activities that foster self-esteem and self-care can help mitigate the negative effects.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES

As healthcare providers, we play a crucial role in addressing the mental health challenges posed by technology and social media. By incorporating proactive strategies into our clinical practice, we can empower patients to navigate the digital landscape safely.

Firstly, it's essential to prioritise education and awareness among patients, parents, and caregivers about the potential risks and benefits of technology use. By

fostering digital literacy and critical thinking skills, individuals can make informed decisions about their online behaviours and consumption. Additionally, clinicians can integrate screening protocols for technology and social media use into routine assessments, enabling early detection of problematic patterns and behaviours. The Haddon et al study reveals that children don't simply view the online world through a lens of caution; rather, they actively weigh potential risks against perceived benefits, demonstrating agency and adaptability in their digital experiences. By understanding children as active agents in their digital lives, healthcare professionals can tailor interventions to promote digital literacy and safety effectively. The study also emphasises the pivotal role of parental guidance and education in fostering responsible online behaviour.

Multidisciplinary teams e.g. OT's, school teachers, and technology experts, can facilitate comprehensive care and tailored interventions.

In the South African context, recognising the impact of socioeconomic factors and parental mediation on digital maturity underscores the need for targeted initiatives aimed at bridging the digital divide among youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. Healthcare providers can play a pivotal role in advocating for equitable access to digital resources and education, particularly for underserved communities. By addressing these factors comprehensively, healthcare professionals can contribute to fostering digital inclusivity and ensuring that all young individuals have the opportunity to thrive in an increasingly digitalised world.

By leveraging evidence-based interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based practices, and digital detox strategies, clinicians can empower patients to develop healthier relationships with technology. Moreover, advocating for policy changes and industry regulations aimed at promoting digital well-being and safeguarding user privacy is essential for creating a supportive environment conducive to mental health.

References available on request. 