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Teens & social media

The effect of social media on teenagers has reached a crisis situation. The negative culture surrounding social media is crippling children and needs to be addressed.

One in three adolescents stay up until midnight or later on week nights on their screens using social media. This causes anxiety, depression, paradoxically increasing loneliness and poor self esteem. It leads to decreased and disrupted sleep which is associated with memory loss and poor academic performance. It affects physical health. The connection between the mind and the gut can turn anxiety and depression into nausea, headaches, muscle tension and even tremors. There is even a trend of mimicking illness, after seeing posts about them. People have developed tics, “caught” from media videos of people ticcing.

Social media creates body image issues at a sensitive time when adolescents are forming an image of themselves in their minds. Young girls are comparing themselves to unrealistic photos of “perfect girls” that have actually been photo-shopped. The same with young boys.

Over the last ten years suicides in teenagers have increased rapidly. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the age group 10 to 24 in the USA. One in three teenagers seriously contemplated suicide in 2021 and three in five feel persistently sad and hopeless. This is related to overuse of social media, the development of anxiety, depression and those feelings of inadequate body image. Teenage girls at age 13 who spend more than three hours a day on social media are especially at high risk for suicide as young adults.

Young girls seem particularly sensitive to the “like syndrome” or competition for likes and the “FOMO syndrome” or “fear of missing out”. Social media has a reinforcing nature. To boost self-esteem and feel a sense of belonging in their social circles, young people post content with the hope of receiving positive feedback. The lack of this causes anxiety.

At the same time most teens confess that using social media make them feel worse about themselves but they cannot control the time they spend on these sites because they have become addicted. They are addicts. That is not by chance. Platforms were deliberately designed to be addictive. We know now that using it activates the brain's reward center by releasing dopamine, a "feel-good chemical" linked to pleasurable activities such as sex, food, and social interaction.

Things can't continue like this. Children are being harmed. Professional organisations have to get involved because people, parents and teens, are not going to change. Social media is too attractive and addictive. So everyone's looking for solutions and they range from the severe like trying to control big tech so, where it can be proved, make CEOs responsible for children committing suicide, to urging parents to stop children from being on line.

Both are unlikely to happen.

Parents are key but alone cannot handle the crisis. When a child is ready to drive her mother's car, the mother can make sure the car is ready to be driven by having her mechanic check the brakes, the steering and so on. But she also depends on the regulations that government puts into place that makes the road safe for the child to drive. Governments have a role to play in regulating social media and it's time they step up.

There are many other suggestions. Tech free zones where social media is not allowed. Limiting the amount of likes that a person can receive in order to get rid of the feel-good competitive nature of the beast. Changing platforms so that they function more as a one-on-one communication. Warnings of the dangers, like those on cigarette packs. Public service announcements about the dangers of social media should be obligatory. Limiting both the number of times a post can be shared and the number of people with whom it can be shared, like WhatsApp, can easily be done.

But parents need to talk to their children about the dangers of social media. Studies show that most children are aware of the detrimental effect social media is having on their mental and emotional levels but don't know what to do about it and here a kind but determined word can help.

Parliament needs to get involved to promote mental care resources by and by passing legislation that makes social media companies responsible for the financial cost of taking care of the mental problems they cause. Of course that won't occur in T&T but similar to what happened with cigarette companies, when the cost of treating the diseases they cause became too much for cosmopolitan governments to bear, then their legislators will go after the companies and some of that will rub off on us.

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