Social Media And Mental Health – What's The Issue?

An Advice Guide for Usdaw Members

USDAW EQUALITIES

Technology and Social Media Have Revolutionised the Way We Connect with Each Other...

From our interactions at work, to our social lives and how we consume and share information, technology has created an expectation that people will constantly be 'switched on'.

Social media is great for keeping in touch with people we don't see often, keeping us up-to-date on developments thousands of miles away. At the same time, it can make it difficult to switch off and can have a broader impact on our general wellbeing.

As lines between home and the workplace become blurred, there's a growing movement calling for the 'right to disconnect'. Being aware of these potential negative effects can be the first step to ensuring we stay healthy.

What's the Issue?

In recent years, a number of potentially damaging impacts of social media have been identified.

Anxiety and Depression

Recent research has shown that four out of the five most used social media platforms can actually make anxiety and depression worse.

Seeing friends constantly on holiday or enjoying nights out may leave us with feelings of self-consciousness, low self-esteem and a pursuit of perfectionism which can manifest itself in anxiety disorders.

Sleep

There is a strong link between sleep and mental health. A lack of sleep can be detrimental to mental health, and poor mental health can be damaging to sleep.

Poor sleep is linked to a number of conditions including high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and depression.

Several studies have shown that increased use of social media, as well as the light from phone and tablet screens, can interfere with the body's natural sleeping process. The addictive nature of social media leads to many people waking up during the night to go online, which can bring about a number of subsequent issues.

Body Image

For many years, society has pushed unobtainable perceptions of body image.

As technology has developed, the use of Photoshopped images in magazines and on billboards has increased.

As similar technology is now available on smartphones, and with vast numbers of edited, filtered and increasingly AI-generated images being shared online, there is an endless potential to be drawn into appearance-based comparisons online, often making comparisons with filtered or stage-managed photos.

Online Abuse

Social media sites are increasingly being used to spread online abuse and harmful content. Women, children, Black and LGBT+ people are particularly vulnerable.

Abuse can have a devastating impact on people's mental health and everyday life. Hostile environments on social media, as in other spaces, lead to people modifying their behaviour or interactions, not feeling safe to be themselves, or feeling pushed off social media altogether.

Online platforms should be a safe place for everyone. Social media companies and government need to do much more to tackle illegal content and protect users from harm.

It's Not All Bad...

Of course, there are many positive aspects to social media. Through providing emotional support or evidence of other people's health and experiences, the various platforms can offer a beneficial environment. Many users of social media have commented upon the significant benefit of someone sharing their personal experiences along with practical strategies and coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, by joining specific groups or pages, people can surround themselves with others who have similar thoughts or are experiencing similar difficulties.

Tips to Manage the Risks

Social media is not going away and therefore, whilst we must acknowledge the risks it presents, we cannot pretend that the only solution is to stop using it.

Some widely shared tips to deal with and manage the risks include:

Accept That It's Not Reality

The photos that many of us see online may be heavily Photoshopped, edited or staged. By simply accepting that social media rarely depicts real life, we can remove a lot of the pressure to live up to other people's experiences.

The truth is that only the happiest occasions or the short moments of triumph get shared. The rest of life, the struggles and worries, continue to exist in the real world.

Allocate Set Times for Social Media

Social media platforms are engineered for us to continue scrolling down or clicking on the next link. As a result, we can end up effectively wandering round the online world with no goal or end point. Through spending unrestrained hours online, we are unlikely to focus on, or actively engage with, those we're attempting to connect with. Allocating specific time slots can prevent us endlessly scrolling, so that we use social media as a tool to engage positively with the world around us.

Don't Neglect Your Life Offline

Many people use social media simply as a way to fill the time. Through developing and maintaining relationships and hobbies offline, we will automatically cut out excessive use of social media. Face-to-face interactions and socialising can offer a more complete experience of the world and should not be neglected in favour of digital interactions alone.

Help and Support

There are many sources of help and it is important to contact your GP if you think you may be suffering from poor mental health or any of the other issues mentioned in this leaflet. Usdaw reps can provide advice and support if you are experiencing workplace difficulties.

The following organisations can offer support:

CALM

Raising awareness of suicide and offering guidance, support and a free, confidential helpline for anyone who needs to talk about how they are feeling.

Web: **www.thecalmzone.net**
Tel: **0800 58 58 58**
(5pm-midnight, every day)

Mind

Providing advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem, and campaigning to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding.

Web: **www.mind.org.uk**
email: **info@mind.org.uk**
Tel: **0300 123 3393**

Rethink Mental Illness

Advice and information about living with mental health problems and signposting to local support in your area.

Web: **www.rethink.org**
Tel: **0808 801 0525**
(Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm)

Glitch

Campaigning to end online abuse and promote a safe digital community, with a focus on women and marginalised people. They also provide resources for those who have experienced abuse online.

Web: **www.glitchcharity.co.uk**

Samaritans

24-hour confidential, emotional support for anyone who is feeling troubled.

Web: **www.samaritans.org**
Tel: **116 123**

Stem4

A charity supporting positive mental health in teenagers through information, apps and education.

Web: **www.stem4.org.uk**

The Social vs the Medical Model of Disability

For some time now, disabled people have emphasised that it is not so much their disability that prevents them from fully participating in society, but instead it is the way in which society fails to make adjustments for their disability that excludes them.

This emphasis on changing the barriers put up by society, rather than seeing the disabled person as the 'problem', is known as the 'social model of disability'. In other words, disabled people are people with impairments/ health conditions who are disabled by discrimination, exclusion, prejudice and negative attitudes towards disability. Their impairment is not the problem.

The 'medical model' attributes the problems resulting from a disability to medical conditions alone. It concentrates on a person's impairment. Rather than focusing on the barriers society throws up that prevent disabled people from participating equally, the 'medical model' focuses on what disabled people should do to adapt to fit into the world as it is. If they are unable to adapt, the medical model accepts their exclusion.

For example, while a mobility difficulty can have an adverse effect on a person's ability to walk, the fact that the transport system is inaccessible to them has a far greater effect on their ability to get around.

Unfortunately, the law is rooted in the medical model. It has been rightly criticised for focusing on an individual's impairments and their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities, rather than on getting rid of the barriers society puts in the way of disabled people.

This leaflet is designed to help understand how the law can support disabled members in the workplace, and therefore tends to focus on the medical model.

More Information

Usdaw Nationwide

Wherever you work, an Usdaw rep or official (Area Organiser) is not far away. For further information or assistance, contact your Usdaw rep or local Usdaw office. Alternatively, you can phone our Freephone Helpline **0800 030 80 30** to connect you to your regional office or visit our website: **www.usdaw.org.uk**
You can also write to the Union's Head Office. Just write **FREEPOST USDAW** on the envelope and put it in the post.

Mental Health Campaign

Usdaw takes both the physical and mental wellbeing of its members very seriously. To learn more about Usdaw's Mental Health Campaign – including online courses for members and reps – visit: **www.usdaw.org.uk/MHC**

Scan to learn more about the campaign

Join Usdaw

You can join online at: **www.usdaw.org.uk/JoinUs**

Scan to join today

What Happens Next

Once we process your application, you will receive a membership card with our Helpline telephone number and a New Member's Pack giving details of all the benefits and professional services available to you.

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Stock photography, posed by models

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