How do I keep my social media use healthy?

Social media use plays an important part in today's modern world, by allowing us to connect with each other immediately no matter where we are. There are many benefits to social media usage. It allows us to connect with family or friends who are busy or faraway, to be invited to events near instantly, to congregate around common causes and raise awareness of issues as well as find groups who share our hobbies or interests. It can also be a wonderful tool for business, promotion and professional networking. Individuals who are social in the 'real-world' are more likely to spend more time on social media, as the real and online worlds reflect each other. Therefore, it makes sense how it has been increasingly recognised that social networking has a positive impact on our social connectedness and well-being. However the ability to interact with others without immediate face-to-face contact, as well as the sense of anonymity found in some social media platforms means that social media can also promote social interactions for those who find socialising difficult and can provide a natural 'stepping stone' towards more meaningful, less anxiety-invoking face-to-face interaction.

Unfortunately, social media use can have a negative impact on our psychological health if we are not careful. People who have low self-esteem, poor impulse control or a tendency toward addiction should pay special attention to their social media usage. Below are some tips on how to keep your social media use healthy:

1. **Look after your self-esteem by avoiding negative social comparison**
   Remember that when looking at other people's posts and pictures online you are often looking at a 'highlight reel' of their life, not what their life is necessarily *really* like on a day to day basis. Sometimes looking at other people's lives on social media paints a 'perfect' picture; full of birthdays, holidays and parties, which can make us feel inadequate by comparison. Keep in mind that it is common for people to post the most fun or interesting moments in their lives and not the

mundane. It is also common for people to add filters, or otherwise alter images of themselves in order to achieve the perfect look, as well as take many, many photos and only upload that one 'perfect' shot. All of this adds up to creating unrealistic expectations for our appearances, behaviour and lifestyle. We can help alleviate this feeling by setting realistic and achievable goals for ourselves in all areas of life such as our career, education, fitness and general lifestyle. Aim to create your 'best self' by only comparing yourself to *your* goals.

2. **Social media is a tool: you use it, it shouldn't use you!**
   Remember why you created an account and logged on in the first place. Was it to keep in contact with high school friends? Found a group for your hobby? Social media can be highly distractible and addictive and very easy to procrastinate with. Therefore it is important to self-regulate your social media use to ensure you are not using it as a way to avoid the real world, but instead as resource to extend your experience of it. If you feel you are spending too much time on social media, keeping a diary of when and how often you use it, and how you felt when you used it can help reveal emotional or behavioural patterns tied to social media use.

3. **Real-world validation is just as important**
   It is easy to get lost in placing our self-esteem in how many Facebook friends we have, or how many likes and comments our pictures got compared to others. Whilst it is human nature to want to feel validated and liked, it is important to remember who your real friends are and to prioritise the real relationships over virtual ones. Keep in mind what real friendship means to you. It is also very easy to become stuck in an 'echo chamber' and surround yourself with people that always agree with what you say. Even Facebook itself encourages this by suggesting pages and advertisements based on what you have previously liked or commented on. It is not realistic for everyone to like or agree with everyone else as we are all so different, so be wary of closing yourself off

from the experience of others or from joining a group that reinforces or your own negative behaviour or bias. Instead use your own logical assessment to judge content: social media can be used as a tool to challenge our own point of view and open us up to new experiences.

4. **Communication is different online and it stays there forever**
When communicating through social media the lack of body language and implicit social cues can lead what we said to be misinterpreted and cause anguish to another person without us realising since we cannot see the other person's reaction. Be wary that your tone can not always be clearly understood through textual communication and that sarcasm especially can be misconstrued. As in the offline world, be wary of bringing up contentious topics such as politics and religion.

5. **Releasing personal information about yourself or others can be dangerous.**
Remember that nothing on the Internet is truly private, so if it's not something you want a stranger (whether they be a potential thief, friend, lover or future employer) to see don't post it. Never post that your house is empty, as this can encourage break-ins.

6. **Always block and report any users who harass or bully you or others online.**

Please call Links Psychology on 9378 8559 or email us on enquires@linkspsychology.com.au for more information on how to keep your social media use healthy.