

REFEREED ARTICLES

Anxiety at Teenagers' Fingertips

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Abstract

Teenager anxiety can be fueled by the online social interactions of today's youth. Comparing one's life with others, coping with bullying behaviour, seeking acceptance from peers, and digital addiction can all have a role in the rising anxiety today's teenagers are experiencing. Educators and parents have an important role to play in teaching teenagers how to navigate their digital environments in a safe and responsible way. Through education, students can be made aware of the risks of social media to their mental health, learn coping techniques and be directed to resources that can help to alleviate the anxiety they may be experiencing.

Online communication, viewing, and interacting with media have a role to play in the increased anxiety levels of today's teenagers. The rise in teenagers' anxiety levels is connected to being exposed to, and interacting with, a variety of digital messages and activities. Teenagers' interpret these messages in relation to their own lives and sense of self. Through media education programs delivered in a school setting, teenagers can become more reflective about their online digital experiences and implement strategies that will help them to reduce their levels of anxiety.

Addressing Anxiety in Teenagers and Its Connection to Technology Use

Anxiety is a part of the human condition and occurs at different moments in a young person's life. However, there may be times when anxiety becomes so prevalent that it starts to affect teenagers' self-esteem, schoolwork, and friendships. The recent rise in use of technology and social networks has fueled unprecedented social anxiety among today's teenagers ("Fewer Girls," 2018, p. 10). Four significant anxiety-causing issues can arise with the use of online technology. Comparing oneself with others, cyberbullying, social isolation, and addiction can all play a role in fueling teenagers' anxieties.

Comparing Oneself With Others

With access to online technology, teenagers are able to be in a constant state of communication and comparison with one another. Anxiety is often triggered when teenagers compare themselves with others ("Is Your Online Addiction," 2016). Teenagers may be browsing on Facebook or Instagram, seeing pictures of beautiful teenagers living seemingly wonderful, perfect lives; there are no pimples rising from their skin, each stray hair is neatly coiffed, chins are defined, eyes are enlarged, and lips are full. Imaging filter tools have erased or reshaped the imperfections teenagers see in themselves and one another. In addition, not only is everyone physically appealing, but everywhere the teenagers look, the lives of their peers are painted with fun times and excitement ("Is Your Online Addiction," 2016). The drab moments of their own everyday lives cannot compete. Teenagers today are becoming obsessed with creating an image of perfection that does not accurately reflect the reality of their looks or their lives. In the school setting, this obsession can be seen in the pressure teenagers put on themselves to look and act as perfect as their online personas. To be accepted as part of a desired social group is a driving motivation for teenagers' behaviours (Charteris, Gregory, & Masters, 2018). Through the lens of social media, teenagers can find unlimited opportunities to

scrutinize and compare themselves with others, resulting in a constant pressure to look and act in the standard expected by their peers.

Cyberbullying

Because of the instantaneous nature of social media, cyberbullying also plays a crucial part in the rising levels of teenager anxiety. Many of the victims, as well as the perpetrators, of cyberbullying do not have positive connections with the school environment and learning (Betts, Spenser, & Gardner, 2017). Though much cyberbullying happens outside school hours, the effects can carry over into the school day, affecting students' perceptions of safety and belonging. In my school, I increasingly deal with peer issues related to negative social media communication by the students. Unfortunately, students who have been bullied online are also more likely to participate in bullying behaviour in the virtual hallways of social media, as a form of retaliation or as an outlet for the pain caused to themselves (Beyazit, Simsek, & Ayhan, 2017). Cyberbullying can also be connected to exploitation of teenager sexuality. Desire to communicate digitally can lead teenagers from flirtatious banter to exchange of sexual images (Charteris et al., 2018). Once released in the digital realm, these images can be knowingly and purposefully redistributed. Because of the very nature of online media distribution, bullying in cyberspace has the potential for a larger audience and longer lasting presence in the life of the victim, causing prolonged anxiety.

Social Isolation

Another significant anxiety-causing issue is feeling socially isolated from friends and peers. Not only do teenagers see images of perfection, they can also see events in which they are not included. On apps such as Snapchat, there are features like Snapmap, which allow the user to see the locations of friends. Seeing friends all gathered in the same location can trigger feelings of sadness and loneliness because the user has been left out of the peer group. It is the fear of missing out that can lead teenagers to check and re-check their social media accounts frequently, sometimes obsessively ("Is Your Online Addiction," 2016). Some online platforms have built-in features to attempt to keep the user at the site and "take advantage of users' vulnerabilities" (Ioannidis et al., 2018, p. 164). In the app Snapchat, for instance, there are features such as Snap streak, which encourage users to communicate daily with their friends. Otherwise, they risk breaking their "Streak," which is a cumulative timeline of daily communication and is often viewed by teens as a safety certificate for a friendship. The need to feel connected with friends and peers is a powerful motivation for teenagers to use social media. Unfortunately, the ease of access to knowledge about events and gatherings, as expressed on social media, can also cause anxiety about being left out.

Teenagers' family lives are also affected by the use of social media and technology such as gaming. Parents who have not grown up with this technological world at their fingertips have little understanding or patience for their child's obsessions with social networking systems (Luders & Brandtzaeg, 2017). Parentally foreign notions such as Snap streak can lead to teenagers choosing behaviours to maintain their social media presence, despite parental input to the contrary. For example, my daughter's friend's phone was recently taken away by her mother; while at school, her friend gave my daughter her Snapchat username and password, and asked her to continue her streaks for her until she received her phone back. Another friend's teenage daughter refused to go on a family weekend vacation to their cabin because there was no Internet access and her Snap streaks would be broken. Such is the grip that technology holds over the psyche of today's teenagers, whereby real-life experiences are being affected by the emotional hold of social media in their lives. This lack of understanding or acceptance of digital use by their child can result in criticism being directed at them. Parents have communicated with me at parent-teacher conferences their frustration in their child's

excessive screen time and unwillingness to shut off devices or videogames. Known as technoference, children feel less warmth to parents who interfere in their technology interactions (Stockdale, Coyne, & Padilla-Walker, 2018). Increased conflict or disengagement with the important adults in the children's lives, coupled with the need to be part of the group as evidenced in online social media experiences, provides a fertile breeding ground for teenager anxiety.

Addiction

Social media use in a prolonged and frequent manner, supplanting other activities in teenagers' lives, is the foundation for the anxiety-causing issue of addiction. Addiction can be a direct result of the previous social media issues: comparing oneself with others and feeling left out. For example, because social networks give teenagers easy access to be "in the know" when something is going on, teenagers can seemingly quench that fear of missing out by frequently checking and re-checking their social media accounts. As a result, browsing on social media can quickly develop into a large addiction. A study by the University of Chicago found that it can be more addicting to use social media than to use alcohol or cigarettes (Goessel, 2012). In addition, there is a natural human desire to belong and be liked by peers. A "like" on Instagram or Facebook, an emoticon on a social media message, or a "Favorite" on Twitter are positive social reinforcements to teenagers and are socially monitored between each other. The need to be accepted and included, as reflected in their social media accounts, can become a time-consuming and constant need for teenagers.

Addiction is also experienced by teenagers as a result of the virtual world of online gaming. Teenagers will sometimes turn to other avenues, such as gaming, to seek positive peer connections (Carras et al., 2017). Because of the highly interactive nature of online games, it is very difficult for a teenager to self-regulate and can result in negative consequences such as isolation and depression (Haagsma, Caplan, Peters, & Pieterse, 2014). Gaming's built-in competition and social nature offer teenagers the opportunity to make peer connections, further encouraging continued and prolonged gaming activity in lieu of other activities (Shen, Liu, & Wang, 2013). Inability to turn away from gaming and social media interactions results in later bedtimes and fewer hours of sleep, which causes fatigue during the school day when the brain is required to be actively engaged in learning (Cain & Gradisar, 2010). A study conducted with college students indicated that achievement in school outcomes was negatively affected by the use of social and electronic media (Guinta & John, 2018). Time devoted to gaming, browsing, and connecting on social media accounts can translate into less time spent interacting with peers, family, and activities in the non-digital world (Scutti, 2018). Technology and social media have transplanted themselves firmly as avenues that can take up large amounts of a teenager's day and, as such, are a time-consuming part of their lives (Burek Pierce, 2017). An addiction to gaming can override other activities to the extent that it has a detrimental effect on several areas of a teenager's life.

Summary

Technology has increased the number of avenues teenagers can use to communicate with each other and, as a result, the risk of having more anxiety-related issues has increased. Technology has opened a doorway for teenagers to connect beyond the walls of the school and home; stepping through this doorway, however, can result in anxiety about perceived realities and questions about the strength of teenagers' social connections. The need to belong and to feel validated by peers is a part of the human condition, but with the world of technology those relationships and perceptions of self can become distorted and rapidly shift. Bullying is no longer restricted to school hallways or during the school day, but can now be inflicted by virtual means without constraints of time or physical proximity. Addiction and social insecurities

influenced by technology can have an effect on teenagers' self-esteem and can negatively affect the face-to-face relationships in school and within families. Without recognizing and devising ways to counter some of the negative associations of online technology use, teenagers' stress and anxiety levels may continue to rise.

Reducing Teenager's Technology-Related Anxiety Through Education

Because of the evolving nature of the digital world, and the important place it has in teenagers' lives, there is a need to educate teenagers about the risk of having increased anxiety due to their online digital interactions and media consumption. Though many of the technology related activities happen outside of school hours, there are ways that teachers can address these issues, and the accompanying anxiety, within the context of the classroom. Programs have been developed to address the cultivation of positive body image, examine media with a critical eye, teach anxiety reduction, and educate students on how to be responsible, healthy digital citizens.

Developing a Healthy Body Image

Helping teenagers to develop a healthy body image, and to examine the influx of media messages portraying certain body ideals, is important to their sense of well-being as they grow and change. The problem of comparing oneself with others, a frequent occurrence because of social media, is addressed through the online resource offered by the Dove Foundation. The Dove Foundation addresses the concept of healthy body image for boys and girls. The "Confident Me" resource has five workshops built around body image ("Dove Self-Esteem Project," 2016). The first two workshops deal with media messages, societal standards of beauty and digital manipulations of images. The remaining workshops challenge students to recognize body talk, to talk about physical features in a positive way, and to make a plan for sharing their learning with their peers. In addition to the school resource, the Dove Foundation also offers a resource designed for parents called "Uniquely Me," which helps parents to develop confidence in their children about their bodies ("Dove Self-Esteem Project," 2016). Lessons on body image, making healthy choices, and awareness of the role of media in determining the standards for beauty, delivered in a school context, are beneficial to raising critical awareness of media messages (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005). Helping teenagers to cultivate a positive body image could translate into a decreased dependence on social media to define what is beautiful and could decrease the anxiety associated with comparing oneself with others.

Balancing Life Choices With Media in Mind

Awareness of how media can be connected to anxiety and the importance of a balanced healthy life are important lessons for teenagers. The more time that teenagers spend on social media increases the opportunity for them to compare their lives with others and causes a higher degree of loneliness (Wang, Frison, Eggermont, & Vandenberg, 2018). This is especially true for teenagers who are more vulnerable (K. Y., 2018). Teachers need to be especially watchful for students who may be susceptible to social isolation and try to incorporate activities that involve positive cooperative interactions with peers in the classroom. Teaching students how to lead a healthy balanced life can help to alleviate this stress. This teaching can be done by addressing physical aspects of a healthy life, such as good nutrition, sleeping habits, and exercise (Yolanda et al., 2016). Teachers can also discuss the mental health advantages of a life that includes a balance of media and other screen-free activities. Encouraging students to explore interests and hobbies that are not digitally connected and make them happy, or help them to feel peaceful, is another option. Understanding the role that media plays on mental and

physical health is essential for teenagers to begin to take steps toward a healthier, more balanced life.

Practising Mindfulness

Teaching the students anxiety-reducing strategies, such as mindfulness, can be beneficial to teenagers. *GoNoodle* (n.d) is a website that has a variety of different movement breaks. Several of these, such as “Bunny Breath,” are related to mindfulness. Mindfulness can be viewed as a person’s reset button. Once completing the activity, students will feel more at ease and ready to move forward. Practicing mindfulness in the classroom teaches students the life skill that they can choose how they react to situations (Lawson, 2018). The grade six classes in our school division are using the Calm App in their health classes. It is a mindfulness app which takes the user through a series of meditations and encourages reflection and growth mindset. The teacher is using this regularly with the students and the hope is that, in time, students will be able to draw upon these mindfulness tools when they are feeling anxious or sad. The use of mindfulness strategies, over time, has a positive effect on a person’s ability to control their moods and helps them by lowering anxiety levels when confronted with a stressor (Basso, McHale, Ende, Oberlin, & Suzuki, 2019). Practicing the mindfulness strategy in an educational setting will give teenagers a tool they can use to reduce their anxiety levels in their daily life.

Strengthening School-Home Communication

Conversations need to be had with students about the effect that digital consumption has on their moods and feelings of self-worth. Teachers can challenge students to have times set aside in their day for non-digital activities, and teach them about how exercise is beneficial not only to their physical health but to their mental health as well (Hrafnkelsdottir et al., 2016). Teachers need to share this information with families so that discussions about the effects of technology use extend to a student’s home environment. In the context of the digital world, parents play a key role in the healthy upbringing of their child (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018). Students can also be made aware of the Kids Help Phone, which has a phone number where students can speak to a counsellor about issues that may be causing them anxiety (Kids Help Phone, n.d.). In addition to the phone connection, there is a web-based resource at Kids Help Phone. This resource has a live chat feature where students can have a written conversation with a counsellor. It also has a mindfulness section with activities to try, and articles on current topics that may affect teenagers’ lives. Teaching students about the role that media may play as triggers to their anxiety, directing them to people with whom they can talk, and teaching the strategy of mindfulness can help teenagers to develop personal strategies to lower their anxiety levels.

Teaching Digital Citizenship

Cyberbullying is an issue that can be addressed in the school through teaching and modeling good digital citizenship. Teaching students how to be respectful, to act responsibly, and to consider the consequences of their actions when using online media are the foundations of digital citizenship. In a classroom setting, teenagers can learn about the potential hazards of Internet use and how to treat one another over a digital platform. Providing teenagers with a safe forum for discussion allows them to explore and reflect upon their own digital use and how they practice digital citizenship (DeNisco, 2018). To focus on cyberbullying, teachers can use the Kids in the Know program. In this program, there are lessons specifically designed for middle years’ students around the topic of cyberbullying, including developing healthy friendships, digital etiquette, and identifying boundaries for posting comments and images about themselves or others (Cyberbullying Resources, 2016). In addition, Cybertip.ca has made safety

sheets for educators to use with their students about topics such as cyberbullying, app settings and privacy, and self/peer exploitation. The site also directs teenagers where to report incidents involving sexual exploitation (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017). Teaching students what good digital citizenship entails, and how to recognize and report instances of cyberbullying, will help them to communicate appropriately and feel safer in their online interactions.

Monitoring Digital Consumption

Digital addiction is a topic that can be addressed through classroom discussion and by using resources designed to help students recognize and respond to their digital use. Common Sense Media has many resources that can be used to talk to students about Internet addiction, including gaming and social media addiction. There are short videos and articles that can be used as starting points for discussions with teenagers on how technology addiction affects their lives and the importance of developing a healthy self, outside of the use of technology (Knorr, 2018). It is important to have teenagers identify and reflect upon how much of their daily time is connected to digital use. Creation of personal or family media use plans is a starting point for students and families to analyze their media use and how it affects their lives (Yolanda et al., 2016). Students who find themselves exhibiting signs of gaming addiction need to be encouraged to develop hobbies and friendships that are not related to gaming. Even friends who are gaming friends can be helpful in fighting this addiction if there is a connection outside the gaming world, as well (Kneer, Rieger, Ivory, & Ferguson, 2014). In order to educate teachers, parents, and students in our community, our school newspaper, *Cubs Corner*, will be writing a monthly feature on digital citizenship starting in November. One of the messages I hope to get across is the importance of spending time unplugged as a family and the healthy family relationships that can be built (Stockdale et al., 2018). Educational resources can be effective in addressing technology-related addiction when they are designed to have students reflect on their personal digital use, identify consequences associated with excessive use, and plan for incorporating non-digital activities into their lives.

Summary

Through education, teenagers can be engaged in the discussion of how online interactions and media consumption affect their lives. As consumers of media, teenagers need to learn to look at the message that media are portraying about beauty and body image. When faced with anxiety as a result of social media comparisons or being excluded, students can practice meditation as a calming and refocusing strategy. Learning how to consume media in a productive and balanced way helps teenagers to develop skills in digital citizenship and, in turn, to educate their families and peers on the benefits of balancing screen time with other activities.

Conclusion

The online digital world of today's teenagers is not defined by physical boundaries, yet it holds a significant place in their lives because it can have a negative effect on their mental health. Technology and its use, in a variety of on-line capacities, has increased teenagers' anxiety levels. By addressing the role that technology plays in increasing anxiety, educators can work with teenagers to identify elements of their technology use that may be negatively affecting their sense of well-being. Well-designed educational programming, used by teachers in the classroom, will help teenagers to examine media messages and to create and implement strategies to minimize anxiety levels related to online interactions.

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