

social stress

Is the quest for a well-curated Instagram feed provoking as much anxiety as pleasure?

BY BAILEY BASHAM



For Brianne Kwasnik, mental health has always been priority. Battling with depression and anorexia has made her hyper-aware of habits that could potentially become harmful. Two years ago when she checked into a hospital for mental health treatment, she was made aware of one more habit to keep an eye on: her use of social media.

“One of the rules of the hospital was I was not allowed to have technology, and [when] I found out, I couldn’t imagine being without it — not being connected to my friends and what others were doing,” Kwasnik, a Santa Monica-based writer, says. “It ended up feeling really freeing and allowed me the proper time to heal without being influenced by any outside noise.”

Now, she knows that keeping off social media at certain times is an antidote to feeling lonely or like she’s missing out.

Kwasnik’s experience falls in line with recent data presented on the use of social media, Instagram in particular. The popular image-based app was deemed the worst for users’ mental health in a 2017 study by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) in England.

The RSPH survey of 1,500 teens and young adults

presented questions related to 14 different areas of mental or physical health (anxiety, depression, self-identity, etc.). Findings showed that many forms of social media, particularly Instagram, exacerbate psychological distress and contribute to poor sleep quality and decreased body image. Oh, and an increase in the fear of missing out (FOMO).

“Our research has shown that young people themselves say four of the most used social media platforms actually make their feelings of anxiety worse,” the RSPH report states.

For Liz Nick, a clinical psychology graduate student researcher at Vanderbilt University, social media has proven to be an interesting new space for studying the effects of everyday experiences on individuals’ mental health.

“When we conducted focus groups with teens about their opinions on social media, we heard a lot on their concerns about seeing their friends’ perfectly curated posts and about making sure their own posts showed their (own) highlights,” Nick says. “Some research has shown that when people are prone to engaging in social comparison, seeing those highlight reels can be especially difficult.”

According to Carmen Papaluca, who has studied the ef-

"WE MUST BE READY TO NURTURE THE INNOVATION THAT THE FUTURE HOLDS."

fects of those perfectly edited, precisely posed highlight reels, these findings make sense. Papaluca is a PhD student at the University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle.

"[Instagram] is very different to other social media platforms and contributes greatly to societal norms for young women," she says. "This is possibly due to the structure of Instagram, as it places such heavy importance on visuals with very few alternatives available on the app to break up the images."

During Papaluca's research, she was surprised at the level of criticism those in her focus groups were dishing out. Those in the study were critical of their peers who weren't being genuine online, though they all admitted to the same practice of polishing their posts.

"They were all extremely media literate and aware that Instagram wasn't necessarily portraying real life, but this had no bearing on how inadequate it made them feel," she says. "Social comparison was prevalent, and most participants admitted to internalizing the ideals presented by celebrities, models, influencers and peers. Body image was a common issue across the board, and issues with life satisfaction were particularly prevalent in the older participants, which may be due to the period of emerging adulthood."

Although Papaluca's study was centered around young women, it's not just girls that are at risk of being affected.

Ashley Hampton, a Birmingham-based psychologist, says Instagram users of all genders are susceptible. And it's often the dopamine rush that keeps all of us coming back, she says. Dopamine is the feel-good chemical our brains release when we're doing something pleasurable, like spending time with the ones we love, having sex or eating really good cake.

"Constantly posting on and checking social media for likes, follows and comments gives us

the same rush and can become addictive. Our phones are never far away, which makes our dopamine hit never far away. This is a free way to feel good and important and have people talk about us," Hampton says.

Instagram, Hampton says, is a hot-spot for unrealistic expectations, what she refers to as "keeping up with the Joneses times a million." Andrew Selepak, who is the Director of the College of Journalism and Communications social media program at the University of Florida, is seeing the same thing in his work.

"Media isn't just celebrities anymore — it's also our friends and family. And our friends and family work out a lot, they eat a lot healthier than we do, and they seem to always pose for pictures on exotic vacations to places we have never been. We are not seeing the photos of them sitting at their office cubicle or eating a bag of chips because it's all they had time for before their next meeting, just like how we didn't see celebrities when they were sick waiting at the doctor's office," Selepak says.

As for looking past the Instagram blinders, Kwasnik says for her, it's all about filtering what she's seeing on the app. Papaluca suggests reining in on our own feeds can be helpful, as can practicing self-compassion, appreciating one's positive qualities and accepting flaws, rather than criticizing them.

"Recent studies have shown that viewing self-compassion imagery on social media increases body appreciation and reduces negative mood. Emphasizing resilience, self-esteem and gratitude as early as possible could help people reflect on their own strengths and be able to appreciate the achievements and qualities of those around them without comparing."

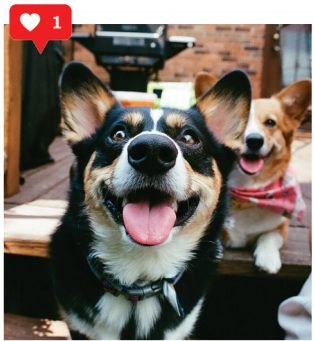
Self-compassion may be the next step for some. For others, maybe it's an app like Moment, which tracks how many times we pick up our phones to scroll mindlessly. "Social media has revolutionized the way we connect with each other," the RSPH report states. "And it has become an integral part of many people's lives. It isn't going away soon, nor should it. We must be ready to nurture the innovation that the future holds." ☺

#NASHDOGS OF INSTAGRAM



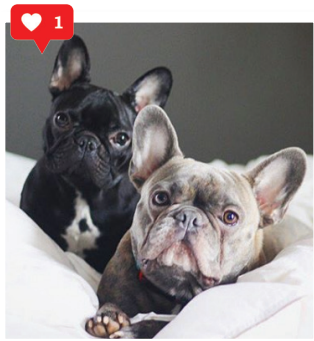
EDWARD
@edwardthebullterrier

One of Nashville's most talented terriers is Edward the Bull Terrier. Owner Ray di Pietro has had Edward since Dec. 2015. He wasn't looking for a dog, but Edward's stunning good looks drew him in. Edward has always been popular with the ladies, and he's even been in a Sheryl Crow music video. "We were on our walk last April, and we ran into a Sheryl Crow shoot for her song 'Halfway There,'" di Pietro says. "She asked if she could pet Edward, and they ended up filming it and putting it into the video."



PUMPKIN AND WOODROW
@pumpkinpie_corgi

Amber Tosh says Pumpkin and Woodrow's joint Instagram came about as a result of the outrageous number of pictures she had on her phone. "Honestly, it's crazy. I probably have 8,000 pictures backed up into Dropbox. And if their fuzzy faces make me smile every day, they might make someone else smile, too." Pumpkin and Woodrow helped Tosh's husband propose to her, and in October 2016, they were in the wedding as Best Pup and Pup of Honor.



SULLIVAN AND ELOISE
@abullynamedsully

Alison Sims's French bulldogs, Sullivan (Sully for short, after the big blue guy in *Monsters, Inc.*) and Eloise, are total clowns. "I've grown up around a bunch of dogs and never in my life have I met one with the personality of these two. Eloise thinks she's about 10 times her size and always puts Sully in his place. And Sully is a master manipulator. It's hilarious to see the two of them together."



FINN YOUNG
@thenashvilledood

You might have seen Finn Young downtown strumming his guitar. Owner Hilary Young says Finn's Instagram account was born as a way to connect with the city they moved to almost seven years ago. "Once we started getting him out and taking his picture around Nashville, we realized that he really connected with people. And people really connected with him," she says. "It's been a great way for us to get out and meet different people in our community, help support local businesses and share our adventures."

OLD FRIENDS SENIOR DOG SANCTUARY @ofsds

The Old Friends Senior Dog Sanctuary Instagram features daily pictures of some of the sanctuary's most photogenic four-legged residents. "Senior dogs are often the last to be adopted, if ever, and often end up being bounced from one foster home to another because of their unique needs," said co-founder Zina Goodin. "But they are so special — they're willing to forget the past and enjoy the present."