The role of social media in youth mental health

In today's digital age, social media significantly shapes the lives of young people, influencing their interactions, relationships, and self-perception.
While providing connectivity and a platform for self-expression, concerns about its impact on youth mental health are on the rise. This discussion explores both positive and negative aspects of social media's role in the mental well-being of the younger generation.

Positive impacts

Social media's positive aspects are often overlooked. A key feature is its ability to foster connections. Platforms like BeReal, Snapchat, Instagram or TikTok enable youth to seek social support and become part of diverse global communities. Probably it is not surprising, that feeling a sense of belonging is crucial for adolescent well-being.

These platforms also serve as mediums for positive self-expression, providing acceptance and understanding — essential elements when addressing mental health. Social media helps discover support groups, reducing feelings of isolation among the youth.

Furthermore, social media plays a significant role in spreading resources on mental health prevention and promoting awareness. Influencers sharing their stories have destigmatised mental health discussions among the younger generation.

Negative impacts

Despite its positive aspects, social media has a darker side, contributing to various mental health issues in young individuals.

1. Cyberbullying and online harassment:

Approximately 10% of young people experience online harassment as these platforms become breeding grounds for cruel rumours, lies, and abuse. Anonymity shields individuals from accountability and taking responsibility, diminishing the sense of security and potentially leading to severe mental health issues.

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2. Social comparison and unrealistic beauty standards:

Awareness of manipulated content doesn't prevent challenging comparisons. The belief that others have perfect lives increases struggles with self-acceptance, affecting both followers and those sharing manipulated content.

3. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):

FOMO is a common part of social media use, making young people feel left out or lonely.
To fit in, they spend excessive time on their phones, seeking reactions to feel a sense of belonging despite the risk of increased isolation.

4. Serious mental health issues:

Due to the lack of real personal connections, misleading information, and other challenges like comparison, cyberbullying, being overwhelmed from information, sleep disruption, social isolation, FOMO and feeling the pressure to be perfect can lead to serious mental health problems, including depression and anxiety.

What youth workers can do

Recognising the challenges of adolescence, youth workers can play a crucial role in decreasing the negative impact of social media on mental health. Instead of taking away their phones and cut them from their community, consider the following strategies:

Time limit

Offer a limited time for device use, incorporating rituals to help establish and maintain boundaries.

Open conversations

Acknowledge that social media issues may mask deeper concerns. Engage in conversations about school experiences, social anxieties, or stressors at home to address root causes.

Educate about social media realities

Empower youth by teaching them that social media doesn't accurately reflect real life. Encourage them not to negatively compare themselves to others online, emphasising that shared content is not a complete representation.

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Promote offline activities and exercise

Encourage engagement in physical activities and hobbies that involve real-world interactions. As role models, youth workers can organise offline activities contributing to stress relief, self-esteem enhancement, and improved mood, reducing reliance on social media for validation.

Promote influencers

Promote the influencers that could have a positive impact on young people. Nowadays influencers and online content creators are acting as role models for young people, it is very important who they are following and being influenced by. One of the biggest danger of social media is following influencers or personalities that provoke or lead to unhealthy behaviours.

Remember, as a youth worker, demonstrating a life without constant reliance on a phone is a powerful example for young people.

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