

One More Hit of Facebook: Social Media, or Social Menace?

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Editor's Note: This editorial was written by Dr. David Greenfield as part of our [Special Series on Addiction and Social Media](#).



One more snort of Snapchat. One more tweak of Twitter. One more hit of something sort-of- social and we will feel better, right? Wrong.

With our ever-present screens we have learned to avoid our aloneness, fear or isolation and we mask unwanted feelings by escaping into mindless scrolling, liking and commenting. We lose hours of our productive time voyeuristically viewing, chatting, and snapping selfies to share with our 1000 virtual friends.

Sometimes more is less, and less is more

We post to get likes and the more likes we get—the more we need to post. Each intermittent series of likes or comments we receive provide small blips of [dopamine](#) in the reward centers of our brains. We don't even realize that our social media accounts have become virtual slot machines, doling out neurological pleasures without our awareness.

Social media companies design their systems to keep us engaged and on site, not for the social connection, but rather to mine our data, and to sell us things. Social media has little to do with connecting to others—more accurately, it's a way of avoiding ourselves. Social media use means numbing ourselves through the

vortex of others' lives, endlessly chasing affirmation and excitement from two-dimensional images and narratives devoid of real-time intimacies or connection.

We now escape into these projected images and lives of others the way we used to escape into alcohol, gambling or drugs. The Internet (and especially social media) has similar addictive qualities to other substance and behavioral addictions; it actually functions much like a slot machine...we never know what we are going to get, when we are going to get it, or how much it will be. This is called [variable ratio reinforcement](#) and it is very resistant to extinction, which is another way of saying it's addictive.

Boredom can be our friend

We've become intolerant of boredom and unaware of how we've become impaired in creating our own excitement and relationships. Social media keeps us endlessly looking at our screens in hopes of feeling connected (or feeling something) when in fact, we get just the opposite—we feel empty. Moments of disconnection and nothingness are critical to experiencing our creativity and the spark to socially connect. As we push away boredom, we also close ourselves off from the benefits of boredom. No one feels welcoming of real-time connection with a screen in their face and the message to others is that we are not available or fully present.

Life becomes all about the distraction from boredom and being easily and endlessly entertained—all under the guise of us being social, when in fact, it is the exact opposite. Social media is actually antisocial, and social media not only takes us farther away from ourselves, but also from our families and our real friends.

Don't judge a book by its cover

We look at others' lives online and we either envy them or judge them. Often, we do both. When people post unrealistic, fabulous lives—we judge them for their shallowness. Those that only post about their problems, we judge as not having a life and think that they are attention seeking. We all want to be seen, known and loved—or at least liked. We don't know how to ask for it directly, so we reach out virtually as an easy form of social fast food, which doesn't require much from us, and doesn't give us much either. In essence, it's a non-nutritive form of interaction. We end up grasping and clinging with our posts, hoping that someone will see us and respond in the form of a comment, funny video, or meme—or better yet, they will like what we have posted.

We've gotten off track in believing that the way to socially connect is on an LCD screen. We end up broadcasting or reading half-truths, shadows of real human experience and often we end up feeling bad if our lives don't measure up to all the life-bites we see on social media. So, we present what we think others want to see, and in the process further lose sight of ourselves and our own deeper sense of connection.

The truth of our lives lies somewhere in between the highs and the lows that social media proffers, not in the fancy food pics on Instagram, or even in the daily soggy cereal and milk of everyday living. The real meaning in life comes from the mundane meaning we eke out from small social connections, like standing in line at the post office and chatting with real live people, which we have less and less opportunity to do.

Going back to basics

How do we change it? How do we change our screen use habits and our unconscious reliance on viewing or posting on social media? First, challenge the idea that if you didn't record something, post it, and have it seen/rated by others, that it is of less value. The phenomenon of Broadcast Intoxication where we relate our experiences in our lives through how others react to them, leads us to our missing the experience.

Is it possible to use social media in a healthy way? Yes—the solution is to treat social media like any other form of entertainment and to see it just as that. Use it in small doses and recognize that is not the same as real-time social connection. Social media is something to be used in brief instances, but it was never meant to be a lifestyle.

The truth is that the less you use it, the less you want it. And therefore, the less you will need it. It essentially an addictive habit and the further you get away from it, the less you will want to be on that digital merry-go-round.

We know from numerous studies and anecdotal reports that most of us feel an increasing sense of freedom, aliveness, and greater social empathy as we become less dependent on social media and make conscious choices on how we will spend our digital minutes. But this takes effort on our part to plan our lives, and our screen time. No longer can we take the easy way out of letting social media and technology decide where our attention is spent. Make a conscious, mindful choice

to be bored for a minute, to talk to people near you, to plan things with people, and to fight the fear that you (or others) will miss something unseen or not posted. We must decide what we want our days to be filled with, what we want our friendships and connections to be made from. This is an active choice, not a passive one, and there's no app for this.

When we choose our consumption based on our overall values for what we want our lives to look like as opposed to having our lives consist of leftover moments when we just happen to not have a screen in front of us, then we will really be living and that is what being social is really about.

Author Biography

Dr. David Greenfield is the founder and medical director of [The Center for Internet and Technology Addiction](#) and Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. He is a leading authority on process/behavioral addiction medicine and author of numerous articles/chapters and *Virtual Addiction* which in 1999 rang an early warning regarding the world's growing Internet addiction problem. Dr. Greenfield has presented throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia and has appeared on CNN, Dr. Oz, Good Morning America, The Today Show, Fox News, ESPN, NPR and HBO. He's been featured in U.S. News and World Report, Newsweek, People, Time, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and The Economist.