

Can teenagers truly escape their digital dependence?

Q: Dear Counsellor, In one of your recent articles, you said social media and smartphone addiction is similar to alcohol and drug addiction. Does this mean it can also affect the brain? I am worried about my teenage daughter, who is addicted to both social media and her smartphone.

Malaika, Arua

A: Dear Malaika, Social media and smartphone addiction can have a negative effect on the brain, just like drugs and alcohol, although not in exactly the same way.

A study published this year in the journal *PLOS Mental Health* examined the harmful effects of excessive social media use on teenagers, highlighting how it hampers their ability to focus on essential tasks such as homework and spending quality time with loved ones.

This study found that teenagers who suffer from internet addiction exhibit significant disruptions in brain signalling, particularly in regions that are responsible for controlling attention and working memory. It also

noted that teenagers with internet addiction showed considerable disruptions in the brain's executive function network, which governs attention, planning, decision-making and impulse control. The

researchers observed that the consequence of these disruptions is that such behaviours become challenging to perform, potentially affecting the teenagers' development and overall well-being.

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Addiction among teenage girls is high and can cause not only brain-related changes, but also mental health problems. Researchers Silja Kosola, Sara Möro and Elina Holopainen conducted a study to explore the impact of smartphone and social media use on the well-being of adolescent girls. Their findings were published this year in the journal *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. The results revealed that 16% of teenage girls had possible social media addiction, while 37% exceeded the threshold for possible anxiety

disorders. Those who were addicts had increased anxiety, poorer body image, lower overall health and mood, greater tiredness and increased loneliness.

The findings of the study align with previous research, indicating that social media addiction is prevalent among adolescent girls and is associated with poorer mental health and well-being. These results underscore the necessity of implementing measures to mitigate the potential harmful effects of social media use on young people.