

Perfectionism, Social Media and 24/7 Internet

Margaret Wehrenberg, PsyD

630-248-3092

Margaretwehrenberg.com

Psychological Wellbeing

An underlying position to the assessment of impact from 24/7 Internet connection, video gaming and social media is summed up in Self-determination theory's 3 core psychological needs:

- Relatedness or feeling connected to others
- Autonomy – we are the author of our own lives
- Competence – the sense we can exert an effect on and in the world

Ryan R. M., Deci E. L. (2017). Self-determination theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation Development and Wellness. New York, NY: Guilford Press

Rising Cultural Emphasis on Perfection

- Self-oriented: "When directed toward the self, individuals attach irrational importance to being perfect, hold unrealistic expectations of themselves, and are punitive in their self-evaluations."
- Socially prescribed: "When perceived to come from others, individuals believe their social context is excessively demanding, that others judge them harshly, and that they must display perfection to secure approval."
- Other-oriented: "When perfectionistic expectations are directed toward others, individuals impose unrealistic standards on those around them and evaluate others critically."

Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2017, December 28). Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta- Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016. *Psychological Bulletin*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000138>

Interrupted Autonomy and Competence: Gen Z, Millennials and Perfectionism

- Pressure to have their version of ‘have it all - live an amazing life’
- Overwhelming choices for who/how to be can result in “soul-crushing” humiliation
- Realities of college debt, low pay first jobs and housing costs played out against expectations of what they would have.
- Encouraged to leave family behind BUT failures more easily managed when close to family and friends

Why So Hooked In? Dopamine (DA) Reinforces Using Apps and Internet – Pleasure and Motivation

- DA is a neurotransmitter associated with reward. When it is released in the basal ganglia, (part of the reward pathway in the brain) the sensation is pleasure and that causes motivation to repeat the activity that triggered dopamine release
- *Intrinsic motivation* refers to the spontaneous tendency “to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacity, to explore, and to learn” (Ryan and Deci, [2000](#), p.70). When intrinsically motivated, people engage in an activity because they find it interesting and inherently satisfying.

Operant Conditioning: Learning That Social Media Contacts Are Rewarding

- The feel-good nature of social media includes the small burst of dopamine from every message indicator.
- It is not the medium, it is the message: You are wanted!
- Notification cues are not inherently rewarding (like cocaine, e.g.) but the brain learns that it signals social reward – thus, operant conditioning.
- Impending social reward is inherently rewarding to adolescent brain – some more than others

Negative Reinforcement: Relief of Pain. Smartphone as Comfort: Effective, But Not Using It Raises Anxiety Again

70% of participants in a study say smartphones and texting help them overcome anxiety/negative moods.

The 'security blanket effect' – texting to escape anxiety - relief of pain (negative reinforcement)

- Screen time blunts negative affect but does not relieve its source
- All ages check phones hundreds of times per day = Elevated heart rate when they do/when they want to

Stimulation Tolerance Creates Anxiety at Removal of Phone = “Nomophobia”

No Mobile Phone: *Nomophobia*

After 24 hr abstinence from electronics:

- The absence of sensory stimulation feels empty
- The sense of isolation and detachment is anxiety provoking – literally existential anxiety
- Without skills to handle it, the anxiety about missing something important becomes unbearable
- Missing reward feelings = stress of craving

Stress of Searching for the Best or the 'One Right Way' – DA Payoff Leads to Compulsion

- 'Click Bait' is planned: causes jumping from site to site
- Reinforced if you land on a gem of info: finding something unexpected that you might want to have or need to know
- Payoff is brain-based DA release from instantaneous social input and intermittent variable reward
- Anxiety about missing such treasures drives compulsive checking (relief!)

Finding Perfect Safety in the Pandemic World

- Passive Anxiety: Messaging increases anxiety in those already suffering from some measure of health anxiety or OCD-ish compulsivity
- Since there is no way to be perfectly safe, anxiety is unremitting
- Must choose sources of information and most likely avoid getting information from social media, although that is the source for news and information for many.

Perfect Parenting in a Pandemic

- With demand to work from home while also supervising and/or educating children, anxiety is skyrocketing: “Now I am also a bad parent!”
- Supervising children when the family is working out of the house and does not have resources for devices and data
- Expectations from schools that are doing online learning puts burden on parents to be the teacher
- Many missing support for children with learning problems, ADHD or behavioral issues or just dealing with normal resistance
- Facebook posts from parents who are creative, inventive, and excited also raise anxiety.

Create Breaks to Assess Impact

Need time off electronics stress to appraise impact on:

- Being “On” 24/7 for work and parenting – set some time-related boundaries
- Zoom Fatigue: Electronics previously had big impact on relationships at work, with family, with friends – now dealing with video conference exhaustion from performance demand and processing.

The Comparison Fallacy and Perfectionism

“Comparison Fallacy” Leads to Anxiety from Perfectionism

- Students rightly perceive that their peers’ scrutiny is continuous
- Fear of social failure or humiliation is persistent – even among adults posting about their lives.
- The **Fallacy** is that images are **accurate** representations of others.
- Decreased self-worth or esteem is the consequence of comparing to the phony perfection on social media. Body image dissatisfaction for women and depression increased
- Perfectionism is fostered by comparison and leads to anxiety

Procrastination: Inability to Be Perfect

At any age, perfectionists may not start if they don't know how or if they cannot stop 'improving' the product. Note:

1. Do they "Work better under pressure?"
 2. Do they always meet the deadline?
- Practice completion of parts of a task followed by anxiety management

“Close Enough” and Perfectionism

Discuss the specific goals/expectations of individuals to review

- Impact of Social Media: if you are not “wealthy beyond”, “amazing” in success, you may as well not even start
- Excess YouTube – Distorts time and effort, creates misunderstanding of what it takes to do something effortlessly and excellently. Watching = “Close enough” to the success.

Listen to Shankar Vedantum’s Hidden Brain podcast “Close Enough: 2/11/19 or Schadenfacebook on 4/17/17

The Comparison Fallacy: Learn to Tolerate Anxiety

- Social media increases negative self-appraisal in comparison to others' perfect lives – downward comparison. In therapy, model genuineness
- Teach clients to turn a comparison into a compliment.
- Acknowledge the reality of the pain and wide net cast by social media sharing. “This too shall pass” is the attitude to tolerate the humiliation of a mistake

“Atomic Habits” (Clear) – Develop Appropriate Goals - Focus on Progress Not Perfection

- I have begun to study writing and I will improve day by day
- Attending university is an important step toward my success in life
- I can have financial success as a result of applying for work and becoming employed
- The small steps complete the journey
- One day at a time
- Every day in every way I am getting better and better

Getting Out of Analysis Paralysis

- Identify the values you are upholding with the decision and base the decision on those *parameters*
- Limit options but consider 3 paths instead of just 2
- Broaden the input – ask others with different mindsets
- Concoct stories about possible outcomes: success, failure and weird.
- Gary Kline, PhD says do a premortem on a failed outcome.

Johnson, Steven B. (2018) Farsighted: how we make the decisions that matter the most. Penguin Random House: New York.

Technology Impact on Pace Also Affects Therapy

- Expectations of faster work
- Talking too fast without listening to self or therapist
- Therapist can slow pace
 - Repetition
 - Pausing and rephrasing
 - Send a reminder with the client – notes, an object or picture and especially a metaphor

Utilize Technology to Improve Outcomes

- Connect to valid psychoeducation
- Improve reminders of goals
- Improve practice to accomplish goals
- Big aid to meditation, relaxation, breathing
- Track progress
- Use apps like Mobilyze, Mindshift and many excellent choices for anxiety in autism, children, etc. Reviews of Apps on ADAA.org