

- Books and reading

## Why reading books is good for society, well-being and your career

Studies show a range of psychological benefits from book-reading, including increasing your capacity for empathy and reducing stress.

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The short-term dopamine rush of scrolling on a device is an elusive promise. It depletes rather than uplifts us. Our limbic brain – the part of the brain associated with our emotional and behavioural responses – remains trapped in a spiral of pleasure-seeking. TikTok allows video up to 10 minutes, but surveys show almost half its users are stressed by anything longer than a minute. An Instagram video can be up to 90 seconds, but experts reckon the ideal time to maximise engagement is less than 15 seconds. Twitter doubled the length of tweets in 2017 to 280 characters, but the typical length is more like 33 characters.

It's easy to get sucked into short and sensational content. But if you are worried this may be harming your attention span, you should be. There's solid evidence that so many demands on our attention make us more stressed, and that the endless social comparison makes us feel worse about ourselves.

### FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH, READ A BOOK

Studies show a range of psychological benefits from book-reading. Reading fiction can increase your capacity for empathy, through the process of seeing the world through a relatable character. Reading has been found to reduce stress as effectively as yoga. It is being prescribed for depression – a treatment known as bibliotherapy.

Book-reading is also a strong marker of curiosity – a quality prized by employers such as Google. Our research shows reading is as strongly associated with curiosity as interest in science, and more strongly than mathematical ability.

And it is not just that curious minds are more likely to read because of a thirst for knowledge and understanding. That happens too, but our research has specifically been to investigate the role of reading in the development of curious minds.

### TRACKING READING AND CURIOSITY

Our findings come from analysing data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, which tracks the progress of young Australians from the age of 15 till 25.

Longitudinal surveys provide valuable insights by surveying the same people – in this case a group of about 10,000 young people. Every year for 10 years they are asked about their achievements, aspirations, education, employment and life satisfaction.

There have been five survey cohorts since 1998, the most recent starting in 2016. We analysed three of them – those beginning in 2003, 2006 and 2009, looking at the data up to age 20, at which age most have a job or are looking for one.

The survey data is rich enough to develop proxy measures of reading and curiosity levels. It includes participants' scores in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment tests for reading, mathematics and science ability. There are survey questions about time spent reading for pleasure, time reading newspapers or magazines, and library use.

To measure curiosity, we used respondents' answers to questions about their interest in the following:

- Learning new things
- Thinking about why the world is in the state it is
- Finding out more about things you don't understand
- Finding out about a new idea
- Finding out how something works

We used statistical modelling to control for environmental and demographic variables and distinguish the effect of reading activity as a teenager on greater curiosity as a young adult. This modelling gives us confidence that reading is not just correlated with curiosity. Reading books helps build curiosity.

#### GLOOM AND DOOM SCROLLING

Does this mean if you are older that it is too late to start reading? No. Our results relate to young people because the data was available. No matter what your age, deep reading has benefits over social-media scrolling.

The short-term dopamine rush of scrolling on a device is an elusive promise. It depletes rather than uplifts us. Our limbic brain – the part of the brain associated with our emotional and behavioural responses – remains trapped in a spiral of pleasure-seeking. Studies show a high correlation between media multitasking and attention problems due to cognitive overload. The effect is most evident among young people, who have grown up with social media overexposure.

United States social psychologist Jonathan Haidt is among the researchers warning that high social media use is a major contributor to declining mental health for teenage girls. Boys are doing badly too, but their rates of depression and anxiety are not as high, and their increases since 2011 are smaller.

Why this “giant, obvious, international, and gendered cause”? Professor Haidt writes: “Instagram was founded in 2010. The iPhone 4 was released then too – the first smartphone with a front-facing camera. In 2012 Facebook bought Instagram, and that's the year that its user base exploded. By 2015, it was becoming normal for 12-year-old girls to spend hours each day taking selfies, editing selfies, and posting them for friends, enemies, and strangers to comment on, while also spending hours each day scrolling through photos of other girls and fabulously wealthy female celebrities with (seemingly) vastly superior bodies and lives.”

In 2020, Prof Haidt published research showing girls are more vulnerable to “fear of missing out” and the aggression that social media tends to amplify. Since then he's become even more convinced of the correlation.

Social media, by design, is addictive.

With TikTok, for example, videos start automatically, based on what the algorithm already knows about you. But it doesn't just validate your preferences and feed you opinions that confirm your biases. It also varies the content so you don't know what is coming next. This is the same trick that keeps gamblers addicted.

#### TIPS TO GET BACK INTO BOOKS

If you are having difficulty choosing between your phone and a book, here is a simple tip proven by behavioural science. To change behaviour it also helps to change your environment.

Try the following:

- Carry a book at all times, or leave books around the house in convenient places.
- Schedule reading time into your day. Twenty minutes is enough. This reinforces the habit and ensures regular immersion in the book world.
- If you're not enjoying a book, try another. Don't force yourself. You'll feel better for it – and be prepared for a future employer asking you what books you are reading.
- Meg Elkins is senior lecturer with the School of Economics, Finance and Marketing and Behavioural Business Lab Member, RMIT University; Jane Fry is a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Melbourne; and Lisa Farrell is professor of economics (health economist), RMIT University. This article was first published in The Conversation.