

- Social networking

Social detox**Should we all take a break from social media?**

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“People worry they’re going to miss out on something, so they keep looking”



It was when Mehret Biruk lost two hours of her life to Instagram that she knew the time had come to escape. What had she been looking at? She couldn't even remember immediately afterwards. Instagram, she thought, was “winning the war on my attention”. The irony was that Biruk had returned to the platform just months earlier, after a three-year break, and she had only returned to promote her website and newsletter, in which she writes about the benefits of spending less time online.

In August 2022, British actor Tom Holland said he was taking a break from Instagram and Twitter (now X), because he found them overstimulating and overwhelming: “I get caught up and I spiral when I read things about me online and, ultimately, it's very detrimental to my mental health.”

The benefits of a break

One study in 2023 suggested a week-long hiatus was enough to have a positive effect. In a group randomly selected to take a break from platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, Facebook and Tiktok, researchers found that symptoms of depression and anxiety had decreased, and overall well-being increased.

Would a longer period have an even bigger impact? “We're still trying to understand whether taking a longer break has longer-term benefits for people,” says Jeffrey Lambert, lecturer in health and exercise psychology at the University of Bath, who carried out the research. “For a lot of people, just taking that one week gave them an opportunity to reflect on how much they were using social media, and their reasons for using it. Were they using it mindlessly, just scrolling? Or were they using it for a positive purpose, to connect meaningfully with friends or family?”

The researchers interviewed some participants a year later. “There were some people who continued to stay off social media,” says Lambert. “Some went back to it but created certain rules for themselves around how they would engage with it. Maybe they deleted the apps off their phone, or they decided not to use it in the morning when they first woke up.”

Scroll no more

This was the case for Korkor Kanor, a public-relations executive, who was on Twitter (X), Instagram and Snapchat, and found it had become overwhelming and time-consuming. “I couldn’t put my phone down without getting a notification,” she says. Sometimes, she would turn the notifications off, “but you find yourself returning — people messaged me because I was using it as an alternative to giving out my phone number”.

Kanor deleted Snapchat, and came off Twitter (X) and Instagram for around nine months. When she did go back to social media, it was with changes. She doesn’t use Twitter (X) as much as she did, and on Instagram, she has changed who can see her posts. She also intends to schedule regular breaks from social media. “I can’t be on it regularly any more,” she says. “I don’t think that’s healthy for me because it becomes really overstimulating.”

For Sneha Morjaria, a management consultant, having a social media break also allowed her to create new rules once she went back. After she was diagnosed with depression and anxiety, her therapist advised deleting social media apps. “You’re always comparing yourself to other people — someone’s on holiday, someone’s done this. You wouldn’t invite hundreds of people into your home, but that space in your head is your home, and you’re inviting hundreds of people there as you scroll past. I didn’t realize how badly it had affected me until I was off it.”

Social media, says clinical psychologist Dr Roberta Babb, can be overwhelming. “We have access to vast amounts of information. It is both controllable and uncontrollable — you can actively search for stuff, but things pop up in your timeline, you get notifications, so there’s the sense of being out of control.” It is also never off — even if you take a break, you know it’s going on without you. “Then people worry they’re going to miss out on something, so they keep looking.”

By spending too long on social media, she says, users are “exposing themselves to quite a lot of negative, traumatic stuff. The balance between good things and not-so-good things isn’t equal, and that can be quite traumatic for people.” And when we compare ourselves with other people’s lives, as presented on social media, we hardly ever come off well, Babb says. Even though we know we’re looking at other people’s highlights, which might even be staged, “it’s hard to hold that in mind when you’re looking at an image. It can be damaging in terms of denting people’s confidence and, because it’s so prevalent and pervasive, it slowly chips away at people.” She says a break can help you “reconnect with who you are, what’s important to you, and give you more confidence in thinking you have a choice as to what information you access, as opposed to feeling that you’re a passive recipient of this information.”

Social media detox

In a new study, still under peer review, psychologists surveyed people who had taken social media detoxes. They found, on average, the participants had taken a break three times, and more than half had taken a detox lasting up to a week. “One of the reasons we were interested in it is because the term ‘social media detox’ is becoming more apparent,” says David Robertson, lecturer in psychology at the University of Strathclyde and one of the authors of the study.

Are we reaching a point where people are planning regular social media detoxes? “That’s the indication that we got from the study,” says Robertson. “Rather than excessive social media use being an addictive compulsion, it was more like a self-regulated behaviour.” People took breaks when they thought they were overusing it. “They were aware of the positive benefits to their sleep, anxiety, relationships and to their mood. They knew those things would improve if they took a break from social media.”

People went back to social media, the study found, not out of an “addictive compulsion — it was more about the fear of missing out,” says Robertson. “Or they were keen to see friends or concerned that friends may not appreciate that they hadn’t liked or commented on posts, or were missing key information about social groups.” Many went back to the same level of usage as before, he says, “which again speaks to this idea of self-regulated behaviour, that they’re able to take breaks when they want”.

For a successful detox, he suggests telling your friends and family you’ll still be available for texts and phone calls — fear of missing out was one reported concern that came up in the study. Distraction techniques could help. “Some people noted that one of the reasons they went back on social media was because they couldn’t find an alternative activity to distract them. If you’re taking a detox, try to replace it with something — seeing people in real life, that type of thing.”

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