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How to handle your teen's social media withdrawal

Why making your under-16 go cold turkey might not be the best idea for their digital detox. By

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AS the Government proposes a social media ban for under-16s, many people are wondering how such a move could affect teenagers in everyday life. Even as adults, many of us find it difficult to resist the temptation to constantly check our phones. "While social media withdrawal is not formally recognised in the same way as withdrawal from substances, the experience can feel very real, particularly for teenagers and young adults," says Dr Vica Khromova, consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist at Cygnet Health Care.



Being forced off social media can have an impact on your mood. "Irritability is a big one and teens might become very snappy with those close to them, such as their parents," says Dr Khromova. Feelings of boredom are also common.

"They might not know what to do with themselves and struggle with boredom," says Hilda Burke, psychotherapist and author of The Phone Addiction Workbook.

"We often medicate boredom with social media which means that kids don't get bored any more because they've got TikTok videos to watch. So, I think boredom is probably a big thing that teens would have to confront in the absence of social media." Withdrawal can sometimes also present with anxiety.

"They might suddenly start to feel quite anxious if they were previously using social media as a way of managing their anxiety," says Dr Khromova.

Hilda adds: "A lot of teen relationships are forged online on social media, so it can be quite unsettling and scary when that key part of how many of your relationships developed is taken away from you." Dr Khromova says: "Their social lives are happening on social media, so if they don't know who said what about who in school, then they might feel out of the loop which can be hard for them as peer validation is really important to teenagers.

"The fear of missing out, or 'FOMO', can further intensify feelings of discomfort when social media use is restricted."

"Interactions on social media – such as messages, likes and notifications – triggers the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter linked to motivation, reward and pleasure, and the brain can

become accustomed to these frequent bursts of stimulation, making the absence of them feel uncomfortable," explains Dr Khromova. Therefore, withdrawing suddenly can be very difficult.
"Taking a break from social media is good because it allows the brain to have time to reset and allows the various dopamine and serotonin pathways to reset, but I would say that going completely cold turkey can be really tough way of doing that," she says.
"The first thing we need to do is start from a place of compassion and understanding," says Hilda.
"There's huge financial investment working to erode our willpower, so it's important to bear that in mind that it's going to be a process. "
"Rather than attempting a sudden digital detox, which can feel overwhelming and difficult to maintain, gradual changes are often more effective," says Dr Khromova.
"If one of the main things they get from social media is connection, then helping them plan activities that involve connecting in real life can help replace some of what social media offers with the real-life experiences," says Dr Khromova.
"The brain responds best when we substitute a habit rather than simply remove it, so plan to do something as a family, such as karaoke, to slot into that time," advises Dr Khromova.
"Parents often want their kids to be on social media less, but spend a lot of time on their own devices, so it's important to think about what example you are setting," says Hilda.