

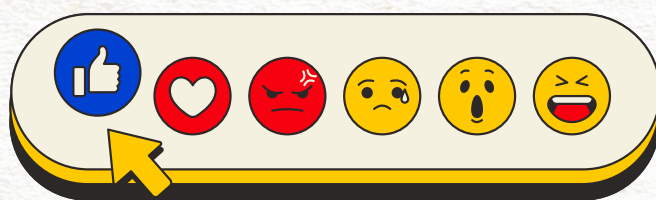
HOW REAL IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

BY: MADELEINE ESPY

“Over the past three years that I have been presenting “Recognizing Eating Disorders and Utilizing Effective Treatment Modalities” I reported that the prevalence rates of eating disorders more than doubled during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Why?

The quarantine that was imposed isolated people and can be associated with an increase in the exposure to social media emphasizing diet and exercise. That exposure had a negative influence on body image and mental health. The messaging on encouraging dieting and weight-loss measures propelled the diet culture even further into the lives of those who were vulnerable to its negative effects”.

Susan C Mengden, PhD, CEDS-C, CGP
Esperanza EDC Executive Director



HOW REAL IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media has transformed the way we communicate, interact, and live on a day-to-day basis. It is a place where people can post what they are doing, where they are traveling, and what they are eating at the click of a button for anyone to see. More than anything, social media promotes comparison. It is important to note that social media posts are curated highlights of a person's life. People are not posting realistic selfies of themselves just waking up, they are instead posting themselves going out to a fancy dinner, on vacation, or posing in a swimsuit. It becomes hard to recognize what is "real" on social media since many posts are heavily edited with filters, Facetune, and more. This contributes to the toxicity of social media as it creates false expectations of reality and unattainable beauty standards because no one looks like that in real life!

In conducting my interviews with patients at Esperanza and talking with them about social media, the overwhelming theme I noticed was comparison. Regardless of what app you are using (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, etcetera), you are inevitably consuming beauty ideals, lifestyles, and food and exercise habits which influence your own thoughts and behaviors. For example, if an influencer is posting "what I eat in a day" videos along with their exercise regimes and they seem to have a pretty picture-perfect life, this is attractive to the social media audience, especially young adults. It creates the false expectation that if I eat, exercise, and buy the products the influencer is using, I will look like them.

Disclaimer even if you followed someone every second of their day eating, drinking, exercising, behaving, living their exact lifestyle to a tee, you still would not look like them. How we look is highly influenced by genetics. But, as we mindlessly scroll and consume, we fall victim to the nature of social media and its comparative ideals of beauty, lifestyle, health, fitness, food and more.

Now, I am not suggesting cutting out social media all together, although, this is not a bad idea. Instead, I encourage you to consciously consume social media with mindfulness and awareness. If you find yourself scrolling mindlessly ask yourself, "Why am I using social media? What do I really know about this person's life through a screen?"

Of course, social media can be a fun outlet to find creative dinner ideas, to connect with friends and see life updates, and even to self-soothe with puppy videos. But it can also create harmful expectations of reality, beauty standards, and lifestyles. The takeaway is this – social media is a curated highlight reel and the majority of what you see on social media isn't real! Consume with caution and remember, everyone has a story and daily struggles they don't share on social media.

