How Perfect is the New Normal? The Impact of Social Media on Disordered Eating

Behavioral Health

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Eating disorders are severe, psychiatric illnesses common in early adolescence. Although there are six types of eating disorders with varying symptoms, all diagnoses are believed to share a cognitive symptom of overvaluing one's body weight and shape. With the influx of technology and social media in the recent generation, researchers are now studying the impact social media has on the way adolescents perceive themselves, specifically related to their body and eating habits.

Although social media can be an empowering platform to promote one's own individuality, there are significant risks associated with its overuse and misuse. One study suggested that disordered social media use is similar to other behavioral addictions, with symptoms of tolerance (i.e. an increase in time spent browsing), withdrawal (i.e. irritability when unable to access the social media) and craving (i.e. strong urges to access social media when unable to). High amounts of social media usage is linked with serious depression and anxiety. Social media use can also impact how adolescents perceive their bodies. For example, many social media accounts are created to promote "thinspiration, fitspiration, and bonespiration," that is, inspiration to appear similar to idealized depictions of excessively thin and overtly fit/lean bodies.

Exposure to images portraying these "perfect" body types increases body image concerns in adolescents and young adults. Although these accounts typically focus on inspiring followers to change their bodies in a "healthy" way, many users who follow these accounts have lower body satisfaction and self-esteem after comparing themselves to photos of unrealistic body shapes.

New phone-editing applications add another complex layer as they allow for altering the size and shape of one's body. For example, filters can make one's nose appear slimmer and cheekbones more pronounced. Adolescents' constant access and digestion of these images can influence unhealthy diet and exercise

practices in hopes of looking like edited versions of themselves or their peers.

Some celebrities even encourage this behavior through dieting practices and the advertisement of diet aids and weight loss supplements. One study of adolescents' use of the internet demonstrated that if they frequently viewed celebrities who are rumored to have or publicly endorsed having anorexia, they were likely to also have searched for disordered eating practices or anorexia-related content. Without a normal and healthy reference to the diversity of faces and body types, social media is portraying a world of perfection as the new normal.

Although social media use itself does not directly contribute to disordered eating, there are websites that solely focus on promoting eating disorders. Known as "pro-eating disorder" websites, these sites spread information encouraging and supporting disordered eating behaviors. The findings regarding pro-eating disorder networks are mixed. One study suggested that pro-eating disorder networks increase social support for individuals diagnosed with an eating disorder, as they may feel less connected to other peers. Research has also shown that these sites have motivational content encouraging disordered eating behavior, with "tips and tricks" associated with increased engagement in eating disorder symptoms. Because these accounts are publicly accessible, anyone can view this content.

As researchers, what can we do? While research on social media use is on the rise, technology is changing fast. Creating valid and reliable assessment tools that effectively measure social media use is essential for creating interventions aimed to minimize the influence of media on body image. Our next step is to disseminate findings regarding social media and eating concerns to the community, promoting awareness and future action in children and parents. Social media is filled with wonderful new ways to interact, but it is up to us to research, disseminate and model how to navigate this social world.

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