

## Quitting Facebook: isolating, yet 'oddly' freeing

*For me, quitting Facebook was a little thing that I found made me a lot happier.*

By D. Ryan Schurtz, The Baltimore Sun (TNS) Updated November 20, 2018 12:00 PM

I was a regular Facebook user for about 10 years, and I still keep an account open that I check from time to time. But, shortly after my children were born, I decided that using Facebook was not helping me to live my life in a meaningful way and might have been adding to my re-emerging feelings of depression. So, after a few false starts, I stopped using it. I found that after I quit, I really did not miss it very much. Sure, I lost touch with what was happening with some of my acquaintances and felt a little more isolated, but I also felt oddly freed.



An iPhone displaying the Facebook app's splash screen in front of the login page in Washington, DC. Photo Credit: AFP/Getty Images / KAREN BLEIER

As a social psychologist, the idea that having less social contact with people I considered “friends” might be making me feel better really surprised me. However, a closer look at the science of Facebook suggests that I should not have been surprised at all. Several studies of Facebook users have indicated that “Facebook Depression” is a consequence for many users and that the more a person uses Facebook the worse they will feel. There are two possible reasons for this. First, the social connections it helps us to make are not always satisfying, and second, we may become infected with the negative emotions of others.

This seems very counter-intuitive, given the mechanics of Facebook. The friend requests, the pokes and the likes all suggest that Facebook is a nurturing and supportive environment. In fact, one research study showed that the more college students used Facebook, the less lonely they felt. Facebook is, in many ways, an excellent social platform. It helps us to reunite with old friends and to stay connected to new ones. It encourages us to share information and experiences that help us to feel connected with each other.

But consuming the experiences of others can be a dangerous game. Many social scientists believe that humans have a need to evaluate themselves relative to others. Seeing a friend’s photographs from their trip to Tahiti, hearing about how great your cousin’s kids are at soccer, seeing your neighbor’s “beach body” or hearing about how much your classmate loves her new job, can trigger feelings of envy and inferiority. The more obnoxiously the posts brag about how great our friends’ lives are, the more painful they can be to us. We have a natural tendency to want to rank ourselves with others and a tendency to feel badly when we don’t measure up.

Of course, not all posts are brags about athletic prowess or carefully curated selfies. Some posts are downright depressing: people complaining about their coworkers, their finances or politicians. Some people, it seems,

use Facebook as a cathartic outlet for their rage, disgust, pain and sadness. It would make sense, given the fact that positive posts might make us feel bad about ourselves, that these negative posts might make us feel better about ourselves. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be the case.

Recent research suggests that negative emotions can spread through social networks. A study from California found that rainy days lead to more negative Facebook posts, and those posts, in turn, lead others to post negative things. Given that something as benign as a rainy day can send ripples of sadness through a social network, one can only imagine the impact that other events (break-ups, illnesses, car accidents) might have.

For me, quitting Facebook was a little thing that I found made me a lot happier. My depression didn't automatically dissipate overnight, but I felt like I wasn't wasting time comparing myself to other people. I felt less inferior to people I hadn't seen in years.

But, of course, I do feel a little lonelier.

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