



Social Media and Apps - Friends or Foes?

A guide to help address your concerns about body image, eating disorders and mental health.

What will this booklet tell me?

This booklet has been adapted from a resource designed by a UK-based eating disorders outpatients department in collaboration with the communications and media team. It makes reference to eating disorders throughout but it can be adapted to be used by any team in SLaM or outside of the trust. We have adapted the booklet to be relevant for young people in Canada dealing with eating concerns, disordered eating or eating disorders.

This booklet is not going to tell you to stop using social media/apps or avoid all sources of information about food or weight. Almost everyone uses social media and it can be a huge source of fun, pleasure and a way of connecting with people.

The problem is that it can also be hard to get away from; you only have to reach into your pocket or bag to get your phone/tablet to access it. We want to encourage you to think about how you use social media/apps and whether they help maintain your eating problems or make recovery harder. We would also like to offer some suggestions on how to use social media/apps in a positive way.



This booklet provides some ideas about how to change the way you use social media so that it helps you move towards a better life free from constant anxiety about food, weight and shape.

Why think about Social Media?

One of the key issues faced by people struggling with an eating disorder is an exaggerated sense of the importance of weight and shape as a measure of themselves as a person. This means that people will often strive towards a particular ideal; social media provides people with a lot of information that could be used to support this striving.

With social media all around us, a person can very quickly become caught up in a whirlpool of unhelpful and unhealthy messages by following various feeds, accounts, blogs etc. Once set in motion your social media content can make it seem as if everyone in the world is striving towards “healthy eating”, is doing more exercise than you, fits into smaller clothes than you, has a more toned body than you or eats less than you. Added to this, the information provided is often misleading and more worryingly, it can be dangerous for your health.

Even if it does not affect your body image, comparing yourself or your life to everyone else via social media can impact your self-esteem if you are not careful. It is worth remembering that people tend to filter out their problems or difficulties when posting online. Someone may post frequently when doing something interesting and post nothing at all when they do nothing or have a bad day. People may also exaggerate the positives because they want to appear interesting to everyone else.

This means you could be left thinking everyone has a more interesting, exciting fun-filled sociable life than you do.

If you are trying to address your difficulties with eating, weight and shape than it really is a good idea to be thoughtful about how you use social media. Otherwise, you will be swimming against a torrent of unhelpful information.

In reality social media gives us all sorts of ways to carefully manage the version of ourselves we show the world (usually minus the flaws or struggles).



“Fitness” and Food Apps

Do you use an app to record your dietary intake and/or activity levels?
What impact do you think this has on how you feel each day?

If you want to reduce your use of unhelpful apps you may like to try these ideas:

- ✓ Set some limits for how many times you will access it during the day e.g. once every two hours only
- ✓ Set a limit for how long you will spend on it each time you use it e.g. five minutes each time
- ✓ Choose another fun or distracting app or activity to do during the time you would normally check your fitness app
- ✓ Gradually increase the time between checks and gradually reduce the amount of time you spend on it each time
- ✓ Try postponing logging onto apps by an hour or a few hours a day
- ✓ Set small goals and targets along the way and reward yourself when you reach them
- ✓ Try leaving your phone at home when you go out and won't need it e.g. when out for a walk
- ✓ Try removing temptation and delete unhelpful apps from your device

Experiment 1

For one day, monitor how much time you spend on your app. Many phones/tablets have settings to monitor and manage your screen time. You might be surprised how much of your day is taken up with checking or adding information to it rather than spending time doing activities you enjoy.

Experiment 2

Notice the effect on your mood, anxiety and self-esteem of using your app as normal compared with taking a break from it.

Try taking a break for an hour, a half day or a full day. Did you feel better or worse when not using your app?

The camera never lies except on social media!

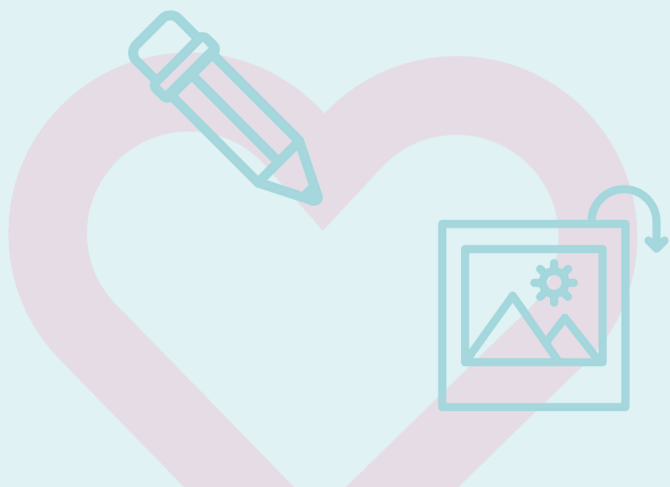
Today's technology means the images people post of themselves on social media are often highly selective, altered or put through filters.

It is important to remember this because you might be comparing the version of yourself you see in the mirror with a highly edited picture someone has posted.

Comparisons with highly edited, filtered, or specifically chosen photos can make anyone feel worse about themselves whether they have an eating disorder or not. When you have an eating disorder, the impact can be much greater because appearance might feel like it is an important maker of value or worth.

Editing hides or removes imperfections. We can usually remember this while looking at magazines and adverts but forget when we look on social media.

The same applies to non-models posting pictures of themselves online. People in everyday life do not look like their social media pictures!



Healthy Eating Myths

Social media is full of people who appear to be experts, role models and gurus sharing hints and tips for healthy eating.

The majority of the time this information is based on fad diets or offers overly-generalized suggestions.

“Healthy” as used on social media is now used to talk about weight loss or control methods, as opposed to eating to promote wellbeing and quality of life.

It is not healthy for your mind or your body to:

- ✗ Diet in order to have an empty/flat stomach
- ✗ Lose all sense of pleasure from eating
- ✗ Cut out any particular food group unless advised to by a someone with medical training who can advise you of alternative sources of nutrition
- ✗ Find eating with others so anxiety provoking you would rather avoid it altogether



When reading any information about lifestyle on the internet ask yourself...

Do these lifestyles seem realistic and sustainable? Would a friend without an eating disorder agree?

What might it cost to adopt these lifestyles in terms of time and energy spent maintaining them?

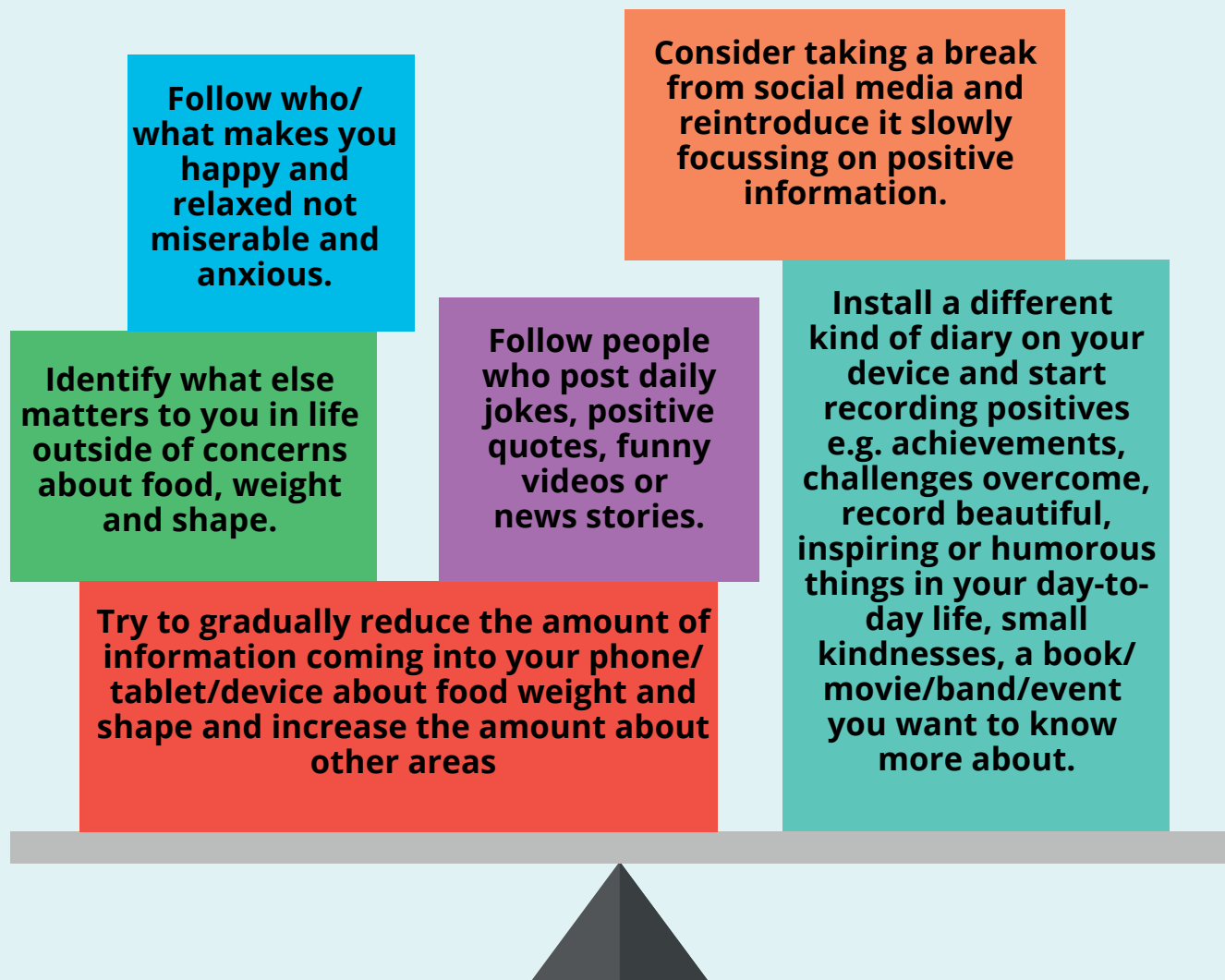
What areas of life would need to be sacrificed to adopt this lifestyle?

“Fitspiration” and “Thinspiration”

- Pro-fitness or fitspiration blogs can be just as skewed as pro-anorexia or thinspiration blogs.
- Government guidelines suggest 30 minutes of activity five times a week – just enough to break a sweat.
- Suggested activity levels for those with an eating disorder vary according to other indicators of physical risk (e.g. blood test results). Checking with your therapist/GP can help you figure out what might work for you.
- You can exercise too much and possible consequences include increased vulnerability to colds/illnesses, increased vulnerability to injury, difficulties sleeping, loss of bone density, and long-term damage to joints and muscles (even if not underweight).

Ideas for rebalancing

You are much more than what you eat and how you look. So try to make sure that who and what you follow on social media reflects a wide range of interests.



Recovered?

Be careful about following people who describe themselves as recovered or recovery blogs. People have different motivations for creating these.

Of course, there are people who have broken free from eating disorders and admirably want to share their story and help others.

Unfortunately most of social media is poorly regulated which means anyone can use it for any purpose. Some people use it to promote unhealthy messages and eating disorders as a desirable life choice. If you are unsure if the person/account you are following is helpful run it past someone you trust who does not have issues with food or weight, what do they think?



Apps are unregulated, anyone can create one and make it available online, for free or at a cost.



We recommend NEDIC (National Eating Disorder Information Centre) as a source of information and support for those experiencing eating disorders and their carers.

www.nedic.ca

Which apps could support my wellbeing?

The next pages give examples of some apps currently available that provide tools to help improve mood and manage anxiety.

New apps appear all the time so try these search terms:

- Eating disorder recovery
- Relaxation
- Mindfulness
- Anxiety
- Anxiety management
- Daily inspiration
- Recovery
- Emotions
- Motivational quotes
- Positivity
- Mood management



Advice for choosing apps

First decide what you want the app to help you with – self-esteem, improving mood, managing anxiety, recording activity/energy intake, encouragement to achieve goals and so on, carefully read the description of what the app provides.

Check reviews and feedback

Pay attention both to the overall star rating and the number of users who contributed to this rating

Get recommendations from friends or trusted people

Try the app for a week to monitor how useful it is to you and stop using it if it makes you feel worse



Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can be harder to deal with than other forms of bullying, it can leave people feeling there is nowhere they can hide as every time they access social media they have to face unkind comments and criticism, or threatening or aggressive messages. This can undermine self-esteem and lead to depression and anxiety.



Cyberbullies often aim to sabotage friendships and encourage groups of people to exclude or abuse someone for usually very trivial reasons.

At their worst cyberbullies actively encourage people to hurt themselves or complete suicide and tragedies have occurred. Some of the symptoms of anxiety and depression make it very hard for someone to see away out of their problems but there are solutions.

You do not have to continue suffering or remain silent.

For more information about cyberbullying, PrevNet has a section on their website, including resources for preventing and addressing cyberbullying:

<https://www.prevnet.ca/cyber-bullying/teens>

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Just because you can't see a way out of the forest doesn't mean there isn't one!

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Tell someone if you are being bullied or information/photos are being shared against your wishes e.g. parent, older sibling, teacher, GP, nurse

- ✓ Use the “block” function which is available on most social media to prevent further bullying from taking place.
- ✓ Most sites now have a system to report abusive or inappropriate messages and many will take action against users who repeatedly abuse rules. Use these systems and report bullying messages.
- ✓ Tell someone – break the silence and the bullies/trolls will have less power over you.
- ✓ Don’t respond to bullying messages, it is not helpful to get into a discussion - delete or ignore them
- ✓ It might be hard to resist but try not to read bullying messages, in the same way many actors do not read bad reviews, it is rarely helpful and usually harmful. Bullies do not give constructive criticism.
- ✓ Be wary of sites/apps/blogs providing anonymous accounts or posts.

Take charge of your content

Many sites and apps have ways of choosing what content you receive, by blacklisting or blocking “triggering” content.

Managing Your Privacy

Protect your personal information at all times when using social media. Some details about you, such as your address, name and passwords may be misused fraudulently. Be very wary of giving out your phone number. Keep them secure, do not share.

- ✓ Protect your privacy when using social media sites. Some information is meant for you, your family and close friends. Do not share too much with people you do not know well. Don't advertise anything which may compromise your personal security; details of holidays or when you are planning to be away from home, for example.
- ✓ Know your friends. Some social media sites display your posts to everyone including both images and text. It may not be wise to share private information on public posts. Many social media sites have privacy settings which you can adjust.

If you are not sure, most sites have information you can read or you could ask a friend.
- ✓ Be very thoughtful about what you post publically since it can be difficult to erase information once it is online. Don't post anything you could later regret or that could negatively affect your future reputation, relationships or career.
- ✓ Bear in mind there are legal safeguards. If you are under 18 and someone (of any age) asks for intimate photos of you they are breaking the law, it is also illegal if they share inappropriate photos of you with anyone else.

Prevent bullying

Sometimes people who bully do not realise they are doing this.

This may be because they genuinely think it is a harmless joke and do not realize the pain and suffering they are causing. Sometimes it is because they are afraid of being bullied themselves and would rather join in than be turned on by the bully.

Sometimes it may be because they do not feel good about themselves or are going through difficulties which leave them feeling powerless and dominating others is a way to feel better. Online communication can provide a barrier to hide behind and the anonymity makes it easier to behave in ways you would never in life.

- ✓ Don't support cyberbullies or be encouraged by them to exclude or harass someone. Make up your own mind what you think about people and how you want to treat them.
- ✓ Be sociable. Do not post comments you would not say in public or face to face. Do not post comments that others may find offensive, provocative, aggressive and threatening.
- ✓ Be mindful that online activity can have very real consequences in real life and the laws are constantly being updated to protect children and adults from bullying, fraud and the sharing of personal or inappropriate material online e.g. the use of social media for revenge attacks by sharing intimate photos. The list is being added to all the time.
- ✓ If you don't approve of the way someone you know is treating others but don't feel able to stand up to them, don't join in and think about letting the person being bullied know how you feel so they at least know not everyone agrees with the bully's view of them.



Why don't you try...

Experiment with one day of looking at social media and... one day of not!
Give it a go and see what happens to:

Your mood
and level
of anxiety

What you
think about
yourself

Your level of
satisfaction
with your
life

Your feelings
about your
body

Take home message.

It is up to you how you use social media; just try to be media savvy when you access it.

Be thoughtful and
aware about what you
are using it for because
it can help or hinder you
in your life and
your recovery.

This resource has been adapted by the CHEO Research Institute for the Canadian context. To see the original resource visit www.freedfromed.co.uk

FREED services in Canada are adapted from the original model in the UK to provide quick and effective early intervention for eating disorders.

We recommend NEDIC (National Eating Disorder Information Centre) as a source of information and support for those experiencing eating disorders and their carers

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