Technology Use, Loneliness, and Isolation

Are older adults overusing the Internet? How much is too much?

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Key points

- The Internet has served as a lifeline connecting people with family and friends and combating loneliness and isolation.
- When technology takes the place of in-person relationships, it has been found to increase loneliness and disconnection.
- A compulsion to use technology might ultimately harm users and contribute to real-life social isolation.

A family member recently contracted COVID-19 in France. He responded to concerned messages: "At least I have good WIFI while recuperating."

The need for connectivity was never greater than during the darkest months of the pandemic. We texted, chatted, and Zoomed with our family and friends. We held virtual "happy hours" and had our medical appointments online, a new experience for most of us. Technology provided a lifeline.

As in-person gatherings became dangerous, those who were able gratefully turned to technology to stay connected to family and friends (Geirdal et al., 2021). Social media saved us from complete isolation.

Since those difficult days, many have been hesitant to re-emerge and re-engage in the "real" world. We are still anxious about being around too many people. We are still hesitant and fearful for our health, which means that at times we cling to our online life or hibernate in our homes.

With the re-emergence of public life, we ask ourselves how much internet use is too much? Social science research has found that for a long time, people have felt lonelier and more isolated. Pandemic measures designed to manage a health crisis have, in many ways, boosted a mental health crisis: the loneliness epidemic. Survey research indicates that 36 percent of Americans often feel lonely. For older adults, the percentages tend to be even higher.

For some people, social media has become a compulsive panacea when longing for connection. Even before the pandemic, problematic internet use was a concern for some. Excessive internet use is only one of many forms of technology compulsion, along with excessive gaming, smartphone, or social media use.

Technology compulsion, like other forms of behavior compulsion, may lead to obsessive thinking and behavior and feelings of [anxiety](#) when not connected. Technology compulsion might lead to rumination about online relationships and activities, and an over-dependence and over-engagement with online platforms.

When technology takes the place of in-person relationships, it has been found to increase loneliness and disconnection and reduce well-being. It is helpful for online connectivity to supplement in-person relationships, but if relationships are maintained primarily online, they ultimately do not satisfy.

Even as various technologies can help connect and sustain social interactions during challenging times like the COVID-19 epidemic (Gioia et al., 2021), a compulsion might ultimately harm users and contribute to real-life [social isolation](#).

High social media use is linked to [reduced positive mental health outcomes](#)–especially feelings of well-being. On the other hand, if one uses the Internet but maintains a sense of control over their use, it can be a useful and helpful tool. Hunt et al. (2018) found that cultivating moderation by controlling and monitoring social media use is associated with positive mental health outcomes and reduced anxiety and [depression](#).

THE BASICS

- [Understanding Loneliness](#)
- [Find a therapist near me](#)

Maintaining control and self-monitoring technology consumption may be a fruitful strategy to combat loneliness and help people cope with [stress](#) and anxiety. Unfortunately, this is often easier said than done. Heavy internet users may interpret their compulsion as a minimal problem, while a disconnection can lead to anxiety and feelings of loss.

Age and Technology Compulsion

Older adults have historically been among the least active internet users. Not being "digital natives." The digital divide has existed for years. Many older adults have felt hesitant and uncomfortable about the computerization of life (McDonough, 2016).

In recent years, particularly during the pandemic, older adults have increased their use of social media. The fact that the Internet is indispensable is undisputed, but how much social media use is healthy (Meshi et al., 2020)?

In an ongoing project that explores the benefits of time spent in natural environments, 12 older adults of diverse backgrounds who walked three to five times a week for at least 30 minutes were asked to list the top five benefits of walking outside.

Eleven of the 12 stated that disconnecting "for a time" from their technology was one of the top benefits. If these responses indicate a need to disconnect for a time, how can we help those who unconsciously reach for their phones for connection and validation?

Despite the fact that overuse of technology may not be adaptive, access to technology is crucial for a sense of cultural competence in today's world. Continuing to boost ease of access and use for people of all ages is important.

Acknowledging age-related cognitive and physical decline in the development of new technologies is also helpful in increasing the usability of digital tools. Current software and hardware developers rarely consider age-related difficulties in their designs.

In addition, ageism, in which older adults are perceived as less capable of understanding or using emerging technologies, may result in older adults internalizing such cultural messages and engaging with the real and virtual world accordingly (Tahmaseb et al., 2022).

Clearly, there are positive and negative outcomes linked to technology use. The question of how much is too much should be explored individually and socially. The moderate use of technological devices is beneficial. It can lead to a sense of self-efficacy and competence, whereas overuse can adversely affect well-being.

We live in a technology-infused world. All age groups use the Internet for many activities. While technology may greatly help lonely people who seek additional connections with close friends, family, or colleagues, it can become a detrimental coping strategy when overused. Total absorption in anything is generally not an adaptive coping strategy.

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