



**By Cayley Jorgensen**  
Registered Counsellor  
Sandton, Gauteng  
cayley@ingagecounsellors.com

# THE IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF TEENAGERS

Imagine a group therapy situation. A note, filled with rude insults about you, is sent around the group, and makes its way into your practice. Eventually the note is intercepted by the receptionist who tears it into pieces and throws it in the rubbish. Now imagine the same note typed as a WhatsApp message and sent from patient to patient. One patient decides to post it onto a social media site where future patients and colleagues can read and share it instantly. The note

cannot be torn and thrown away, but instead quickly moves through online sites to an audience of hundreds or even thousands. You can claim defamation and take legal action but what if this message was about a teenage patient of yours. While face-to-face harassment still exists, cyberbullying is more prevalent. In a study conducted in South Africa, it was found that 1 in 5 teenagers have experienced cyberbullying first-hand. Furthermore, out of 28 countries, South Africa has the highest

Over 60% of children surveyed in South Africa agreed cyberbullying is worse than bullying face-to-face (ITWeb, 2015)

incidence of cyberbullying followed by Peru, Malaysia and India.

Our world is defined by downloads, likes and shares with the average child spending 142 minutes a day on social media. Given that 'YouTube channels' and 'public figures' play the leading role in teenage conversations, and social media is their playground we need to understand the impact that cyberbullying and social media has on mental health. In a study conducted at John Hopkins (2019), it was found that going on social media for 3 hours or more a day can increase the likelihood of depression, anxiety, aggression and antisocial behaviour.

Through the use of cellphones, instant messaging, mobile devices, social networking websites, apps, online gaming and other technologies, bullying has found its way into the cyber world. Cyberbullying involves the repetitive, intentional use of verbal, social or physical threats that use digital technology in some way.

Cyberbullying is different from other forms of bullying because:

- **The negative behavior usually happens outside the view of adults:** While some bullying is very overt, such as pushing or damaging belongings, cyberbullying happens through phones and on computers or tablets, making it much more difficult for adults to detect.
- **Cyberbullying can be done anonymously:** Those being bullied might not even know who is maintaining the behaviour, which makes it easy for one child to hurt another and not be held

### Spotting the signs!

62% of parents say they are concerned about cyberbullying. This is the same level of concern as online grooming and seeing inappropriate content.

accountable.

- **Cyberbullying can reach a large audience:** The information can be easily and quickly shared, which makes it difficult to contain or stop negative messages.
- **It is often easier to bully using technology because of increased physical distance:** They might not recognise the serious harm from their actions because they don't witness their victim's response.

Cyberbullying, may start for many children long before they are able to use social networking sites, which usually requires users to be 13 years of age. It may begin as soon as children have access to a cell phone, tablet or computer. There is potential for cyberbullying whenever children are using technology to interact with others. Parents need to discuss online conduct and behaviour, as well as cyberbullying, as soon as their children begin using technology.

Teenagers worlds are dominated by likes, shares and follows which is directly linked to the reward center

of the brain. It is, therefore, naturally understandable that teenagers become addicted to the pleasurable feeling of having their 'TikTok' video published on the very popular 'For You' page. However, the effects on their mental health is visible to all.

Complaints of difficulty sleeping, or frequent headaches seem to be age appropriate, and in many cases they are. However, these should not be happening regularly. More teenagers are experiencing concentration difficulties, more frequent headaches and increased pressure. Studies have linked this to the common statement: 'FOMO' - The Fear of Missing Out. This is what drives teenagers to stay awake all hours of the night, make choices they would otherwise not make, including negative behaviours, accepting risky challenges as well as altering their appearance.

An increase in teen suicide rates have been linked to increased social media use, with one study explaining that a learner who spends 5 or more hours on social media is 71% more likely to have at least one risk factor for suicide. Furthermore, a new phenomenon of digital self-harm is on the increase. This is when teenagers use social media sites to validate their insecurities, by either posting about these insecurities anonymously or posting mean and derogatory comments towards themselves on their own profile. According to the Journal of Adolescent Health, common themes of digital self-harm include sexual orientation, drug use, deviant behaviours, depressive symptoms, experiences with school bullying as well as cyberbullying. The



motivations, however, for digital self-harm are usually to get another learner's attention, to prove they can take it, to get adult attention, to get others to worry about them, as a joke on someone else or even to start a fight.

The teen who wants to make a joke of it and gain positive attention from peers might be struggling with self-esteem and social interactions

A teen who seeks adult attention or wants to make others worry could be struggling with low self-worth or being ostracized by peers

Social media use is increasing, technologies are developing faster than before and learners are utilising these in all aspects of their lives. Here are some tips to help teenagers navigate the mental health pressures:

1. **Autonomy:** Teenagers need independence. As soon as they start to feel like they are being micro-managed, they will shut down. They need frequent conversations to talk about the pros and cons of social media use and what to do if cyberbullying does occur.
2. **Engage:** Give teenagers the space to engage with you about social media – the positives and the negatives. Ask which apps they use the

most and why. When difficult situations arise online, either in the news or their life, ask teenagers how they would handle it. Encourage parents to talk about how they can make social media a more positive experience for their child.

3. **Modelling:** Teenagers are confronted with new and confusing information online daily. They learn through seeing adult's behaviour. By seeing parents stick to their own rules and limits, they can learn important lessons on boundaries and self-care. When teenagers begin to internalise the importance of limits and boundaries, they can set limits with their peers. This is an important life skill that is sometimes overlooked when teenagers are stressed, busy, and constantly connected.
4. **Talk Often:** Encourage parents to be there to help their teen process and cope with what they're seeing online.
5. **Connection:** The best thing adults can do for teenagers is to make time for face-to-face interactions and be present. Connection is key when it comes to parenting teenagers in a modern world.

Social media can lead to an environment of harsh judgments and comparisons. The key to helping teens learn to balance social media with real life friendships is to:



1. Keep the lines of communication open and keep talking.
2. Show teenagers that you are there to support, not to judge them. They know more about social media than we think.
3. Walk the walk with them.
4. Disconnect on weekends and show teenagers that there is an exciting world out there that doesn't require a screen. **MHM**

*References available upon request*



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