Continuum of Social Networking Use

Positive Impacts

Social networking sites (SNSs) are designed to exchange information, encourage social interaction, enhance friendships, and promote new relationships. Virtual communities have become an inherent component of a young person's developmental process. Here, youth can explore and develop their identities and culture [1].

SNSs can have a positive impact on youth's psychosocial development. They can be a tool to reach and connect with people, particularly for those who are isolated or marginalized, or who experience social barriers [2, 3].

Effective social movements and social justice initiatives increasingly use SNSs to support social activism, elevate marginalized voices, and offer alternative perspectives from mainstream media [4, 5]. For example, social networking has been an effective tool for creating social connections and disseminating health promotion information to transgender youth, as well as to youth with autism spectrum disorder [6]. Another benefit of these sites is that they can provide information about addictions and mental health [1].

When Social Networking Use Becomes Problematic

Online risks and harm associated with social networking include:

- concerns about excessive and problematic use
- exposure and sharing of inappropriate information and material (sexting, pornography)
- influence of social media on body image
- sourcing of harmful content or advice, such as websites or social networks promoting self-harm
- negative impact on mental health and well-being [1].
- cyberbullying

Types of Cyberbullying:
- sending or posting offensive or intimidating messages
- creating and sharing photos or videos of a sensitive nature without consent
- sharing secrets about someone
- leaving somebody out of an online activity or social group
- voting on someone in an offensive poll
- creating a website with critical content about somebody
- creating a false profile or hijacking online identities in order to damage someone's reputation
- sending explicit messages or encouraging a young person to send an explicit text, then sharing that more widely
- cyberstalking: constantly harassing with threats of physical harm [1, 7]

Alberta Health Services

Addiction & Mental Health

Biopsychosocial Perspective

An example of problematic use is when repeated and pathological social networking causes significant problems in daily life. Process addiction can be examined from a biopsychosocial perspective to understand the complex relationship with social networking sites.

The six components of process addiction are:
- Total preoccupation with social media use (salience).
- Changes in emotional state (mood modification).
- Increasing use of social media to obtain the same pleasure (tolerance/craving).
- Experiencing distress, negative feelings, and other psychological symptoms if prohibited from using social media (withdrawal).
- Unaccomplished expectations in important life areas and interpersonal problems because of social media use (conflict/functional impairment).
- Failure to control the use of social media after a period of abstinence (relapse/loss of control) [8, 9].

Understanding the issue using a biopsychosocial framework helps service providers, youth, and families understand what motivates individuals to engage in social networking, and what rewards or gratification they're looking for when using those types of sites [10, 11].

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