
Depression In Younger Generations

Among the most common of mental health disorders is depression, followed by alcohol and drug abuse. Based on previous epidemiological studies, we know that depression is two to three times more likely to affect women compared to men (Oltmanns & Emery, 2018, p. 138). Results from a recent NCS-R indicates a lifetime prevalence of 16% of Americans experiencing symptoms of depression combined with a diagnosis (Oltmanns & Emery, 2018). Along with gender differences, we also know that certain risk factors are involved in the onset of depression such as genetics, stressful life events and the way we think about those events, ourselves and our environment. However, age is increasingly becoming a significant factor in determining the incidence and prevalence of depressive disorder. More specifically, younger generations today are more at risk for depression than previous generations (Oltmanns & Emery, 2018). For the first time in our nation's history, younger generations are trending toward higher rates and earlier onset of depression compared to earlier generations of youths (Oltmanns & Emery, 2018).

To determine why rates of depression are increasing among young adults in the last 15 years, we should probably examine what has changed in our society. At first glance, we know that social media use has increased dramatically in this time period, bringing about a change in the way we interact with others. A larger part of our daily routine involves the use of technology whether we are working, shopping, texting, or browsing our newsfeed on social media outlets. This behavior may lead to social isolation that further reduces the quality time for face to face interactions that are more meaningful. It could be that social media outlets are leaving users stressed with the fear of missing out which paradoxically increases their use, leading to more isolated time on the internet. Studies show that individuals who spend more time on the internet are at higher risk for addiction and negative feelings which are recognized in the DSM-5 as conditions related to depression and anxiety (Jones, Colditz, Shensa, Sidani, Lin, Terry, & Primack, 2016, p. 606).

In like manner, social media may be responsible for creating unrealistic goals of measuring up to the perfect bodies, luxury vacations and lifestyles portrayed on Facebook and other sites. This particular type of perfectionism can potentially promote insecure thoughts, body issues, unnecessary competition, and feelings of inadequacy. Increased social media use may contribute to more materialistic, self-absorbed individuals making relationships less personal, more elusive and difficult to maintain. Basically, a sense of realness to interpersonal relationships and the ability to relate to others could be diminished with higher rates of social media use.

Not only has our use of technology changed, but so have our expectations regarding education, success, and standard of living. Part of this change may also be precipitated by increased use of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram which may contribute to a change in social norms. Even LinkedIn, the professional site for individuals seeking employment and career advancement has been associated with depression with likely cause being users may experience feelings of inadequacy when measured against the success of others (Jones et al. , 2016, p. 602).

In past generations, many youths expected and could viably achieve success at a higher level than their parents. However, unlike previous generations, today's young adults may have a difficult time meeting and exceeding the lifestyle provided by their parents. To some extent, these challenges may be due in part bombardment of choices, not to mention the effects of the economy. It's possible that too many options can become confusing, making us feel miserable with regret, emotional distress and increased expectations contributing to depressive mood disorder. Combined with pressure from parents to perform and glamourized portrayals of success on social media, many young adults may experience higher levels of stress leading to thoughts of hopelessness and despair associated with depression. Ultimately, the perplexity of too many choices can guide many young adults to delay purchasing a home, traveling, and marriage until later in life. In like manner, the obsession with instant gratification, overly ambitious goals and the failure to achieve perfection may lead to feelings of sadness, worthlessness, and thoughts of suicide.

To assess the association between social media use, availability of too many options or measuring up to today's higher standards and depression will require further research. One way to approach this is surveying a large (1500 – 1750 participants) nationally representative sample of young adults ranging from 18-30 years old. To ensure random sampling, participants will be chosen based random digit dialing in a cross section of demographics, controlling for age, gender, race, income, education, marital status, and living situation. Self-reported answers to questions regarding amount of time spent on social media, type of activities, self-efficacy, career satisfaction, achievement satisfaction and feelings of depression will weighed using a multivariate analysis to compare relationships between each variable independently and covariates. To determine strength and frequency of associations, a Likert scale (1-5) will be used with responses of "Never", "Rarely", "Sometimes", "Often" and "Always." Results will be used to determine the cause and direction of the associations with social media use.