CPYU'S DIGITAL KIDS INITIATIVE

FACEBOOK DEPRESSION

By Walt Mueller

Trend Alert: Facebook Depression

I didn't grow up in a world saturated with social media. But I do remember receiving and looking at communications during my years of parenting that somehow left me feeling less than good about myself. Every December, our mailbox would fill with Christmas letters from people I hadn't seen or heard from since receiving their annual "brag-up-the-family" letter twelve months earlier. Okay. . . maybe it's unfair to assign intent to the letter writers in this manner. But I do know that reading family reports that always highlight the best and leave out the worst can somehow leave you feeling. . . well. . . a little bit forlorn about yourself.

Feeling insecure about one's self is a reality in our horribly sinful and broken world that spans all age groups. But it's especially strong during the change-filled and confusing years of adolescence as kids struggle to figure out not only who they are now, but who they will be for the rest of their lives. Playing the comparison game tends to peak during the teenage years.

In years past, teenagers who felt horribly insecure during their hours spent navigating the hallways of the middle and high school, were usually able to find some reprieve in the safe confines of their home. One could usually be themselves without worry or fear of being criticized or rejected. But now that social media has become the main online activity of adolescents in their 24/7 connected world, there is no escaping the strong temptation to compare yourself to everyone else. And with everyone else carefully constructing and curating the best foot they put forward on social media, the pressure is even more intense.

While advancements in technology have brought a host of blessings to our lives, there are also a host of new difficulties and curses that we need to be aware of so that we might avoid them ourselves (yes, we adults are susceptible as well) and keep our highly vulnerable and impressionable kids from engaging with things that can slowly eat away at their physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health. One of these new realities has been labeled "Facebook depression" by health care providers, most notably physicians with the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Feeling insecure about one's self is a reality in our horribly sinful and broken world that spans all age groups. But it's especially strong during the change-filled and confusing years of adolescence.

In their published report, "The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families," the AAP says that Facebook depression is a "depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an important element of adolescent life. The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents. As with offline depression, preadolescents and adolescents who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to risky Internet sites and blogs for 'help' that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive or self-destructive behaviors."

Facebook depression is fueled in large part by the fact that social media allows us to craft and curate ourselves as we carefully construct our persona through the words and images that we choose to post. In other words, an online profile and postings consist of what one judiciously chooses to upload. Researchers say that men tend to post self-promotional content, while women overstate and/or promote their physical attractiveness and sociability.

Consequently, what you see and know about me is what *I want* you to see and know about me, whether what you see is true, partially true, or not even close to who I *really* am. And because adolescents want desperately to be noticed, accepted, liked, and affirmed, they are particularly susceptible to creating an online self that puts their best foot forward, even if the foot that's being put forward doesn't look at all like their own foot. Then, when we log on to a social media site, we continue to be painfully aware of our own inadequacies and shortcomings as we are bombarded by exposure to others who we are led to believe are so much better than we are.

> *Facebook depression is fueled in large part by the fact that social media allows us to craft and curate ourselves as we carefully construct our persona through the words and images that we choose to post.*

Sadly, this reality is not limited to our teenagers. Placing a premium on image and appearance is a mark of the worship of youthfulness that has us carefully curating ourselves as social media using adults.

Facebook depression can occur when we play the social comparison game by looking at the online photos, likes, status updates, activities, and achievements of our friends. We compare our kids, jobs, vacations, activities, and number of friends. We compare the number and nature of comments (are they positive or negative?) that other people make in response to our postings. For people who are lonely and driven to social media because their lives are marked by less off-line interaction with others, playing and losing this comparison game results in even deeper loneliness.

Experts are saying that signs of Facebook depression include envy of peers and their families, dissatisfaction with one's own life, discouragement, anger, frustration, loneliness, resentment of others, and misery. As social media users spiral down into deeper and deeper levels of Facebook depression, they may actually choose to spend more time on social media sites in an effort to change their online status and standing. They spend more time creating and curating themselves in the hopes that they can reverse their low view of themselves.

Social media is playing a powerful role in how we interact with and understand ourselves and others. It shapes how we use our time, our aspirations, and where we find our identity. And because our teens are at a vulnerable stage in life, its influence is especially strong.

In an effort to use social media responsibly and to avoid the pitfalls, including Facebook depression, we suggest that parents and other significant adults take the following steps with your kids and yourself:

Monitor your use of social media. Too much time online or the presence of any of the aforementioned signs of Facebook depression are symptoms of deeper heart issues that must be addressed. Those who find it necessary to carefully create and curate their online selves could be worshiping the idol of "fear of man." When people-pleasing eclipses our desire to please God we must confess our idolatry and then say with the Psalmist, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Ps. 56:3-4).

Tell the truth about yourself. Take stock of your motives behind your social media posts, and the content of those posts. Do they reflect who you really are? Or, have you "photo-shopped" yourself in an effort to be someone that you're not? Do they glorify you? Do they matter? Why are you choosing to post what you post? Do they bring glory to God and God alone? Remember, you are not a brand that needs to be created and managed. You are a human being created in the image of God and given value by God.

Realize that what you see of others is an horribly incomplete picture. The tendency to put one's best foot forward is universal in the online world of social media. What you see offers only a small, curated window into a person's reality.

And, when the postings seem too consistently good to be true, remember that that is probably the case. Everyone struggles with sin and brokenness in their lives and their relationships. And sometimes, the most carefully curated personas have been most carefully curated to cover deep hurt, pain, brokenness, and difficult life situations.

Choose to conform to a Godly standard and identity. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul echoes the consistent message of the Gospel: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). Our identity is to be in Christ. Our attitude should be that of Christ.

Log off and power down. We are hearing more and more young mothers say, "I need to get off of Facebook." They realize that their time on social media leads to playing the comparison game with other young mothers and their children. Knowing how destructive and all-consuming this can be, they are simply choosing to spend their time more wisely. Limiting our social media time yields more opportunities to spend time fostering our relationships with God and real-life family and friends.

DR. WALT MUELLER,
President, the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

CPYU'S DIGITAL KIDS INITIATIVE

PHONE: (717) 361-8429 **FAX:** (717) 361-8964
EMAIL: DIGITALKIDS@CPYU.ORG

For additional information on the digital world of kids, visit the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding's Digital Kids Initiative at *digitalkidsinitiative.com*.

CPYU grants permission for this article to be copied in its entirety, provided the copies are distributed free of charge and the copies indicate the source as the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF FEAR OF MAN, WE RECOMMEND ED WELCH'S BOOK, WHEN PEOPLE ARE BIG AND GOD IS SMALL: OVERCOMING PEER PRESSURE, CO-DEPENDENCY, AND THE FEAR OF MAN (P&R PUBLISHING).