

By Hunter Jennings

Technological Problems

Though the pandemic has been credited to be a leading factor in the soar of depression that has happened recently, perhaps an already present danger has exacerbated our youth's problems to a level they have never gone before due to the worldwide lack of in-person connection and fear of going outside. Perhaps, we have some technological problems.

According to National Public Radio, "At the end of June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveyed Americans on their mental health... Almost 11 percent of all respondents to that survey said they had "seriously considered" suicide in the past 30 days. For those ages 18 to 24, the number was 1 in 4 — more than twice as high." There is no question whether or not the worldwide pandemic and lockdown have created a spike in depression and suicide, but to better understand these statistics and the root of the problem, we need to learn more about what was hampering our teens before the pandemic.

In 2017, Dr. Kardas, "an Ivy League educated psychologist, best-selling author, internationally renowned speaker and an expert on mental health, addiction, and the impacts of our digital age," stated, "In the modern digital age we've seen an epidemic spike in mental health disorders--especially amongst young adults and teens. Skyrocketing rates of depression, anxiety, the opioid epidemic, a doubling of suicide rates, increased ADHD and overall malaise." And this goes hand in hand with the research of other experts like Dr. Ilardi: "Americans are 10 times more likely to have depressive illness than they were 60 years ago...and a recent study found the rate of depression has more than doubled in just the past decade." *Slick Text* reports that, "Compared to teens who only spend an hour on electronic devices daily, teens who spend five or

more hours a day on electronic devices are 71% more likely to exhibit suicide risk factors.” It’s no secret that our teens and youth are addicted to technology, and the effects are devastating.

Of course, there are ways to counteract these statistics. According to *Fight Addiction Now*, a website dedicated to empowering people to overcome and prevent addiction, “Physical activity is an essential part of any healthy living plan, but exercise holds distinct benefits for people recovering from substance abuse. In some cases, physical activity is necessary to rehabilitate the body after severe drug abuse, but the benefits are clear and measurable for any patient. Getting off your ass is one of the best things you can do for yourself in recovery.” If technology has catastrophic effects on our young, then we need to treat technology like an addiction, using the same strategies to battle it as one would with something like substance abuse. Therefore, our young need to be spending time outside, performing physical activities, and getting their blood pumping. Not only will this help take their mind off their phones, but it will foster, “a more natural and healthy dopamine cycle in the brain.” It, “also requires the person to work for it.” But what if our youth couldn’t go outside? And what if these already daunting, pre-pandemic statistics were to be exacerbated on another level? Welcome, COVID-19.

Millions have been locked in their homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, making the struggle with technology addiction an almost insurmountable obstacle for our youth and teens. With the inability to attend school, athletics, and meet with their friends and family, they lose crucial times of the day when they are forced to take breaks from technology. And with many schools shutting down, they have more downtime. This of course, leads them to spend hours and hours on their devices. And with teens spending more and more time on their devices, it’s taken a toll on their mental health, as well as physical health.

Blue light is a hamper in the production of melatonin, the body's natural sleeping agent. It stimulates the brain and keeps people up. Harvard Health suggests, "At night, light throws the body's biological clock—the circadian rhythm—out of whack. Sleep suffers. Worse, research shows that it may contribute to the causation of cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and obesity... While light of any kind can suppress the secretion of melatonin, blue light at night does so more powerfully. Harvard researchers and their colleagues conducted an experiment comparing the effects of 6.5 hours of exposure to blue light to exposure to green light of comparable brightness. The blue light suppressed melatonin for about twice as long as the green light and shifted circadian rhythms by twice as much (3 hours vs. 1.5 hours)." Therefore, the sleepless nights our teenagers have had on their devices because they didn't need to do homework or wake up for school the following day have thrown off their normal sleeping patterns, made them have worse sleep, and feel more tired.

And with people getting worse and worse sleep, means people are more susceptible to depression. Sleepfoundation.org says that, "Depression and sleep are closely connected... Depression and sleep have a bidirectional relationship. That means that poor sleep can contribute to the development of depression and that having depression makes a person more likely to develop sleep issues." They go on to say, "Sleep issues may contribute to the development of depression through changes in the function of the neurotransmitter serotonin. Sleep disruptors can affect the body's stress system, disrupting circadian rhythms and increasing vulnerability to depression." This process of technology addiction, technology induced depression, bad sleep, and depression induced by sleeping problems, seemingly, has the ability to spiral youth down a vortex of destruction. And let's not forget social media.

With teenagers being trapped inside and unable to connect with their friends in person, they have had to turn to social media to feel connected. Newport Academy, a series of evidence-based healing centers for adolescents and families struggling with mental health issues, eating disorders, and substance abuse, published an article on March 27, 2017 titled *Looking for 'Likes': Teens and Social Media Addiction*. And what did it say? “Kids who already feel isolated and unhappy are particularly vulnerable. Teens and social media addiction are an unfortunate match.” In addition, “...teens seek online experiences for a sense of escape and connection,” according to Nicholas Kardaras (mentioned above), author of *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction Is Hijacking Our Kids—and How to Break the Trance*. “But the relief is short-lived. Hence, the constant overstimulation of social networking shifts the nervous system into fight-or-flight mode. Also, this makes disorders such as ADHD, teen depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and teen-anxiety worse... for teens, being addicted to Facebook or other forms of social media is a never-ending addictive loop. Therefore, they keep coming back for more, whether their emotional response is good or bad.” And if they are addicted to the point where they can’t help but come back, what does that say about the lengths they will go to please their social media “friends.” What happens is, they resort to any means necessary to feel connected and valued, even if it means sharing provocative images of themselves for thousands to see.

When Nancy Jo Sales was writing the book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Our Teenagers*, she asked a group of teenagers, “...why do some girls post sexualized pictures?” Lily, who was a 14-year old girl in Garden City, N.Y. responded by saying, “I think it’s just to get attention. It’s to get the likes. Everything’s about the likes.” So if, as Sales states, “Kids who already feel isolated and unhappy are particularly vulnerable,” what does that say about our kids in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of whom have already been

experiencing isolation, loneliness, and teen depression? It means that our teens are more vulnerable than ever before.

So how can teens break the chains and avoid the dangers of excessive technology use during the pandemic? First, make an agreement with them as to when and where they can use their technology. Don't simply say, "Get off your phone," while you're watching the tv. Actually work with them to develop a plan, and abide by it. Also, don't present it as, "You're too addicted to your phone, so we're going to try to get you off of it." Present it as, "Let's spend more time together as a family," or, "We're all on our devices too much and missing out on things." The truth is that everyone is on their devices too much, and the better the example, the better the outcome. Second, give them things to do in replacement of technology, and give them things to do with technology. Learning an instrument or how to paint brings amazing benefits to the developing brain of a teenager, and if teens don't have as much to do, activities like these are great. Encouraging your kid to learn about things like the Stock Market, investing, career fields, etc., are all productive things they can be doing on technology. Remember, technology is only becoming a bigger part of our daily lives. The young people that find ways to use technology to their advantage are going to be successful in the future. This is the perfect time for kids to learn about what they actually like: business, film-making, photography, cars, etc., and instead of coming out of COVID unprepared and unknowledgeable, they could come out prepared and with a passion they can use in the real world. Third, make a schedule and ask your kids if they want to join it. One example would be going for a run every morning and going to bed by 10:00. Like already mentioned, physical activity will foster a natural release of dopamine, and set sleeping schedules that aren't interfered with blue light exposure will make one more rested, decreasing the chance of falling into depression, and therefore, suicide. Also, the older kids get, the more

they notice and understand the sacrifices their parents make for them. A parent will have better chances getting their kids to participate when they put themselves on the line; kids know dad might hurt when he works out. That makes dad's desire to exercise and spend time with them more meaningful. Furthermore, if you go somewhere to exercise, there's a greater chance that you'll actually stick to your regiment. It's with the same reasoning why experts say not to use technology in your room if you want better sleep: your brain will associate locations with what you do there. So working out in the living room might be a hard habit to keep since you do various things in the living room, while in contrast going to the park to run or outside to work out will probably have better results.

Though technology is unavoidable, especially during COVID-19, we can still combat the pernicious effects of excessive technology use, by doing simple, but powerful things each day. It will take sacrifice from all parties, but in the end, it will keep the teens of today mentally healthy so they can face the challenges of tomorrow.

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