Today’s technology can have a major influence on students’ mental wellness, self-esteem and relationships.
Given that more than 90 percent of U.S. households have three or more interactive devices, according to a recent Ericsson study, the ubiquity of technology has infiltrated and transformed the way our students view themselves. This has an impact on self-esteem, relationships, stress, coping skills and even sleep. Children are finding their way around a smartphone keyboard faster than they learn the alphabet, probably wondering why the letter “B” is next to “A,” instead of “S.” Better yet, emoticons provide a new way of expressing an array of feelings. Of course, cyberbullying and online harassment add another layer to this complicated web.

**Mental Health Implications**

Researchers are fascinated with the effects of social media on our mental health. Countless studies have been conducted to look at the relationship between social media use and mental health. Is there causality or just correlation? The National Institutes of Health (NIH) published an article explaining that although there is no conclusive evidence that sites such as Facebook or Instagram cause depression, perhaps what is most relevant to our work with students is that signs and predictors of depression and other mental health disorders are likely to manifest in one’s behavior on social media. This could result in earlier detection and subsequent treatment of disorders such as depression.

This also means that a cry for mental health support could take the form of an emotionally laden post or ambiguous message. Chances are most of our students will come across such online activity. Fortunately, social media sites have caught onto this trend and are taking prudent measures to address users’ mental health. For instance, Facebook provides guidelines for users on what to do if they see a post about self-harm or suicide. There lies opportunity for school counselors to help students know what to do when clues emerge online that a person could harm him- or herself.

NIH also examined how technology and social media are influencing suicide-related behavior. Unfortunately, there have been several cases in which teens have documented a live suicide on social media channels, such as 14-year-old Naika Venant, who livestreamed her death earlier this year. Another tragic case hit headlines this spring when a young girl was charged with malicious use of technology after faking her own suicide. Media reports suggest that her boyfriend at the time, 11-year-old Tysen Benz, killed himself after learning his girlfriend was dead. What was supposed to be a prank turned fatal.

Although these cases are rare, it does remind us that any issue of prevalence, such as mental health or suicide, will find its way into the social media landscape. Now that suicide has been rearing its ugly head in social media, Facebook has ramped up its efforts to prevent suicide by employing artificial intelligence to identify suicidal thoughts in livestream activity and posts to provide opportunities for intervention.

**Social Media Can Be Messy**

Today’s students are navigating fresh terrain with the omnipresence and accessibility of technology. Social media and technology represent a double-edged sword that invites promise, innovation and a tangle of messy implications. So what does this mean for the work of school counselors who support the whole child from kindergarten up until high school graduation?

Technology gives students an entry point into a world that is so vast and multifaceted at a time, developmentally speaking, when there is a tremendous focus on the self. K-12 students are learning about themselves and sculpting their identity. Technology and social media play a role in shaping how children see and feel about themselves. Common Sense Media found children ages 8-18 spend more than seven hours a day engaged in technology and media. How can all that screen time not have an impact on development? Certainly, this leaves less time for things like spending quality time with people, sleeping, reading and studying.

For healthy self-esteem to develop, positive feelings toward oneself must be cultivated from within. Social media provides a constant and open platform for users to seek approval and affirmation — a desire that peaks as kids move into adolescence. In other words, social media allows for self-worth to be assessed based on input from others during a time where students can be most vulnerable as they seek to assimilate with their peer group.

Let’s not forget that social networking sites provide an opportunity to constantly compare physical attributes, achievements and engagement in social activities in real time. Social media updates reveal things like who was at the party, how did he/she look in a bathing suit, and then there’s the humble brag about winning an award or being accepted into your first-choice college. This can breed feelings of inadequacy and even jealousy.

Let’s consider how crushing it might be for children to post pictures in which they feel good about themselves and not get the positive feedback they had anticipated from others, especially their peers. Taking it a step further, what if a friend or classmate garners more attention for a similar post?

To gain peer approval, kids and teens have found the use of selfies. According
to Teen Vogue, millennials are estimated to take about 25,000 selfie snapshots over their lifespan. Although selfie culture might seem like a temporary trend and rather harmless, there is a caveat when these channels don’t produce the expected reaction. Negative selfie feedback or the absence of feedback could be deflating to a child or teen whose self-esteem may already be on shaky ground.

The desire to capture an idyllic selfie has led some people to snap photos of themselves in precarious situations like on train tracks or on the edge of a cliff. Sadly, some of these dangerous snapshots have resulted in death.

Appearance Obsession
Another concern with selfies is that the feedback received is almost always centered on one’s physical appearance, which can lead students to obsess over the way they look on social media.

A study published by the International Journal of Eating Disorders found female subjects felt greater body dissatisfaction after scrolling through social media posts than those female subjects who were told to research rainforest cats.

It can be difficult for kids and teens to realize the pictures they see on their friends’ Facebook pages or Instagram may not be an accurate depiction but instead a filtered version of the self they wish to promote. Oftentimes, what is posted is a false illusion and doesn’t give the full picture.

Social networking sites produce a two-way window of self-evaluation as we try to see how others perceive us, while also giving us a chance to compare ourselves to others and see how we stack up. This brings us to a heightened awareness of self, which can be further explained by the objective self-awareness theory. Essentially, this theory explains that when we see ourselves more objectively as an outsider would, it can have a diminishing effect on our self-esteem. This can occur when we look at photographs of ourselves or hear a recording of our voice, as we often hone in on the features we find unfavorable. All this focus on the self can also lead to an exaggerated sense of self-importance, which has characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder, in which low self-esteem is at the core.

School counselors can find opportunities to help students tap into their strengths and form positive opinions of self that aren’t as dependent on external affirmation, while also helping students understand the limitations of social media in improving self-esteem.

Your Brain on Likes
Why are those “likes” on social media so sought after if they do little to improve how we feel about ourselves? Researchers at UCLA found the reward center of a teen’s brain is activated by social media “likes.” The feel-good effects of a “like” have been compared to the brain response when eating chocolate or winning money, the Association for Psychological Science reported.

Behavior that is positively reinforced is likely to be repeated, so when a post
gets “likes” it makes us want to do it again and again. Although social media “likes” may fuel some pleasurable feelings, albeit fleeting, they do little to enhance a person’s positive self-concept. Turning to social media to boost feelings about one’s self may actually backfire as it leaves a void where emotional needs go unmet. It feels good, but the “likes” are often superficial actions.

As humans, we crave social connectivity, and the desire to belong is even more intense for children and teens. The desire for connecting is so severe most teens sleep with their phones, worried they will miss out on a message in the wee hours of the night. The intensity of this want for acceptance is so great psychologists have begun to study the phenomenon of “phantom ringing” and “phantom vibration.” It’s as though the technology has become an extension of our body.

Studies have found that when people feel lonesome they will literally imagine hearing the sound of their ringer or slight buzz on an electronic device. This brings us to the notion of the addictive properties of technology. Even when it is not alerting us of a new update, we imagine someone is reaching out to us.

Although NIH found social media and technology can enhance some close-knit relationships with friends and family, research suggests too much time spent on social media can have an adverse impact on relationships. Less time is devoted to forming meaningful relationships that build over time. When social media circles grow too large, close friendships may suffer.

Similar to acquiring “likes,” our brain responds positively to the sharing of information about ourselves, but when done on social media it often lacks mutual self-disclosure where we slowly reveal snippets about ourselves to build connections with people in an intimate way. It used to be that if you did something interesting over the weekend, a select few would know because you shared this first-hand. Now people can feel a false sense of connectivity to a person’s life without really knowing who they are but instead having a window into a person’s carefully crafted world.

**Communication Skills**

For students, technology has major implications when it comes to communication skills and face-to-face interactions. A UCLA study found that students who went without technology for a week were better able to read emotions than those who maintained their current use of technology. For our students, it is important

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they understand that forming an emotional connection with a friend requires an exchange of communication that happens through facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and sharing the same physical space. Imagine that many of our students have never answered a telephone without knowing who the caller is ahead of time. Something as simple as using a neutral phone greeting is absent from our students’ interactions.

Without all those elements of communication, empathy and intimacy will fall short. For some students who feel anxious about social interactions, social media provides a safe shield for interaction but can further intensify anxious feelings about face-to-face interactions.

Although the implications of technology and social media on students are vast and complicated, it is imperative that school counselors try to decipher our students’ ever-changing world. It is critical to understand that all the domains we address as school counselors – academic, career and social/emotional – will transcend the technology and social media landscape. As we work to support students’ mental health, self-esteem and healthy relationships, viewing these issues through our students’ lens will only further enhance the work we do with students.

Support Students
School counselors can do a number of things to support students in this digital age.

• Bring attention and awareness to the positive and negative impacts of technology and social media.
• Teach students to be deliberate about their social media activity.
• Help students understand when a person may need help online and what steps to take when they suspect someone may be in danger.
• Educate students on the limitations of social media and technology.
• Encourage students and families to unplug and take note of how they feel.
• Help students sharpen their social skills, such as phone etiquette, introductions, self-advocacy skills and the notion of mutual self-disclosure.

Social media can have a positive or negative impact on our students. It’s clearly a major part of their lives, and school counselors owe it to their students to help them navigate it in the mostly healthy way possible.

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