

Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health

Fact sheet: The coronavirus, depression, and social media use among U.S. teens and young adults (age 14–22)

This fact sheet presents data from a nationally representative survey of more than 1,500 14- to 22-year-olds in the U.S., conducted in September–November 2020 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, on behalf of Common Sense, the California Health Care Foundation, and Hopelab. The survey included the PHQ-8 scale to measure symptoms of depression. The complete survey findings, methodology, quotes from participants, and text of the questionnaire are available [here](#).

Rates of depressive symptoms have increased substantially among teens and young adults over the past two years; those directly affected by the coronavirus have higher rates than others their age.

- 38% of all 14- to 22-year-olds report symptoms of moderate to severe depression, up from 25% in 2018.
- Among young people who say that they or a family member became sick from the coronavirus, half (51%) report symptoms of moderate to severe depression, compared to 36% of others their age.

Social media has played an important role in keeping youth informed and connected during the coronavirus pandemic.

- About half (53%) of young people say social media has been "very" important to them during the pandemic for staying connected to friends and family, and about a third say social media has been "very" important for staying informed about current events (34%) and understanding how to protect themselves against the virus (31%).

Young people are far more likely to say that using social media makes them feel better rather than worse when they are feeling down; those with depressive symptoms consider social media even more important than others their age do.

- 43% of all 14- to 22-year-old social media users say that when they feel depressed, stressed, or anxious, using social media usually makes them feel better, compared to just 17% who say it makes them feel worse (the rest say it makes no difference either way). This is up from 27% who said social media made them feel better in 2018.
- Among those with moderate to severe depressive symptoms, 29% say social media is "very" important for getting inspiration from others (vs. 17% for those without symptoms), 28% say it's "very" important for feeling less alone (vs. 13%), and 26% say it's "very" important for getting support or advice when needed (vs. 15%).

Young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms use social media far more frequently than others their age, and their use of social media has increased over the past two years.

- Young people with moderate to severe depressive symptoms are nearly twice as likely as those without depression to say they use social media "almost constantly" (34% vs. 18%).
- In 2018, 21% of youth with moderate to severe depressive symptoms used social media "almost constantly"; today, 34% do.
- The percent of those with depression who say social media is "very" important for getting support and advice has more than doubled since 2018, from 11% to 26%.

Among young people reporting symptoms of severe depression, social media may pose greater concerns.

- 5% of our survey sample report experiencing symptoms of "severe" levels of depression. Since this group represents a small sample size, findings should be viewed with extreme caution.
- There are indications that social media plays an outsized role among this small group: It's more important for inspiration (43% say it's "very" important, vs. 17% of those without depression) and feeling less alone (49% say "very" important, vs. 13%), but it's also more likely to make respondents feel anxious, lonely, or depressed (42% say using social media during the pandemic has made them feel more anxious, compared to 10% of those without depression).

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