

VeryWell Mind:

How to Deal With FOMO in Your Life

Don't let FOMO get in the way of your happiness

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If you've ever scrolled through your social media feed and felt like there was something missing from your life, then you know exactly how FOMO feels.

FOMO

The fear of missing out, or FOMO, refers to the feeling or perception that others are having more fun, living better lives, or experiencing better things than you are. It involves a deep sense of envy—and it can take a serious toll on your self-esteem.

It's not just the sense that there might be better things that you could be doing at this moment, but it is the feeling that you are missing out on something fundamentally important that others are experiencing right now. In your mind, it may seem that everyone else is having this amazing experience, and you're the one who is missing out.

The phenomenon is becoming increasingly common—in part thanks to social media—and can cause a lot of stress in your life. It can affect just about anyone, but some people are at greater risk.

Keep reading to find out what you should know about the history of FOMO, what research says, how to recognize it in your life, and how to manage FOMO to keep it from negatively affecting your happiness.

Is FOMO a New Phenomenon?

The idea that you might be missing out on a good time is not new to our era. However, while it has presumably been around for centuries (you can see evidence of FOMO in ancient texts), it has only been studied during the past few decades, beginning with a 1996 research paper by marketing strategist, Dr. Dan Herman, who coined the term "fear of missing out."

Since the advent of social media, however, FOMO has become more obvious and has been studied more often. Social media has accelerated the FOMO phenomenon in several ways.

Social media creates a situation in which you compare your regular life to the highlights of others' lives.

Therefore, your sense of "normal" becomes skewed and you seem to be doing worse than your peers. You might see detailed photos of your friends enjoying fun times without you, which is something that people may not have been so readily aware of in past generations.

Social media creates a platform for bragging; it is where things, events, and even happiness itself seems to be in competition at times. People are comparing their best, picture-perfect experiences, which may lead you to wonder what you are lacking.

What the Research Says About FOMO

FOMO may not be new, but formal research on this phenomenon is still emerging. As more research on FOMO is conducted and becomes available, we are getting a clearer picture of what it entails and how it affects us.

Unfortunately, the picture is not pretty. FOMO has many detrimental effects—plus, it's actually a lot more common than you might expect.

Social Networking Sites

Teens tend to use social networking sites at a high rate. According to a 2023 Gallup survey, slightly more than half of U.S. teens report spending at least four hours per day on social media apps, including Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter).

They also tend to be at an age where they are particularly vulnerable to comparing themselves unfavorably to their peers. As a result, FOMO can have a powerful and often devastating impact on teenagers who spend a great deal of time on social media.

Girls experiencing depression tend to use social networking sites at a greater rate while, for boys, anxiety was a trigger for greater social media use. This shows that increased use of social media can lead to higher stress rates caused by FOMO.

FOMO, Age, and Gender

People of all ages can experience FOMO, several studies have found. One study in the *Psychiatry Research* journal found that the fear of missing out was linked to greater smartphone and social media usage and that this link was not associated with age or gender.

So what is the key cause of FOMO? While multiple factors likely play a role, the research also found that social media use and "problematic" smartphone usage were linked with a greater experience of FOMO. Smartphone usage was related to fears of negative and even positive evaluations by others as well as linked to negative effects on mood.

Adolescents and young people may be particularly susceptible to the effects of FOMO. Seeing friends and others posting on social media can lead to comparison and an intense fear of missing out on things their peers are experiencing.

FOMO can contribute to peer pressure, leading teens to engage in risky behaviors they might otherwise avoid. Because the teenage brain is still developing, teens may engage in such actions without considering the lasting consequences.

Life Satisfaction Rating

Research also indicates that FOMO can affect people's satisfaction with their lives. Fear of missing out was associated with a lower sense of having one's needs met and a lower feeling of life satisfaction in general.

As other studies have suggested, FOMO was heavily linked to higher engagement in social media. FOMO appears to be linked to both feeling a need to engage in social media and increasing that engagement. FOMO and social media habits may contribute to a negative, self-perpetuating cycle.

What You Can Do to Minimize FOMO

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to curb FOMO if it is something you experience often.

Research shows that a fear of missing out can stem from unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life and that these feelings can propel us to use social media more. The problem is that greater engagement with social media can make us feel worse about ourselves and our lives, not better.

It helps to know that our attempts to alleviate feelings of FOMO can often lead to behaviors that exacerbate it. However, understanding where the problem lies can be a great first step in overcoming it. The following can help.

Change Your Focus

Rather than focusing on what you lack, try noticing what you have. This is easier said than done on social media, where we may be bombarded with images of things we do not have, but it can be done. Add more positive people to your feed; hide people who tend to brag too much or who are not supportive of you.

You can change your feed to show you less of what triggers your FOMO and more of what makes you feel good about yourself. Work on identifying what may be sapping your joy online. Work to minimize these as you add more to your feed (and life) that makes you happy.

Try a Digital Detox

Spending too much time on your phone or social media apps can increase FOMO. Reducing your usage, or even doing a digital detox where you take a break from digital devices, may help you focus more on your life without making constant comparisons.

If doing a complete digital detox isn't possible, consider limiting your use of certain social media apps that make you feel as if you are missing out. Temporarily remove those apps, set daily limits on how much you will use them, or cull your feed to remove people who make you feel bad about yourself or your life.

Keep a Journal

It is common to post on social media to keep a record of the fun things you do. However, you may find yourself noticing a little too much about whether people are validating your experiences online. If this is the case, you may want to take some of your photos and memories offline and keep a personal journal of your best memories, either online or on paper.

Keeping a journal can help you to shift your focus from public approval to private appreciation of the things that make your life great. This shift can sometimes help you to get out of the cycle of social media and FOMO.

Seek Out Real Connections

You may find yourself seeking a greater connection when you are feeling depressed or anxious, and this is healthy. Feelings of loneliness or exclusion are actually our brain's way of telling us that we want to seek out greater connections with others and increase our sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, social media engagement is not always the way to accomplish this—you might be running from one bad situation right into an even worse one. Rather than trying to connect more with people on social media, why not arrange to meet up with someone in person?

Making plans with a good friend, creating a group outing, or doing anything social that gets you out with friends can be a nice change of pace, and it can help you to shake that feeling that you are missing out. It puts you in the center of the action.

If you do not have time to make plans, even a direct message on social media to a friend can foster a greater and more intimate connection than posting to all of your friends and hoping for "likes."

Focus on Gratitude

Studies show that engaging in gratitude-enhancing activities—like gratitude journaling or simply telling others what you appreciate about them—can lift your spirits and those of everyone around you.¹⁰

This is partially because it is harder to feel you lack the things you need when focused on the abundance you already have. Making others feel good also makes us feel good.

Gratitude can be a powerful way to alleviate feelings of depression and anxiety. Because you feel better about the good things in your life, you are also less tempted to go down the rabbit hole of social networking and FOMO.

Takeaways

Although FOMO is strongly correlated with social media usage, it is important to remember that it is a very real and common feeling among people of all ages. Everyone feels a certain level of FOMO at different times in their lives.

If you feel you are suffering from feelings of missing out, it can be helpful to reach out to a friend or spend some time reflecting on the things you are grateful for in your life. Activities like these can help us put things in perspective as we gather a greater sense of belonging and release the anxiety of "missing out" on anything.