

Health

The effect of social media on our mental health is well documented. None of us is completely immune to the potentially harmful impact of spending too much time and energy on Instagram. Even if striving to have a purely commercial relationship with the platform, it's almost impossible not to let our emotions get involved.

The goal is to have all the benefits of Instagram without the negatives. We're winning when we leverage Instagram to grow our brand's influence. We're losing when we end up mindlessly scrolling the feed. It's essential to achieve production, not consumption, when it comes to social media.

Using technology to our advantage

Technology has the power to unite, removing many of the barriers that once existed between people from all over the world. However, social media can also be divisive. It creates an algorithm-driven echo chamber leading to insular and extreme views that are open to manipulation. Social media should be used to facilitate and enhance our real-world experiences, not replace them. These include:

- ✔ People buying and benefiting from your product
- ✔ People meeting you in real life
- ✔ Staying in touch to deepen relationships
- ✔ People visiting your shop or venue

Addictive by design

The popularity of social networks is no accident. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram are designed to be addictive. They are monetised through brands advertising to their users, so the greater the number of users and the longer they spend on their accounts, the more money the platforms stand to make.

Instagram employs an 'endless scroll' format, meaning users can keep scrolling posts as long as they want. According to the algorithm, as they go further and further into the archives, the posts should be of decreasing relevance to the user. However, if the urge is there, there is no shortage of content.

This feature also means that there's no natural end to the activity, as there would be when watching a film or reading a magazine. Therefore, Instagram can become a serious time and mental energy sponge without us realising. Opening the app and scrolling becomes a habit that we perform without even thinking about it.

The buzz that people get when they receive notifications on social media is a result of chemical changes in our brain. The 'happy' hormones dopamine and oxytocin are released in response to activities on social media, which make it so addictive. Our bodies crave those little buzzes and that's why we're so compelled to keep checking out the latest posts.

Mental health implications

A UK survey carried out by the BBC suggested that Instagram is rated as the worst social media platform when it comes to its impact on young people's mental health. 1,479 people aged 14–24 were asked to score apps on factors such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, bullying and body image.

FOMO (the 'fear of missing out') is a common form of anxiety caused by social media. If we see people having a great time while we're not there, this can create unhelpful thought patterns. This is the same for brands and businesses too. It's easy to feel that our brand isn't as successful as we'd like and we're missing out on things our competitors are doing.

Comparing our reality, both personal and business, to another account's edited feed rarely ends well. The insecurities we have are exacerbated, while we have little control over what other people get up to and what they post.

This section works through five valuable tips to avoid becoming drawn in by Instagram's addictiveness and the potential mental health issues associated with it.

1. Don't let Instagram monopolise your time

Stay in control of the time you spend on Instagram so that it doesn't monopolise your day. Approach your activity in a clinical way to make sure you get all the benefits without any of the downsides.

SET TIME LIMITS

Parkinson's Law states that tasks expand to fill the time made available for them. Before starting any Instagram activity, set a timer and stop when the time's up. You might be amazed at how productive you are.

SCHEDULE TIME AWAY FROM INSTAGRAM

Use Instagram's own 'time on Instagram' feature to monitor your daily usage and set limits. Be strict with yourself and resist the urge to use the override function.

BATCH ACTIVITIES

When you suddenly think of ideas for your Instagram, write them down. Only open Instagram when you have more than five written down and resist the urge to constantly open the app.

SIGNPOST ACTIVE HOURS

If you run an account designed for customer service, include your active hours in the bio. This way your audience knows when to expect a response and you don't need to check so frequently.

HIDE THE APP

Social media app icons are designed to be shiny and enticing. Keep your Instagram app off your home screen. Hide it away on the second screen or in a folder to ensure you use it deliberately not mindlessly.

PRODUCING OVER CONSUMING

Notice when you are 'producing' content, engagement and ideas rather 'consuming' via scrolling and checking. Tip the balance in favour of producing.

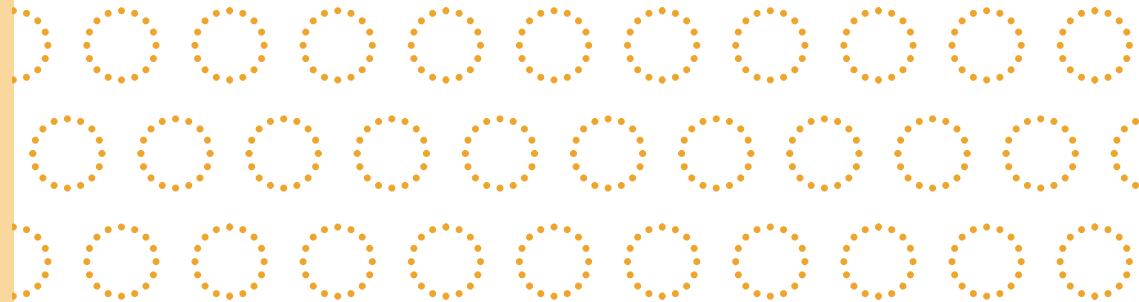
2. Don't let Instagram affect your sleep

Late-night Instagramming is a recipe for a bad night's sleep. It's well documented that the blue light emitted by devices disturbs the natural production of melatonin, which controls the body's sleep cycles. Using your phone tricks your body into thinking it's time to be awake.

However, more than this and your brain will be awake with thoughts of content, ideas, metrics and the lives of the people you follow – all of which can wait until the morning.

To counteract this, create boundaries based on when you will carry out your Instagram activity.

- Set a cut-off time, at least an hour before your bedtime, when you will put your phone away.
- Don't Instagram in bed. Buy an alarm clock instead of using your phone's alarm and keep your phone out of reach of your bed entirely. You could charge it in a different room overnight.
- If you only use Instagram as part of your 9-to-5 role, consider using a separate phone that you leave at your place of work, so you're not tempted to work on it in the evening.



3. Remember your purpose

Social media can enhance someone's profile but rarely can it fabricate one from scratch. Not one of substance, anyway. Create an account of substance by committing to being exceptional in whatever it is that you do.

The most popular and well-loved Instagram accounts are those people and brands whose purpose is bigger than simply growing their Instagram accounts. They do something else really well. These accounts include world-class athletes, exciting brands, movie stars, entertainers and singers. Everyone is an artist honing their craft and the more they do this, the more it translates to Instagram success.

Your brand has a purpose. It might involve producing products that people love to use, providing a service that makes a difference or inspiring or motivating people into action by the example you set and the story you share. Focus on doing great work first and compel people into looking for you online. The more your customers love you, the more they will actively seek you out.

Keep Instagram in perspective by:

- defining the purpose of your work and prioritising it
- seeing your presence on Instagram as a fun and challenging game
- not taking anything personally (negative comments, unfollows, etc)
- remembering that behind every handle is a real person
- using it to promote and explain the work that you do, not replace it
- being the same person online as you are in real life
- treating everyone with kindness and respect.

4. Don't obsess over follower numbers

Your worth is not defined by the number of followers you have. Ensure that your mood or satisfaction is never tied to how well your latest post has been received. Quality counts for much more than quantity.

Focus on the inputs – the things you can control – and see everything else as playing a game. If your account isn't where you want it to be, it just means people haven't found you yet. Look at the bigger picture and keep perspective.

If you're a business to business (B2B) brand, only serving customers fitting a certain criteria, you might not naturally gather as many fans as a global customer-led brand would. Perhaps your account is relatively new. Don't compare the first few steps of your journey with established accounts that have been playing the game for longer. See them as inspiration showing what is possible and don't feel disheartened.

Focus on providing a service to your existing follower base, getting to know them and designing your content to surprise and delight them and turn them into superfans. Chasing growth in favour of serving your existing network is a distraction. Serve your network well and the growth will happen.

If you have built a huge Instagram following that isn't translating into sales, realise that you've done the hard part. Take the next steps to work out what is missing and address it from the solid platform you've built. Turning Instagram into a valuable asset and not just a vanity platform takes consistency and is a long-term endeavour. The best view often comes after the hardest climb.

5. Stick to your own game

The more certain you are of your purpose, your goals and the route you will take to achieve them, the less you will worry about unhealthy comparisons.

Instagram is someone's carefully edited showreel. It's not their real life. Scrolling your home feed will inevitably result in seeing the milestones, travelogues and announcements of everyone you follow. Taking inspiration from other accounts and using it to explore new techniques or features to improve your own feed is good. Feeling happy for others without feeling envious is good. Comparisons that lead to insecurity, anxiety or sadness are not good.

Use the following steps to stick to your own game:

1. Regularly revisit your goals. Remind yourself of your progress and ensure you're working towards achievements that actually matter to you.
2. Be headstrong. As your account grows, you might start to receive advice on how you should post. Others might try to pull you in their direction for their benefit. Scrutinise carefully and say 'no' more than you say 'yes'.
3. Take the right steps for you. When you feel yourself becoming sidetracked by external opinions or influences, take a step back and reassess.
4. Don't take anything personally. Not everyone will like what you put out there, and that's fine. You don't need to impress everyone. Ignore any trolls because they aren't happy people.
5. Use only your former self as competition. Only compare your present to your own past and your own future.

Putting yourself or your brand out there on Instagram is a choice. You can opt out at any time. If it ceases to be what you want to do, you can log out, you can post less, you can make your account private, or you can outsource the activity to someone else. You have options. Those who win at the game are those who can take all the positives without internalising the negatives.

My favourite word is the Greek word 'euthymia'. From Seneca's essays, this translates as: 'Believing in yourself and trusting that you are on the right path, and not being in doubt by following the myriad footpaths of those wandering in every direction.'

I wish you a fulfilling and prosperous Instagram journey.