

Technostress: How social media keeps us coming back for more even when it makes us unhappy

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If you ever find yourself looking forward to a holiday because you'll be able to switch off your smartphone then perhaps you're suffering from [social media "technostress"](#). The constant stream of messages, updates and content that social media apps deliver right to our pockets can sometimes feel like a social overload, invading your personal space and obliging you to reply in order to maintain friendships.

You'd think an obvious response to this problem would be to stop using our devices or deleting the apps. But we have recently [published research](#) showing that, when faced with this pressure, many of us end up digging deeper and using our phones more frequently, often compulsively or even addictively.

Conventional wisdom implies that when people are faced with a stressful social situation, for example, an argument with someone—they cope with the stress by distancing themselves. They take a walk, go for a run, play with their kids. But when the [stressful situations stem from the use of social media](#), we find people tend to adopt one of two very different coping strategies.

We surveyed 444 Facebook users from Germany three times over a year to find out how they responded to social media technostress. Sometimes, as we might have expected, they diverted or distracted themselves with unrelated activities such as hobbies. But counter-intuitively, we found it was more common for people to distract themselves by using social media even more.

Social media apps and websites are what we call feature-rich technologies, meaning there are lots of ways to use them. On Facebook, you can play games, read the news, plan a holiday by looking at travel related posts, or chat with your friends. Each of these actions is done in a different context and takes you into a different realm within the app. This allows you to view a single app in different ways.

So if, for example, you experience social media technostress from a friend's post about cruelty to animals or from losing a game, you can "get away" from that stress by diverting your attention to something more pleasant and relaxing within the app.

Such diversions sound harmless at first. But they can suck you into a never ending loop of social media technostress and social media diversion that keeps you stuck on the source of your stress. This can even form a symptom of addiction, where you constantly look for a short-term fix from the very thing that is causing you long-term problems. Alarmingly, we found that the more you use social media, the more likely you are to do this.

Concern over the potential negative effects of social media have led governments to start acting to protect citizens. US lawmakers have [proposed banning](#) features of social media that may have addictive properties, such as infinite content feeds and autoplaying of videos.

Behaviour shapes harmful effects

Yet while such features may be designed to keep people using social media for longer, it's also becoming clear that it's how people use their apps and how they react to social media that shapes any harmful effects. If people see social media as a stress buster as well as a stress creator, then they are more likely to increase their use in response to the pressure it generates.

The first step to tackling this kind of reaction is awareness. If we can become more aware of all the different ways we behave on social [media](#), we'll be more likely to separate the [harmful effects](#) from the more benign ones, and so avoid using it in a harmful way.

So the next time you're feeling technostress from [social media](#), it might be better to put your phone down altogether rather than seeking refuge even deeper in your apps. Otherwise, before you know it, you may have spent minutes or even hours of "dead" time doing nothing other than flitting from one function to another in order to divert yourself.

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