

💡 LJP Top Tips:

# Being Mentally Well Online: 7 Steps to a Healthy Media Diet

*the lily jo project*

## **BLOG RESEARCH + WRITING + SOCIAL GRAPHICS**

A blog article examining the impact of social media on mental health. Followed up with practical tips on how to create a "media diet" - see it live [here](#).

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Audience / The Lily-Jo Project's online community, geared for teens and adults.

Niche / Mental Health & Wellbeing

Voice / American English

## Being Mentally Well Online: 7 Steps to a Healthy Media Diet

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One of the benefits of lockdown and social distancing has been this unique opportunity to spend some extra time at home. And while I, like many, have tried to use that extra time productively, I know I can't be the only one who feels as if it's being wasted in front of a screen.

I stare at a screen all day for work. I stare at the TV screen in the evenings for entertainment. And I am constantly checking my mobile device to read the news or catch up on social media. Sometimes, I'm even staring at two screens at once!

I am in a constant battle between living in the present moment, staying connected with friends and family, and staying informed about the rest of the world. It's too much. And it's exhausting.

The good news? I am not alone. In fact, nearly 44% of people worldwide have admitted to spending more time on social media than they did before the pandemic. And according to Ofcom, adults in the UK now spend over a quarter of their waking day online – which is an increase of 30 minutes compared to just September of 2019.

### The Reality

As the reality of this pandemic sets in, we must accept the fact that our lives will likely now involve more time in front of a screen – at least for the foreseeable future.

And even though we can't escape virtual coffee breaks with colleagues or the endless work/school related Zoom calls, it is important to remember that we do in fact still have control over the media we consume in our free time. You don't have to attend every virtual birthday party and you certainly don't have to respond to work-related emails after 5 o'clock. You can disable your notifications, and you can also unfollow social media accounts that make you feel stressed.

Screens are a part of our lives now, and it's up to us to make sure that we consume digital media in a responsible way that enhances, rather than hurts, our mental wellbeing.

## How Does Media Affect Mental Health?

So how does the media we consume actually affect our mental health? Here's what some of the research says:

- Social media use in particular has been linked to increased depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. It has also been associated with poor sleep quality, which can in turn negatively impact our mental health and wellbeing.
- Extended use of video chat platforms, such as Zoom or FaceTime, have been reported as having a negative impact on the user's body image.
- High levels of screen time in general have also been associated with reduced physical activity, increased risk of depression, and a lower sense of wellbeing.

In some cases, our media use is more about what we're not doing rather than what we are doing. We're watching a viral video instead of practicing an instrument or going for a walk. We're googling a random fact instead of giving our partner our full attention. And as we mindlessly scroll through content, some of us (myself included) begin to feel increasingly stressed, isolated, and unhappy with the world we live in.

## Introducing the 'Media Diet' Concept

As someone who works in the marketing and communications field, I am well aware of how addicting social media and casual web browsing can be – it's what makes the internet such a great place for advertising! However, I was never able to recognize my own vulnerabilities with digital media until I stumbled upon the concept of a 'media diet'.

A 'media diet' is simply a way to conceptualize the types and quantities of media that we consume with our minds. And just like with food – everyone has a media diet whether they are intentional about it or not. A media diet can encompass any of the following factors:

- The amount of time we spend each day in front of a screen
- The brands and voices we follow on social media
- The type(s) of content we consume for entertainment
- The quality of our daily news sources
- And many other factors

So what makes a media diet 'healthy'? Similar to a nutritional diet, it can look different for everyone. However, as a rule of thumb, our 'media diet' should:

- Have clear time boundaries
- Include a variety of voices and formats
- Keep us adequately informed
- Bring us joy
- Be well-balanced

If you think that your media consumption patterns may be impacting your mental health, here is a look at 7 steps for creating a mentally healthy media diet for your lifestyle.

## **7 Steps for Creating a Mentally Healthy Media Diet**

### **Step 1: Reflect on your current media usage**

Before you do anything, take a moment to reflect on your current media usage patterns. How do they make you feel? It can be so easy to passively scroll through our Facebook or Instagram feeds, and we forget that we are actually in control of what we see and put into our minds.

You may want to ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I feel when I use Instagram/Facebook/Twitter
- Do certain accounts that I follow make me feel better/worse about myself?
- Do certain accounts that I follow make me feel better/worse about the world?
- Am I spending too much time passively scrolling when I could be doing something more productive?

Once we are honest with ourselves, we can then make the right decisions about who to follow and listen to.

## **Step 2: Clean up your news feed by unfollowing or 'snoozing' unhealthy accounts**

As a social media user, you actually have a lot of power when it comes to curating your news feed. Remember, your newsfeed is YOURS and you can control just about everything that you see.

The best way to clean up your news feed is to take a cold hard look at who exactly you follow. In most cases, you will have a range of interests and contacts that you have accumulated over the years. A good amount of variety is great – however, you should consider unfollowing toxic accounts that do any of the following:

- **Promote unrealistic and unhealthy body types**

Even if you do not suffer from body-image issues or an eating disorder, it may be best to unfollow accounts portraying unrealistic images of the human body. These types of accounts can make us feel bad about ourselves and can even contribute to low-mood, eating disorders, and depression.

If you need additional support with overcoming issues with body image or body anxiety, you may find our recent article, "[How to Cope With Body Anxiety & Covid-19: 6 Practical Tips](#)" to be helpful.

- **Portray moments of success in a way that might be sensitive or hurtful to you**

It's great to celebrate others and be inspired by their achievements. However, sometimes it can be really hard to see others achieve milestones in their lives, while we are in the midst of a crisis or feeling particularly vulnerable.

For example, if you have just lost your job, it's okay to 'snooze' your friends who always seem to post about how great their career is. If you are going through a divorce, it's okay to 'snooze' your friends who seem to be in a perfect relationship. If you have just suffered from a miscarriage, it's okay to 'snooze' your friends who have just had a baby.

If these posts make you feel worse about yourself, it's okay to take a break. Remember, you can always come back when you're in a better place, and never forget that social media is more of a highlight reel rather than an accurate portrayal of life.

- **Share inflammatory or frequently inaccurate information**

We are experiencing a moment in history where news content has never been so available – and yet so biased, inflammatory, and incorrect. To make sure that you stay well informed, take a look at where you are reading/watching the news – are the sources credible? I personally love this [chart by Ad Fontes Media](#), which rates news sources based on their level of bias and reliability.

Try to include a good mix of high-quality news sources from a variety of perspectives. This is the best way to stay on top of what's going on in the world without becoming burned out with toxic news content.

- **Bully others or promote offensive content**

Accounts that bully others or promote racist, xenophobic, misogynistic, divisive, and any other type of offensive content do not deserve a place on your news feeds. Even if you do not agree with them, they can often cause stress and frustration within our minds – not to mention, they can be tempting to comment on. Even if the account is light-hearted or just 'for fun', try to avoid consuming this type of toxic media passively. Remember, you can unfollow your friends without unfriending them. You can also block all ads from certain advertisers who may be promoting offensive or insensitive content.

### **Step 3: Actively follow quality organizations and individuals**

Once your news feed is cleaned up, the fun can begin! Enhance your life with content that helps you do the following things:

- **Feel connected**

The ability to stay connected with others around the world 24/7 is one of the best things that social media does for us. That being said, if someone isn't your friend in real life, you don't have to give them access to your social media account. You also don't have to 'like' or 'follow' your friend's business pages if you don't want to. Your page is about YOU, and you don't have to connect with people or organizations that you don't want to.

- **Find enjoyment**

There are a ton of pages out there that celebrate just about every interest and hobby. Follow pages that you ENJOY. Fill it with your hobbies, interests, positive pages, favorite TV shows, puppy videos, and everything else that you LOVE.

- **Learn**

Social media is also a great way to learn and receive practical tips about anything from budgeting and vegan cooking, to DIY fashion and juggling. Follow accounts that teach you something new about life.

- **Stay informed**

If you are not in the habit of reading the news each day already, it's a good idea to include a few news sources in your newsfeed. However, make sure that the sources you add are reliable, accurate, and present the news in an unbiased way.

#### **Step 4: Consider diversifying the voices you listen to**

This is its own step because we all have to actively do it. Our social media feeds can easily become an echo chamber, causing us to gradually fall out of touch with the perspectives and needs of others in our communities.

To combat this, try to think outside of your own experiences and make a deliberate choice to follow accounts that you may not normally follow. You don't have to follow extremists or toxic accounts, however, try to follow organisations and individuals who may:

- Have a different political point of view
- Come from a different ethnic background
- Have different interests/hobbies than you

By following accounts that you may not agree with, you give yourself the opportunity to grow and better understand the world and people around you.

#### **Step 5: Set some boundaries**

Too much screen time can often lead to feelings of anxiety and depression, and it can also affect your sleep cycle. That's why it's important to put some healthy boundaries in place in order to limit the amount of time you spend using a screen. This will definitely take a bit of discipline and time to get used to – but it's so worth it!

While everyone's boundaries may be different, here are some examples that may work in your life:

- Disable your notifications in the evenings and early mornings
- Leave your phone in another room while you are engaged in an activity
- Do not respond to work related emails or messages while not at work

By living more in the present moment, you will gradually feel more fulfilled and connected with your life.

### **Step 6: Be a good digital citizen**

Tensions online have never been higher, and it can be tempting for us all to engage in heated conversations in discussion threads and comments sections. However, during times of political turmoil, it's important that we prioritize compassion and understanding over hostility and animosity. We all form our opinions based on our own life experiences, and we need to be respectful of other people's backgrounds and perspectives.

If you do find yourself in a healthy debate online, remember that attacking someone else is counterintuitive and rarely persuades them to see things your way. Not to mention, the impact of cyberbullying can be devastating and long-term. Before commenting on something, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is your ultimate goal to shame or bring someone else down?
- Are you trying to draw attention to yourself?

If you answered 'yes' to the above questions, you may want to reconsider commenting.

### **Step 7: Remember, it's okay to change**

Social media is a place to share and read about the experiences of others, and part of that process may change us – and that's okay. It's okay to grow, evolve, and shift our mindset and opinions over time. Never feel like you always have to stay the same. The beauty of life is that it changes, and that happens just as much in the world as it does within ourselves.

### **Further Reading on Media Diets**

- <https://artplusmarketing.com/how-to-balance-your-media-diet-a2140c0311ec>
- <https://www.adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/?v=402f03a963ba>
- <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/social-media-and-mental-health.htm>

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 7 Steps to a Healthy Media Diet**

**1 Reflect on your current media usage**  
 Before you do anything, take a moment to reflect on your current media usage patterns. How do they make you feel about yourself and the world? It can be so easy to passively scroll through our Facebook or Instagram feeds, and we forget that we are actually in control of what we see and put into our minds. Once we are honest with ourselves, we can then make the right decisions about who to follow and listen to.

**2 Clean up your news feed**  
 As a social media user, you actually have a lot of power when it comes to curating your newsfeed. The best way to clean it up is to take a look at who exactly you follow, and consider unfollowing toxic accounts that promote unhealthy body types, share inflammatory or inaccurate information, or make you feel worse about your life and the world.

**3 Actively follow quality organizations and individuals**  
 Once your news feed is cleaned up, you can now enhance your life with quality content that's right for YOU. Online content should help you do any of the following things:

- Feel connected to others
- Find enjoyment
- Learn and grow
- Stay informed about the world

**4 Consider diversifying the voices you listen to**  
 This is its own step because we *all* have to actively do it. Try to think outside of your own experiences and make a deliberate choice to follow accounts that may have a differing political stance or interest than you do. By following accounts that you may not agree with, you give yourself the opportunity to grow and better understand the world and people around you.

**5 Set some boundaries**  
 Too much screen time can often lead to feelings of anxiety and depression, and it can also affect your sleep cycle. That's why it's important to put some healthy boundaries in place in order to limit the amount of time you spend using a screen. Examples of healthy boundaries include: disabling notifications after a certain hour, leaving your mobile device in another room, and choosing to not check work-related emails after hours.

**6 Be a good digital citizen**  
 Tensions online have never been higher, and it can be tempting for us all to engage in heated conversations in discussion threads and comments sections. However, during times of political turmoil, it's important that we prioritize compassion and understanding over hostility and animosity. We all form our opinions based on our own life experiences, and we need to be respectful of other people's backgrounds and perspectives.

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