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IT'S ALL HERE

OPINION

IGEN AND THE IMPACTS OF ALWAYS BEING CONNECTED

'UNPLUGGING EVERY DAY IS OBVIOUSLY A NECESSITY,' SAYS ALAM



NADIA ALAM
Column

As a family doctor, I can see that our youngest generation, Gen Z or iGen, is struggling. I see more teen angst, depression and suicidality than ever before - and my gut says that it's connected to smartphones, social media and how the human brain is wired.

"You're not imagining things," said Dr. Deepa Soni, an ER doctor in Mississauga, whose hospital sees high volumes of everything from heartburn to heart attacks. She too sees more teens and preteens presenting in crisis: "while everyone seems less patient and more stressed these days, teens in particular come to the emergency department with more anxiety, less resilience and more suicidal attempts."

Dr. Soni shared new research that backs up anecdotal experience with parent councils, classrooms and family docs like me. Rates of depression in

teens have doubled. Rates of feeling "left out" or "lonely" have doubled. One in three teens now report "poor sleep." Teens today are constantly plugged in and turned on for six to 10 hours a day on their smartphones, checking them hundreds to thousands of times a day. Most can't go to sleep without it within arm's reach.

It's an addiction.

Teens today live two lives: the physical one seen in school and at home, and the virtual one on Snapchat and Instagram. This virtual life has transformed the teenage brain, and not for the better.

Social media transmits a vortex of information through scrolling newsfeeds, mixing the trivial with the relevant. Teens today are not only afraid of missing out, they're less able to separate what is useful from what is noise. Shorter attention spans - shorter now than that of a goldfish - impair their ability to lay down long-term memory, which is essential for learning.

The entire tech industry is in "an arms race for dopamine," our brain's feel-good chemical. Companies aggressively track how people use smartphones, finding ways to make them use it more. Notifications provide a hit of dopamine, so apps like

Instagram delay revealing the number of likes on a post, luring teens into checking their phones again and again. Maintaining a Snapstreak (a Snapchat conversation) releases more dopamine, so teens participate every single day even on vacation.

For teens, branding is the new social currency. Carefully curated and filtered selfies show highlight reels of teen life. It reinforces feelings of inadequacy, otherness, competition - and dishonesty because the online persona bears little resemblance to reality.

It's no wonder tech giants like Bill Gates or Steve Jobs refused to let their kids plug in.

Unplugging every day is obviously a necessity. The research is in. Put your devices out of sight, out of mind every evening. Your health depends on it.

- Nadia Alam is a Georgetown physician and president of the Ontario Medical Association. She can be reached at nadia.alam@oma.org.

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