Excessive Internet Use as a Safety Behavior in Social Anxiety

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No Conflicts of Interest

My Goals Today

❑ Emphasize the importance of evaluating social media use by your patients with social anxiety disorder

❑ Explain how to assess patients' social media use

❑ Share implications for treatment

Hallmark Symptoms of
Social Anxiety

- Fear that others will observe my anxiety

- Fear that others will think less of me

- Belief that devastating social and professional consequences will result

- Use of "safety" behaviors to hide my insecurities

Hirsch and Clark, (2004)

Why Clinicians Should be Concerned

- Social media culture is pervasive

- Socially anxious individuals prefer communicating via social media
    Seabrook, et al. (2016)

- Social anxiety is associated with problematic internet use
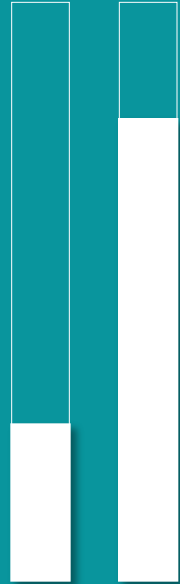   Lee & Stapinski, (2012)

Social Media EXPLOSION

Increase in Social Media Use 2008 to 2016

23%
Increase

53%
Increase

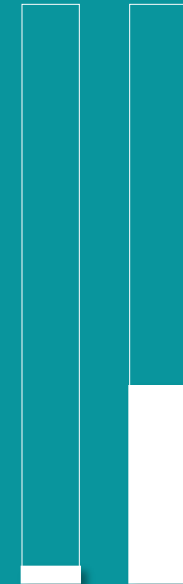**55%**
Increase

32%
Increase

86%

80%

64%

34%

18-29
Years Old

30-49
Years Old

50-64
Years Old

65+
Years Old

Gallagher, K. (2017, August). Social Media Demographics.

Facebook Still Rules

Top 5 Most Used Social Media

Apps in 2018:

1. Facebook

2. WhatsApp

3. Messenger

4. WeChat (China)

5. Instagram

Jefferson Graham, USA Today, (January 17, 2019)

Social Media

How do socially anxious individuals use it?

Cognitive-Behavioral Model of **Problematic Internet Use**

(Internet Addiction)

- Perceiving more interpersonal control online than offline

  Davis, (2001)

- Using the internet to control unpleasant moods

- Becoming attached to social benefits of the internet

Problematic Use

❑ Perceiving more interpersonal control online than offline

Davis, (2001)

❑ Seeking online anonymity in a misguided effort to portray "true self"

Lee & Stapinski, (2012)

❑ Social Compensation Hypothesis: Socially anxious individuals substitute connections online for poor relationships offline

Lee & Stapinski, (2012)

Passive Use

❑ Offer less opinions and interact less on Facebook

❑ Compare themselves negatively in relation to others ("Facebook Envy")

▪ Facebook Envy increases depressive symptoms

Seabrook, et al. (2016)

Case Example

Anna

Who is **Anna?**

❑ 18 Year-Old College Freshman

- Lives in dorm on campus
- Rarely interacts with her roommate
- Walks to class and avoids eye contact with others

❑ Small Circle of Friends

- Has one friend she trusts
- Limited interaction with boyfriend back home

❑ Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale = **94 (severe)**

❑ Takes an SSRI

Anna's Safety Behaviors

- ❑ Avoids eye contact

- ❑ Avoids face-to-face interaction

- ❑ Interacts mostly by texting

- ❑ Frequently goes home on weekends

- ❑ Rarely comments or posts on social media

Anna's Typical Day

Time on
Social Media

☐ Wakes Up at 7:30 am

Turns off her alarm and immediately checks

her social media accounts
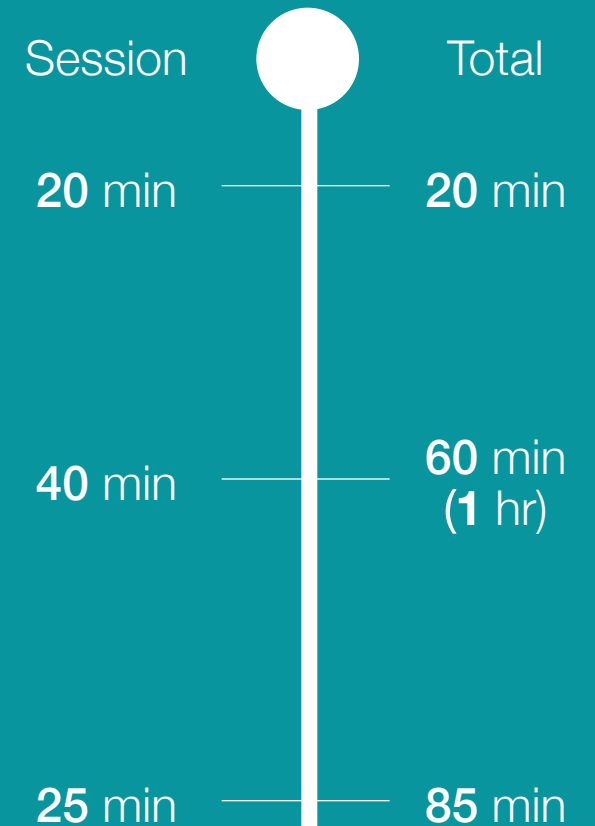
☐ Eats breakfast at 8:15 am

Continues to review Instagram and Snapchat

for the latest news and stories

☐ Heads to class at 9:00 am

Looks at social media on the way to class to

avoid eye contact with others

Session   Total

20 min   20 min

40 min   60 min
                           (1 hr)

25 min   85 min

	Session	Total
☐ **Arrive at Class 9:25 am**		
Looks at her phone before class starts to avoid interaction	**5** min	**90** min
☐ **Between Classes**		
Will have two classes this morning and look at her phone during both breaks	**25** min	**115** min
☐ **Lunch at 12:00 pm**		
Will look at her phone during the entire lunch break to avoid interacting with others	**65** min	**180** min **(3** hr)

	Session	Total

☐ **Pattern Continues . . . . .**

During classes, breaks, walking, in dorm room,

Anna uses her phone to avoid talking to others.

Session: **60** min — Total: **240** min

☐ **Dinner around 7:30 pm**

Anna brings food into her dorm room

instead of eating in the cafeteria.

Session: **120** min — Total: **360** min

☐ **Bedtime at 12:00 am**

Anna once again checks her social media

accounts right before going to sleep.

Session: **65** min — Total: **425** min (**7** hr)

Only 1 Comment or Post for Every

540

Hours Spent on Social Media

What **Anna Thinks**

- ❑ If I comment of social media, no one will "like" it.

    "I'll look stupid."

- ❑ If I talk to people, they'll see my anxiety.

    "I am awkward."

- ❑ Other females will judge me poorly.

    "I think guys won't judge me as much."

- ❑ Others are having so much fun

    "It makes me sad."
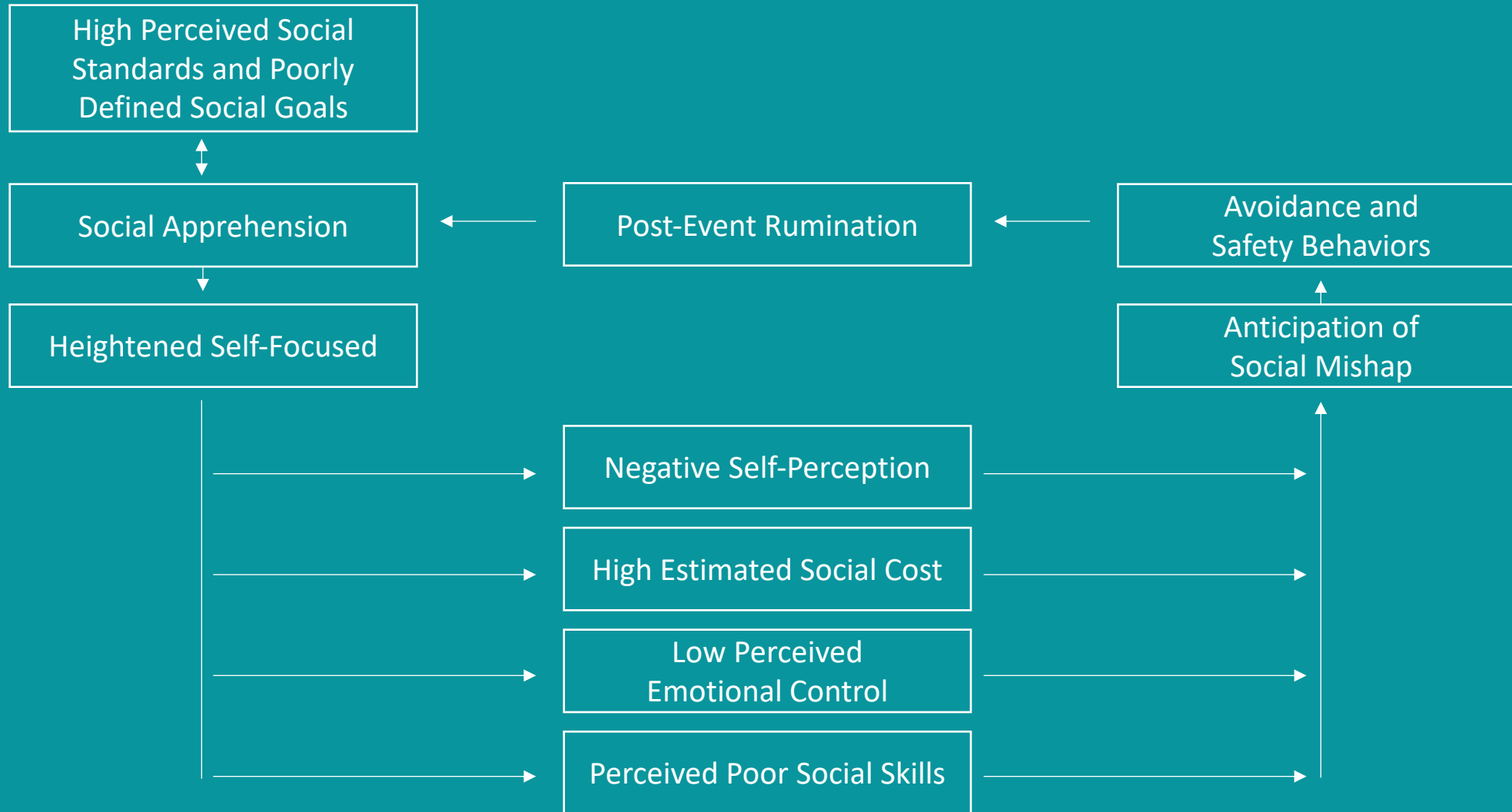
How **Anna Feels**

- ❑ Lonely
- ❑ Depressed
- ❑ Envious
- ❑ Anxious
- ❑ Hopeless

How **Anna Acts**

- ❑ Avoids eye contact & interaction

- ❑ Fidgets in the presence of others

- ❑ Looks at her phone to avoid engaging

- ❑ Isolates herself in her dorm room

- ❑ Uses social media passively

CBT Model of Social Anxiety Disorder

High Perceived Social Standards and Poorly Defined Social Goals

Social Apprehension

Heightened Self-Focused

Post-Event Rumination

Avoidance and Safety Behaviors

Anticipation of Social Mishap

Negative Self-Perception

High Estimated Social Cost

Low Perceived Emotional Control

Perceived Poor Social Skills

Hofmann, (2007)

Implications for
Assessment

Implications for **Assessment**

❑ **DO** assess your patients' internet and social media use

  ▪ 69 of 70 articles reviewed from 2005 to 2016 found that frequent social media use did NOT decrease anxiety or depressive symptoms.
    Seabrook, et al., (2016)

❑ **DON'T** assume patients are active users of social media

  ▪ Passive users of Facebook engage in more rumination and experience higher levels of social anxiety
    Seabrook, et al., (2016)

Elicit Details Concerning

❑ **Frequency of Social Media Use:**

- Is it excessive?

❑ **Self Disclosure**

- Disclosure to their entire network - - or just a trusted few?

- Engaging in negative social comparison?

❑ **Problematic or Addictive Behaviors**

- Using social media to avoid face-to-face interactions?

- Using the internet to manipulate how other see them?

- Using the internet to manage moods?

Addressing Problematic Use of Social Media in

Treatment

Problematic Use of Social Media

❑ Provide a rationale for conducting face-to-face

behavioral experiments:

- Short-term gain of feeling more in control online leads to

  long-term erosion of confidence

- Success engaging online may be attributed to the "safety"

  of anonymity

  Lee & Stapinski, (2012)

- Pattern of avoidance is maintained

❑ Start an exposure hierarchy with online experiments

- Utilize Skype or other visual platforms

- Visual cues can help disprove negative expectations

Addressing Passive Social Media Use in

Treatment

Passive Use of Social Media

❑ Create an online exposure hierarchy as a bridge to
   face-to-face behavioral experiments:

   ▪ Add an emoji to someone else's "Post"

   ▪ Post a "Like"

   ▪ Comment on someone else's post

   ▪ Share:

     ✓ A photo

     ✓ An article

   ▪ Post a thought or photo with a trusted few

   ▪ Post to entire network

Passive Use In Treatment

❑ Ease into face-to-face behavioral experiments:

- Practice making eye contact

- Practice smiling at others

- Say hello to co-workers

- Contribute a brief comment during lunch with co-workers

Summary

Summary

- Social media can help or hinder treatment of social anxiety, depending how it is addressed.

- Elicit specifics regarding social media use during assessment

- Integrate patients' use of social media into their treatment plan.

- Educate problematic users about the pitfalls of internet addiction and the merits of integrating face-to-face interaction

- Help passive users create an online hierarchy as a bridge to face-to-face behavioral experiments

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