

Episode 1: Social media – are they always helpful?

SPEAKERS

Mark, Isabelle

Isabelle

[Music]. It's so built in, at least for me, and I know for a lot of people, it's so habitual and most of the time our phone is right there. Oftentimes, it's like actually on a person. So it's so it's so easy to reach to it out of habit.

Mark

Hello and welcome to you uOttawa together. I'm your host Mark Patton, it can be challenging sometimes to feel connected. Like you're a part of things. Physical distancing can make this even more challenging. In this podcast, we will be discussing issues related to human connection, interviewing guests and offering practical ideas and suggestions for building greater feelings of belonging in our lives. When it comes to social connection, social media can be a polarizing topic. There are those who see it as something that is detrimental to social connection, and will point to research that shows that people who spend more time than others on social media report greater and happiness and feeling lonelier. On the other hand, there are others who point to all the new avenues that technology makes available for people to connect with one another. Our guest today is Isabelle Hodak, who is also a host of our podcast uOttawa ensemble. Isabelle is a mental health and wellness counselor here at University of Ottawa. She has worked with many students who are looking to build greater social connection. Welcome to our show.

Isabelle

Thanks, Mark. I'm really happy to be here.

Mark

Yeah, it's awesome. So Isabelle, you've been working at U of O, as a counselor for four years. Now, can you talk about what drew you to work here?

Isabelle

Um-hum. So there's several different things that drew me to the university environment. One of the most important part is the student population that I really enjoy working with. One of the things I appreciate the most about kind of the developmental stage, I think that a lot of the students are at is how there's a lot of personal growth that happens, there's a lot of identity development and exploration that happens. And I find it really fascinating and really, really like a privilege to witness that and to support students as they work through those things. So I think the personal growth part is something that drew me. Another part also is that I went to uOttawa, myself for my undergrad. So I really love the environment and the campus and everything like that. So being a part of it as an employee, and as a

support for students is also a really cool kind of full, full circle moment for me. So that also drew me, but also drew me here.

Mark

Yeah, it's awesome. And I agree with you, I think it does feel like a real privilege to work with students, and you know, help them work through some of the challenges that they're facing. When we first talked about starting a podcast on social connection, you seem to immediately think about the topic of social media, what makes this a relevant topic for you?

Isabelle

Hmm, I find the topic of social media, it's really relevant to me on a professional level, and also on a personal level. So I find it really a really interesting thing to talk about on a professional level, I talk about social media almost every day with the students that I see. It's like such an intrinsic part of life. Now, it's really present every day, oftentimes several hours a day that it's like a part of our life. So professionally, it's really interesting to me to see what comes from that the positives and the negatives. That comes from the use of social media, obviously, there's different platforms as well. And that has different pros and cons to but overall, like the space that technology takes up in our lives, I find it's really interesting to talk about with students. And it's also really relevant to me on a personal level as well. So I am from the millennial generation. So for me, it's technology, like I remember a time without technology, I remember a time with it, obviously. And there's like a larger and larger stretch that technology has been present in my life. So it's also something really relevant for me, because I get to work through some issues with technology as well, kind of alongside the students that I see. And alongside like, the general population as well.

Mark

Yeah, it's interesting to me because I think like I can relate to that, and that, you know, I certainly meet with a lot of students who talk about their experience on social media and who are, you know, struggling to find connection and having different experiences with that. And, you know, I guess for me, I see myself as one of the more late adopters in terms of social media and you know, how only got my first account probably about eight, nine years ago, and, and you know, used it sparingly, and it's certainly now I, I find, you know, it's both this opportunity for me to connect. But it also sometimes when I look at my screen time, and I realize I've spent quite a bit of time on social media, it's, I see sometimes the downside to it as well.

Isabelle

Um-hum. Yeah, it can be really kind of surprising. When we look at the screen time and see the time spent in hours or in minutes. Most of the time, I think it's like an hour's. it's, I find it's like kind of a wake-up call sometimes.

Mark

Right. So social media is a topic that oftentimes comes up in sessions, as you mentioned, at counseling services. In what ways does it come up in your sessions with the students? And what are the some of the common themes that you hear?

Isabelle

Um-hum. So oftentimes, I noticed a lot of students will either like bring it up themselves, like they noticed that it's part of the problem. And what I mean by that is that they might be noticing a problem with, I don't know how they speak to themselves, or feeling, feeling isolated, or feeling like they're hard on themselves, or feeling that they're not good enough. And then they can sometimes notice that the type of media that they consume feeds into that, which is really like good awareness. When I hear and see that I'm like, okay, this is, this is like a great first step towards building change, because there's awareness of how this plays into the challenges that they're living with.

Mark

Right.

Isabelle

That's a part and the other part too, is sometimes I will ask also students, sometimes people are feeling like really down, depressed, oftentimes, when there's sleep issues, for example, I'll ask like, what kind of, what keeps you up at night, what happens that makes it hard to fall asleep, or all these different things? And oftentimes, use of technology comes up, so that we can we can we can work on it. So that's kind of how it comes up in terms of the common themes. There's a lot of using technology for procrastination or for avoidance of something that they don't want to do. I think there's a lot of use of technology for soothing emotions, to try to, again, kind of come down to like avoiding some distress. I think that's really common, as well. Also, comparing ourselves to what we see online is like, super, super common.

Mark

Um-hum. Yeah, I would say I see a lot of the same issues with the students I work with. And I think one of like, two of the themes that I would pick up on, or maybe three is sort of disruption of sleep and eating and sort of disruption of routine, which I think can be so important in terms of getting things done in our in our, in our work and our school. And also in terms of self-esteem, I think is a really big part. And then that you know, that social comparison, where I think one of the things I see sometimes is where students will spend time on social media and then feel bad and then wanting to talk about that bad feeling they have. Yeah, you know, that bad feeling can sometimes have many layers to it or have different meanings to it for different students. But some of our work I think has been unpacking what that's like.

Isabelle

Yeah.

Mark

As mentioned at the beginning of this podcast, social media seems to be a polarizing topic when it comes to social connection. What do you make of this?

Isabelle

Um-hum. I think it's similar to at the beginning, when we were talking, Mark, we were saying how social media can provide, like amazing opportunities to connect with people. And to stay in touch and to, you know, see what your loved ones, your friends are doing, even if they're far for example, which is really positive. But it can also be really, really detrimental. It can be sometimes like a time waste, unfortunately, like people will feel bad because they spent like, a couple hours on TikTok when what they really wanted to do was study and make themselves a meal for example. So I think like how, like the range of impacts is so like, large, and it's so broad, that it becomes something that you're almost like, against or pro like pro or not pro kind of thing. Yeah, that's kind of how I see that, it can be polarizing.

Mark

Right. Yeah.

Isabelle

How do you see that?

Mark

Yeah. I think, I mean, I'm particularly conscious of where we're in the midst of a lockdown right now as we're recording this right and, and, you know, it can I think it almost highlights the polarizing where people are spending more time on devices, and that can be really fatiguing. And at the same time, without social media and without other ways of connecting, it can, you know, we could all feel more isolated or more, you know, kind of on our own with the experience. So, I do think sometimes there's this moralizing aspect where, where it can feel like, you know, there can be this sort of good, bad divide that that makes it challenging as well, where there were that that can I think that can complicate it or, or lead to more polarization.

Isabelle

Yeah, yeah. And kind of having it as being like good or bad is rarely something like helpful because it's such, it's like, everybody has their own personal relationship with the different platforms, with their phone, with all of these different things. And it's kind of about finding a way to have more of those pros than the cons, and finding a way that you are kind of that the devices and the social media platforms are like serving you well, and not that you're kind of serving them. Which reminds me, I don't know, if you saw the social dilemma on Netflix, the

Mark

No, I haven't.

Isabelle

Okay, it was really interesting. And I would really recommend it to anyone who's interested in learning more about it. One of the takeaways for me was about the difference between, like using social media to better our lives, and to use it wisely to use it to stay connected, for those opportunities, that we've been talking about those positive things. But how it can be really hard to like tether, not to cross the line into becoming almost kind of addicted to it, where we are serving our devices,

Mark

Um-hum. right.

Isabelle

Being triggered and opening our phone, we get a notification and ending up staying on a certain platform longer than we'd like. Oftentimes, platforms are designed to capture our attention and to make us want to continue to kind of wander on them and see what's out there. So it's, it's a tough balance.

Mark

Um-hum. Given that this podcast is about social connection, what have your experiences with social media taught you about social connection?

Isabelle

I find for me, the way that I've been trying to use social media recently, it's taught me that there can be that technology can be really helpful, first moments of social connection. And that we can find people who have different, like, hobbies that we have in common, or things that we enjoy as well. And that can, it can be really positive for mental health to connect with those people. Like I'm thinking, for example, I'm on a few plant groups on Facebook. And I get to see how people's plants are doing, I get to sometimes see people give advice to each other. And it kind of builds a community. And so I think it's really cool that there can be also virtual communities, not just in person communities. I think social media, particularly taught me, taught me that part.

Mark

Yeah, I think for me, that resonates with me. I think that I think that part of what I've learned about social connection is kind of what you're saying earlier about how, you know, we want to kind of look at how does it serve us and but also watch it for some of the downsides to it. And, you know, some of the ways it can pull us out of, you know, what makes us happier, what makes, what's meaningful to us. And, and I think that, for me, one of the things that I've learned about social connection is to kind of not see social media as a competition and also to really take with a grain of salt, what we see on other people posting that, you know, some people are, or maybe posting certain things to try to make themselves feel good on a particular day, or because they've had a particularly good moment, even though maybe they're struggling much more than they would ever show through through social media. And so, so that kind of taking things with a grain of salt and instead of using as a way to kind of feel connected rather than as a as a comparison tool.

Isabelle

Um-hum. It kind of teaches us to not assume, what we kind of imagined somebody's life to be based on what they write or what they post or the photo or things like that, because sometimes we might assume there was a quote that was floating around a couple, a few years, a few months ago, but it was something like don't compare your life to someone's highlight reel or something like that, and I thought really resonated for me and I think it resonated for a lot of people as being like, shared everywhere.

Mark

Yeah, I think that's, that's really great. And I think that there's also an element for me of like, No, I think I don't know how to put this. But it's like, I think sometimes social media can pull us into a more passive role. And I think there's something for me I've noticed is, if I just sort of sit back and be passive and sort of watch what other people are posting, it doesn't necessarily give me a sense of connection. But sometimes like, somebody posts something, and it might, you know, make me think, well, I want to reach out to that person and connect with them in a more in a way that does feel more meaningful to me. So it can sometimes cue me about people that maybe I haven't connected with in a while, and that I want to connect with them in a bit of a different way. And maybe it gives me something to connect with them on where they post something that that kind of reminds me something that we have in common or something about our lives that that that makes me kind of want to reach out a bit more.

Isabelle

And these changes, like they take time. They take probably like, an hour, but I think it can be somebody's journey of like several months to change their relationship with the social with social media, with technology, if that's something that they're wanting to do, because it's so it's so built in, at least for me, and I know, for a lot of people, it's so habitual most of the time our phone is right there. Oftentimes, it's like actually on our person. So it's so it's so easy to reach to it out of habit. And it takes a while, as we know, to change habits. I wanted to put that out there that we have to be patient with ourselves. Because this is like a big change, especially if this has been going on for several years as it has been for most of us at this point. We've had technology in our lives for a while.

Mark

I want to give you a scenario. Is that okay? If I give you a scenario?

Isabelle

Yeah.

Mark

So you're you're working with a student who identifies that they spend a lot of time on social media and they struggle, they're struggling a lot with their self-esteem. What might counseling look like with the student in this kind of situation?

Isabelle

Um-hum. So I'll focus with, I focus on the social media part, with the self-esteem, like how they relate together. So I think a first, a first step for sure, like we've been saying, building awareness is super important, building awareness about how we use the social media, the type of content that we see. Even building the awareness. And this is more, this is kind of hard, especially if it's a habit of, but noticing the emotions and thoughts that make us lead. Does that lead us to reach out to our device or to like, grab it and to go on it? Like, what made us do that? And sometimes it can be like, Oh, it was a habit, it was a habit. I'm like, okay, let's slow it down. Let's like, even if we can physically slow it down, or even if we can count to five, just to like, identify what was going on. Sometimes we might be experiencing, experiencing a negative emotion, we might be experiencing boredom, we might be experiencing, like all kinds of different things. Right? So building that mindfulness and awareness about what made us leap towards grabbing the phone and going on whatever it is right? Was it Instagram,

Facebook, Tik Tok all those things, then building awareness around how we feel when we're using it, how we feel after. And oftentimes, it's like, when I ask the question, like, how do you do you think there's a relationship between social media and you're struggling with your self-esteem? Most of the time, people are able to answer it really quickly. And they're like, yes, absolutely. And they're able to tell me like, what it is that they're seeing that's making them feel that way. Why is making them feel that way. So I think a lot of the times, like our work is uncovering things that people are aware of, like at the surface, and like bringing it to the forefront. And like expanding on it so that we so that the person can see, like the extent of what it is. And then another part is looking at, you know, what is this? What is that specific platform with the content? What is that bringing to you? Is it taking something away from you? That's important. So there's a lot of great conversations to be had around that as well.

Mark

Like sort of values or what's important to you and that kind of thing.

Isabelle

Yeah, because a lot of times people will have values of like body positivity, or wanting to engage with content that makes them feel better, that's uplifting, that's inspiring. And then they might realize, Oh, this is actually not doing that for me, and that's what I would like it to do. I've seen a lot of my students take breaks actually, which I think is something common. People will delete an app, they will go back to it. And people can play with that in experiments. I've had some students who've deleted things for, like a significant amount of time actually and have noticed, and not being exposed to certain posts or content, or what their friend not another university is doing like that has been helpful. And then more kind of mental health wise, it's really interesting to see the links between what we see and our inner dialogue, because we can, when we consume certain content, or we see images, like regularly, for example, it can slowly kind of change the way that we talk to ourselves or the expectations that we have, or rules inside. And it's, it's interesting, because it can change it negatively. But it can also change it positively depending on if things are curated in a certain way. Like I've had a few students who were struggling with body image issues, and they switched, like they erased and unfollowed plenty of people and started following people who shared more of their values. And then they were feeling inspired and feeling like they belong to a community of people who valued the kind of quote like normal body type. And that was really helpful. Yeah, so it's kind of a personal journey with each person that I see. In kind of, yeah, seeing what works best for them, what would bring more grounding and more inspiration to each person, what would reduce the triggers for negative self-talk?

Mark

It sounds like there's, there's part of it, that's about like reality testing, almost like sort of looking at how like social media can protect, potentially distort our perception of reality. And sort of counseling can be a way to kind of get like, sort of re-examine some of those beliefs that we might be, that we might have about the world or about ourselves.

Isabelle

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And like we know, in psychology, right, those beliefs and feelings and behaviors, these are all intertwined. And it's really also interesting to see kind of, like bringing it back to social connection in isolation. We can almost make, like different, different connections with like, okay,

when you are on social media for several hours a day, and it's not a positive experience, and you feel bad does this, like up the chances that you would connect with someone or notice this lower the chances? Like, it makes me want to be even more, it makes me want to be alone, it makes me feel ashamed. It prevents me from connecting with someone.

Mark

Because it can pick up these inadequacies or something that make us in shame, right? Absolutely. It also makes me think like, like one of the things that's maybe, you know, we sort of take for granted, but it's probably important to say is that like, one of the things that we won't do as students is sort of judge them for it or, you know, sometimes when we're talking about things like screen time I, I can see sometimes like students will will experience a moment of shame or something, we sort of unpack and say, n o, this is like, you're building your awareness of where you're at. And, and, and that can be really good thing. And, and so I think that's maybe an important thing to say is that, you know, counseling is not about judging people. It's really about, you know, coming up with a plan and some practice, you know, developing that awareness that you talked about and coming up with a plan and some strategies to try to kind of turn things around if things aren't going the way that we want them to be going.

Isabelle

Absolutely, yeah. And like you said, Mark, like, we're not immune to experiencing things that are kind of sometimes similar to what our students might be feeling. Like, for me, I made changes to my use of technology. In recent months, I was noticing that it was affecting my mood, I was noticing that it wasn't being a productive experience. And I found different things to test out, for example, in the morning, I won't go on my phone first thing in the morning. And I know for a lot of people, that's something that at least the students that I talked to this is almost like a normal thing. It's like, Oh, yeah, you get up, roll to your side, grab your phone, it's right next to you, where do you sleep. And then you kind of check things out a little bit. And for some people, that might be a positive experience, where you start off your day by doing some of that and then you're like, Alright, it's kind of like a little routine that you enjoy. For me, it was something that I wasn't enjoying. It made me feel bad like I was starting my day off with a phone, all these different things right, which is like a personal kind of experience. People can live it differently but I started not charging my phone beside my bed.

Mark

Right and It's also important to say, too, that like, different counselors have different approaches, but like some, some might work a bit more with thoughts. And some might work a bit more like, let's change, let's look at, you know, changing some of the behaviors that you're doing. And some people might zero in a bit more on like emotions, and what are you feeling when you're when you're when you're using social media? And, and, you know, like, I think we all tend to work in a, in an integrated way where we're kind of mindful of all those, but some may put a slightly different emphasis on different things. And part of that is also to kind of match what's going to be best for, for particular students that we're working with.

Isabelle

Um-hum. That's a really good point. Like we have different kind of methods that might be more emphasized. And I think it's really interesting to look at, like, what motivates the student, and

oftentimes, we can see that one, like, a certain direction of the conversation, the person might be, like, even more receptive, so we can see like, what is like motivating for them? And also asking them directly, like, what is motivating for you? Is it kind of concretely changing something? Is that something that's like, inspiring to you? Is it kind of reflecting on how you feel and using that to track positive change? Like with journaling, for example, things like that? Is it like the thoughts that come in your mind and you want to like, kind of be aware of those a little bit more? Because that's what that's what tells you what's best for you, what's not so best for you? Yeah.

Mark

You've kind of already covered some of this, but anything else you want to say about ways that students can use technology to increase social connection while limiting the drawbacks?

Isabelle

Um-hum. So yeah, super quick summary, for sure. We want to try to use the technology and the social media platforms, mindfully and deliberately. So kind of using the social media platforms or our time online to meet our needs, not the other way around. The other element for sure is looking at limits and boundaries, seeing like, okay, how much space do I want to give this, right? Is this something like, and it's I don't want to name specific hours or minutes, but this is like, something that everybody can like personally choose for themselves. And we were talking about before, right? Kind of actively seeking it out versus kind of mindlessly scrolling, which we want to avoid. Something interesting, that I've seen some students do is like, find groups of interests that they find interesting, or even groups for different, even like health conditions or different realities of life. I've seen that being really, really helpful for some people. Yeah. Sometimes the reality is that in our kind of physical social circle, we might not know someone else who is challenged and challenged with some certain thing, we're struggling with a specific issue. But thanks to the online world, it opens the door to meeting different people who might be struggling with the same thing that we are.

Mark

Um-hum. Yeah. I think in terms of that, that comment about setting limits, one of the things like, I sometimes work with students where they're spending, say, more than 10 hours a day on screens, and, you know, they want to be spending maybe an hour a day on screens, and it's like, well, let's aim for nine, right, like, right, yeah, you know, that's, that's, it's, it's kind of evolving or making some gradual changes and not trying to go cold turkey to another extreme, which, which is probably not going to be so sustainable. Or, you know, and you know, we want people to succeed these changes.

Isabelle

Yeah, absolutely. And I think research shows that small gradual, like incremental changes is what leads to more sustainable change. And then our lifestyle can also adjust for somebody like you said, is was using their phones or games or whatever technology for 10 hours, boom, now they just want to have one boom, there's at nine hours. What is gonna happen during those nine hours? It's like, really, it's gonna, it takes a while to adjust to slowly build and other things.

Mark

Un-hum. You mentioned about social media being an opportunity sometimes to have these positive connections to be part of communities or and that sort of thing. Students who have experienced social exclusion because of disability, race or gender identity often experience greater loneliness to see ways that social media might be helpful for students who are experiencing marginalization.

Isabelle

yeah, I definitely think that it could increase access and opportunities, as we said to connect with communities. Even things like online through like different websites, often there's there can be like support groups that are virtual. And thinking, for example of like things that I've recently been looking into the Canadian Association for Autism or for other types of issues, like it can be so positive to reach out to those to those places. I would say like definitely starting off by finding like the appropriate, like the appropriate, like organization and source, and then working from there, because oftentimes, they will have Facebook groups.

Mark

Okay, do your research. Don't just join the first group, you see?

Isabelle

Yes, exactly. Exactly. Do your research first. And I know that we have a group virtually running right now for members of the BIPOC community, right, for example. And that, like technology is helping us to provide those.

Mark

Right. Absolutely. I think this is my last question for you. Based on your experiences, do you have anything that you would like to say to students who are listening who feel isolated, particularly in the unprecedented times that we're living in now?

Isabelle

So I think the first thing I would say is that you're not alone. And the fact that you listen to this podcast, and that you're asking probably yourself different questions about how you can help make your life better, is indicator of something and it means something. And I would invite everybody who feels curious about counseling or who would like to see how we can help or even if you have just like questions about like, what is it, what is it like, to reach out to us. Because we're here for students and like you said before Mark, we, we don't judge. And there's like any issue that you that you bring to us like we'll be able to sit with you and talk and to see what's the best support plan to help you with what you're going through.

Mark

Thank you for joining us on uOttawa together. If you're a University of Ottawa student and are looking for opportunities to feel more connected, you can access the wellness hub on the uOttawa website. If you're struggling with isolation and loneliness, and would like to access online resources for counseling, please don't struggle alone. Check out the website for counseling services at sass@uottawa.ca That's s-a-s-s dot uottawa dot ca. And thank you for listening to us and we hope that you will join us next time. Thanks for joining us Isabelle.

Isabelle

Thanks, Mark.