Social Media and Self-Doubt

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"Look," says Sasha, a 16-year-old junior in high school, scrolling slowly through her Instagram feed. "See: pretty coffee, pretty girl, cute cat, beach trip. It's all like that. Everyone looks like they're having the best day ever, all the time."

Magazines and advertising have long been criticized for upholding dangerously unrealistic standards of success and beauty, but at least it's acknowledged that they are idealized. The models wearing Size 0 clothing are just that: models. And even they are made-up, retouched, and photoshopped.

These days, however, the impossible standards are set much closer to home, not by celebrities and models but by classmates and friends. With social media, teens can curate their lives, and the resulting feeds read like highlight reels, showing only the best and most enviable moments while concealing efforts, struggles, and the merely ordinary aspects of day-to-day life. And there's evidence that those images are causing distress for many kids.

Donna Wick, EdD, founder of Mind-to-Mind Parenting, says that for teenagers the combined weight of vulnerability, the need for validation, and a desire to compare themselves with peers forms what she describes as a "perfect storm of self-doubt." She's so thin. Her grades are perfect. What a happy couple. I'll never be that cool, that skinny, that lucky, that successful.

Sometimes, says Sasha, looking at friends' feeds "makes you feel like everyone has it together but you."

Struggling to stay afloat

The fallout from these unrealistic standards becomes more dangerous once kids reach college, where they face higher stakes, harder work, and a largely parent-free environment. The pressure to look perfect to impress new peers, not to speak of friends and family back home, can be even greater.

After a recent spate of college suicides, researchers at Stanford University coined the phrase "duck syndrome." The term refers to the way a duck appears to glide effortlessly across a pond while below the surface its feet work frantically, invisibly struggling to stay afloat.

Several students who have died had projected a perfect image on social media— their feeds packed with inspirational quotes and filtered images showing attractive, happy kids who seemed to excel with minimal effort. But behind the digital curtain they were struggling emotionally.

Hiding imperfection

For kids experiencing anxiety or depression, carefully edited feeds can act as a smoke screen, masking serious issues behind pretend perfection and making it harder for parents or friends to see that they need help.

"It's important to remember that just posting edited pictures online or pretending your life is a little more glamorous than it is not in itself a problem," says Jill Emanuele, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "Social media alone is unlikely to be at the heart of the issue, but it can make a difficult situation even harder."

Teens who have created idealized online personas may feel frustrated and depressed at the gap between who *they* pretend to be online and who they truly are.

"If you practice being a false self eight hours a day, it gets harder to accept the less-than-perfect being you really are," says Dr. Wick, "and as we all know there's no harsher judge of a kid than herself.*"*

Other people's perfection

Another, more prevalent problem, says Dr. Emanuele, is that for some teens their social feeds can become fuel for negative feelings they have about themselves. Kids struggling with self-doubt read into their friends' images what they feel they are lacking.

"Kids view social media through the lens of their own lives," says Dr. Emanuele. "If they're struggling to stay on top of things or suffering from low self-esteem, they're more likely to interpret images of peers having fun as confirmation that they're doing badly compared to their friends."

Difficult to resist

Sasha and her friend Jacob, 15, agree that constant exposure to social media has had an impact on how they view their peers and themselves. "It's like you know it isn't making you happy," says Jacob of the pictures his friends post on Instagram. "But you still look."

Even the knowledge that these images mask serious problems doesn't seem to alleviate the pressure they cause.

"I knew a girl who had an eating disorder. We all knew it. It got so bad that she ended up going to a treatment center, but when she put pictures up of herself on the beach looking super-thin everyone liked them anyway," says Sasha.

Logically, she says, she knew the pictures weren't current and the girl was very ill, but that didn't stop her from feeling a twinge of jealousy. "I remember thinking 'I wish I looked like that' and then being horrified at myself."

Sasha also acknowledges the trouble of "liking" images that in this case provided dangerous validation. "It's like we were saying, 'Good job.' "

1. In your opinion, do social networks harm an adolescents' self-esteem? Explain.

2. According to the article, what are some of the benefits and drawbacks to social media? Cite evidence.

3. In your opinion, can a person truly become someone else on the internet? Explain. Use text evidence to help

4. What makes a person who they are – how they see themselves, how others see them, or their behaviors and decisions? Explain.

5. Can you change your "identity"? Use text evidence to explain.

6. a. List all the various social media accounts (including gaming) that you access.

   b. Describe what purpose they serve to society

   c. Explain how you use them and how it impacts your life. (using verbs similar to this to explain: browsing, posting, creating etc...).