Screen use by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic

What is screen time?

Screen time refers broadly to time spent on electronic devices, such as phones, computers, tablets and television. Young people use screens for many purposes, including schoolwork, gaming, watching TV and connecting with their friends.

Screen time can be active or passive. During active screen time, a person is mentally, socially or physically engaged in screen-based activities such as playing a video game or chatting with peers.[1] During passive screen time, a person passively consumes screen-based content — for example, by watching videos or scrolling through social media.[1] The same activity can be active or passive depending on the purpose.[2] For instance, using social media to message with friends is active screen use, but using it to make social comparisons is passive screen use.

What is doomscrolling?

During times of crisis, many people turn to the internet to find information and clarity. This has been especially prevalent during COVID-19 and has led to the emergence of a new phenomenon — "doomscrolling".[3] Doomscrolling is the act of scrolling through negative news or information on a phone or social media feed and feeling unable to stop.[4] The consumption of negative news may lead to sadness, anxiety, apprehension, anger and uncertainty about the future.

How much screen time is recommended for young people?

The Canadian 24-hour movement guidelines recommend less than two hours of screen time per day for children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 years[5] and less than three hours for young people over the age of 18.[6]

How much screen time do young people report?

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, children and adolescents were reporting around 3 to 5 hours of daily screen use.[7,8] Canadian post-secondary students reported an average of 4.7 hours of screen time per day.[9]

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, average screen time has risen to six or more hours per day across all ages.[10,11] Two explanations for this increase are the rise of online learning and an increased dependence on virtual methods to keep in contact with family and friends. Also, screen time may be used to escape reality or as a coping tool for feelings of anxiety or depression.[12]

How does screen use affect mental health?

Some individual studies show that increased screen use is negatively associated with a range of mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, self-esteem and general well-being.[1,9] However, systematic reviews summarizing the results of multiple studies demonstrate that screen time is associated with depression, but not anxiety.[2]

Additionally, screen time may not directly impact young people's mental health.

- Research has shown that sleep and physical activity are codependent with screen time.
- Together, these three factors influence mental health.
- Some combinations of sleep, physical activity and screen time might be more beneficial for the mental health of young people, but researchers are still studying this.[13]

To better understand these complex interactions, some researchers have studied the effect of replacing certain behaviours with others. Replacing screen time with sleep, homework or physical activity proved beneficial for adolescents.[14,15] Replacing screen time resulted in better self-esteem, better resiliency,[14] less depression and better well-being.[15]

How does screen use affect physical health?

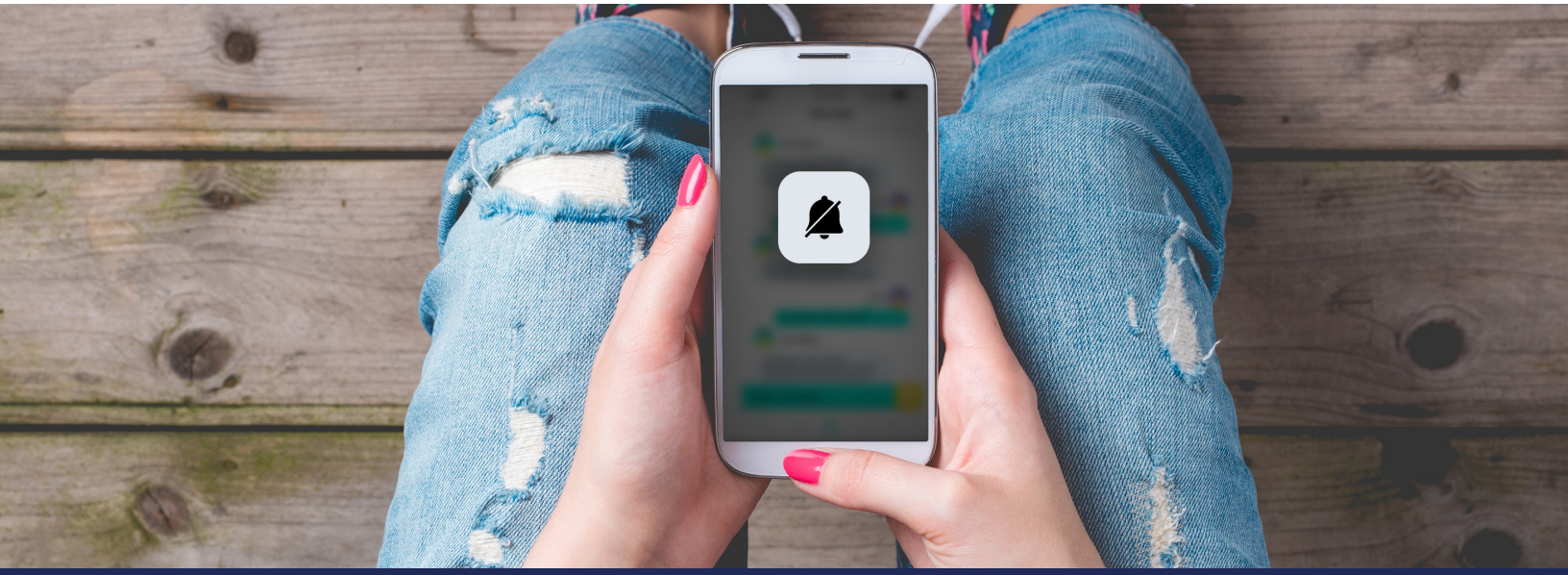
Young people may be spending time on screens instead of on physical activity. Many young people in Canada are exercising less than the recommended amount but using screens more than the recommended amount. Close to 40% of Canadian post-secondary students are getting less than the recommended 150 minutes of physical activity per week, yet 64% are exceeding the recommended maximum of 21 hours of screen time per week.[9]

High levels of screen use may have an impact on the physical health of young people. Screen time has been linked to obesity, hypertension, and elevated cholesterol levels in children and adolescents.[16]

How can we help?

Most young people will continue to need screens in their daily lives. This means that they may not be able to significantly reduce their screen time. Instead of suggesting large decreases in overall screen time, consider using a harm reduction approach. Here are some approaches you can share with clients.

- Use screens actively, for social interaction, online school and learning new skills.
- Avoid making comparisons when using social media. Focus on using social media as a tool to connect with your friends.
- Incorporate movement while using screens — for example, do an online workout or stand up while using a smartphone.



- Schedule non-screen time into your daily routine to ensure that you get a break from screens. Consider disconnecting during meals, social gatherings and other opportunities for in-person connection.
- Practice good sleep hygiene by not using screens before bed.
- Use mindfulness techniques. Ask yourself if you're enjoying using a screen or if you're using a screen to avoid negative feelings or a necessary task.
- Where reasonable, monitor your screen use, and set achievable goals for gradually reducing screen time.

To help combat doomscrolling, young people can:

- turn off notifications for COVID-related news.
- set a time limit for consuming negative news.
- incrementally decrease the amount of time spent doomscrolling each day.

Resources

- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health offers treatment groups for technology use and gambling.
- Check out Media Smarts for more information on excessive internet use.
- See this blog post on using gamification to manage screen time.

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