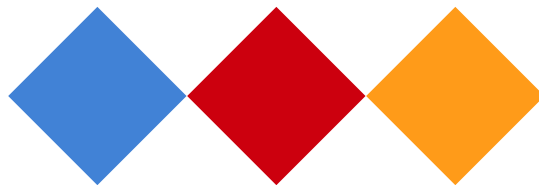




National Youth  
Partnership

# Social media in the context of Youth Loneliness

## Resource pack



HM Government



Foundation



# Contents

Introduction	Page 2
Activity 1	Page 4
Activity 2	Page 5
Activity 3	Page 6
Activity 4	Page 7
Activity 5	Page 8
Closing the session	Page 9



# Introduction

Youth Focus North East has been working over the last five years to develop and deliver projects and programmes of work specifically designed to help young people, and those who support them, to tackle loneliness and isolation.

There is a wide range of information, data and resources now available on a subject that is still relatively misunderstood. A website supported by the Co-op Foundation can be found at [Tackling Youth Loneliness](#).

This is not an online safety guide – there are many good examples of this already in circulation. Use examples UK Youth and NYA (find titles of documents)

Throughout our work, whenever we look at the causes of young people's loneliness and isolation social media is invariably mentioned as a significant factor. Often the discussion then moves onto the negative influence of social media use – and it is clear that social media does present significant challenges to many people's emotional wellbeing. It would, therefore, be easy to overlook the positive aspects social media can bring for young people. There can be a complex interplay – many workers will have stories of the positive impact young people find by connecting to others on Facebook or the likes they get on an Instagram picture; closely followed by the negative aspect that comes with fewer likes on their next picture or the comments that then begin, not all of which are positive.

The obvious way to find out how social media is used by young people and how it impacts on them is to ask young people. This document sets out a range of activities you may wish to use with young people alongside some of the thinking underpinning the sessions. Rather than simply following the session plan outlined in the following pages, colleagues may wish to use the thinking to develop their own activities. If you do this, Youth Focus North East would love for you to share them with us – the youth sector needs a bigger bank of effective resources to help young people tackle loneliness and isolation.

As workers we need to improve our understanding of how young people use social media and how it impacts on all aspects of their lives, not just in terms of loneliness and isolation. In the latter respect though, social media use is intertwined with emotional wellbeing, which in turn is wrapped up in challenges of feeling lonely and isolated.

From research carried out by the Co-op Foundation in 2017, we know that:

- Almost two-thirds (65%) of young people think that loneliness is a problem for their generation
- 81% say that fear of others' reactions would stop them talking about feeling lonely
- Fewer than one in ten (9%) think that their age group is confident discussing loneliness

For just these reasons alone, we need to better understand the causes and consequences of youth loneliness and isolation as well as the approaches and techniques to begin tackling it.



The activities in this guide together with your own introduction, icebreaker and comfort break comprise around a ninety-minute session. You can decide how you want to structure the session for instance some aspects may warrant more exploration and discussion; you may want to revisit some areas in further sessions.



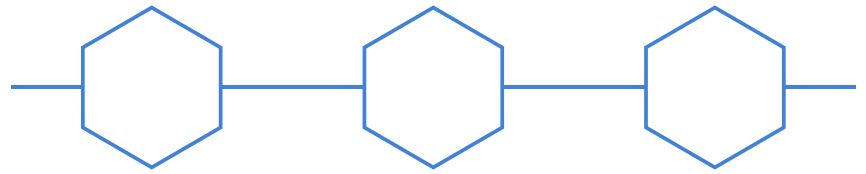
# Activity 2



A day in the life: how and when do young people use social media.

Ask each person, or if they prefer – to work in groups, to draw a timeline or a storyboard or a clock, etc to show how they use social media from waking up to going to sleep. Around this, get them to list or discuss the different platforms they use and the different purposes they use them for.

Approximate running time: 15 minutes



Thinking behind this activity.

Many of us do not realise the amount of time we spend scrolling through Twitter or surfing through Instagram.

There is certainly a negative aspect to getting lost online with the emergence of what is being termed ‘doomscrolling’ – a tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing. Many people are finding themselves reading continuously bad news without the ability to stop or step back. Many young people, though, use their time on social media in positive ways and some are structured in how and when they use social media.

This exercise is for young people to share how and when they use social media. It is not for us as workers to then be judgemental about the amount of time someone may spend on TikTok, more that we have an understanding about the role it plays in their life.

There is a lot of discussion around the degree that social media use is addictive – the fear of missing out can lead to people not being able switching off their devices, even to the point that they struggle to fall asleep or on waking the first thing they reach for is their phone to check their Instagram account. Again, a better understanding can help young people explore how their usage impacts positively and negatively on their lives – rather than someone, usually an adult, simply stating that they spend too much time on their laptop or phones.

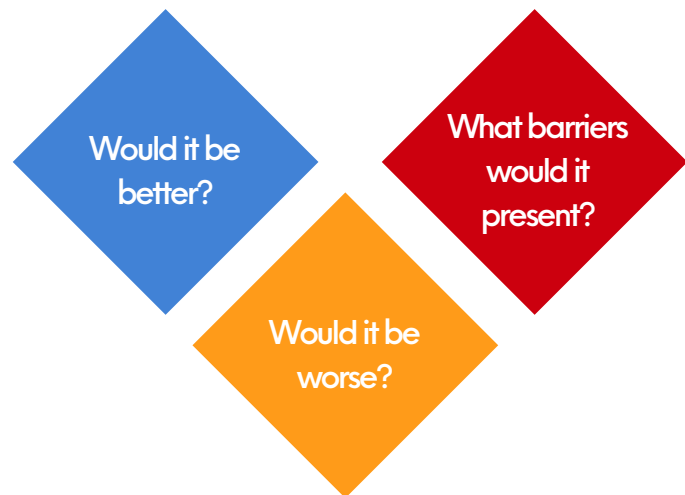
The activity will also illustrate the platforms they do use – in our experience more young people used Twitter than we expected before running these sessions. It can be a useful and really illuminating activity to run with young people.

# Activity 3

Group discussion to capture the impact of social media on today's young people.

Ask the group to share ideas around what life would be like if there was no social media.

Approximate running time: 15 minutes



Thinking behind this activity.

This activity helps give the context around the knowledge gained from the previous activities. It helps to improve our understanding of why social media use is important for young people and can help us to consider more of the positives around its use, rather than simply defaulting to the negative aspects we are more likely to be familiar with.

The activity can also help young people explore a reliance on social media and provide a space to help them taking up some more activities or opportunities alongside their social media use. Social media can provide routes to the things they are interested in that they can access in person, as well as providing networks of like-minded people or people with shared interests.

The activity can be run in different ways – pros and cons on post-its and flipcharts, straight-forward-discussion or perhaps in the form of a debate with the group being split in two to argue for and against a world with/without social media. The activity can lend itself to creative practice – maybe the group using art to show what a world would look like without social media.

It is also a useful activity for workers as it helps update or refresh our knowledge with the current thinking about social media use coming directly from young people.

# Activity 4



The positives and negatives of social media.

Ask the group to think of positives and negatives – get them to shout them out or stick them on post-it notes. Pick out some of the themes and/or interesting ones for a wider discussion.

Approximate running time: 20 minutes.



Thinking behind this activity.

You will have examples of positives and negatives of social media use from the previous activities, but this is the space to collect them together and to consider some new ones.

We often find that this is the activity that brings aspects of youth loneliness and isolation to the forefront. Young people may begin to explain why they connect with people online is because they have no friends locally or they may not fit in with those at school, college or in an existing friendship group.

The discussion can lead to a conversation around the value of online friends – it is easy to dismiss connections of Facebook as not 'real friends' yet we have worked with young people in the North East of England who get huge support from friends online, be they local or in some cases scatters around the globe. Again, this is a helpful conversation as it sometimes brings in generational challenges about what constitutes a healthy friendship – i.e. my parents do not think Alexei from Moscow in Russia is a proper friend.

Online connections do bring in considerations around safeguarding and being safe online. How we as workers deal with this aspect of the discussion should be covered by your own organisational safeguarding procedures – we would also suggest these procedures are regularly reviewed giving the ever-evolving ways that young people connect online.



# Activity 5



How can we help people through social media?

Ask the group to think how social media could be used in better ways for themselves, but also for the greater good – get them to discuss in groups and then feed back. Introduce the concept of loneliness and isolation by using this as an example that social media could help to tackle. How do we get young people feeling less isolated and/or lonely using social media?

Approximate running time: 20 minutes

## Thinking behind this activity.

A 2017 piece of research, published in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine, stated that young adults with heavy use of social media platforms—two hours a day have twice the chance of experiencing social anxiety. The study's researchers also found that participants who are online most frequently—defined as 50 or more visits a week—have three times the odds of perceived social isolation as those who went online less than nine times a week.

There are lots of research articles and studies about the correlation between social media use and loneliness, but they fall short of making definitive statements – for instance, many of the sample sizes are relatively small.

We know from working with young people that some struggle to switch off from social media, while others are more structured in how they choose to use it. We will likely have lots of our own examples of the negative impact on some young people.

Social media is here; it has been for some time and is not going to disappear. This activity is useful to explore how it can be used in positive ways and if it is to be used positively the considerations all of us should have. Setting up or joining film clubs or book clubs online could be a positive step in tackling a young person's loneliness, they might seek to help others in the community by setting up a local friendship group or community page on Facebook, social media can be used to publicise activities and hobbies where people can connect and even forge some new friendships – whether these are online or where online leads to more face to face connections. These ideas and many more can be explored – but underpinned by thoughts and advice about staying safe when using social media as a positive in connecting people.

# Closing the session

Close the session with your own feedback/evaluation tools and see if there is the opportunity to develop further sessions from this discussion.

Ensure you close the session by evaluating and gaining feedback from the young people. You can utilise your own methods and tools to do this or use...

<https://www.tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk/>



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