



Can immersion in the digital/cyber world that saturates modern culture undermine mental well-being? You won't find consensus in the behavioral science community on this one.

For example, numerous studies claim that excessive screen time harms children and teens, messing with brain development, inducing attention deficit disorder, and damping down emotional intelligence. What's more, this research asserts that "cyber addiction" is a real syndrome, and one strongly correlated with mental health issues, including depression and other mood disorders.

However, as any reputable scientist will maintain, a correlation is not a cause, meaning just because two things occur in tandem doesn't mean one causes the other. Proving causation is tricky business in the behavioral sciences. Does screen time cause depression, or do depressed people just spend more time on screens?

One reason many mental health professionals worry about the impact of digital devices on emotional well-being is because, on average, we spend a ton of time interacting with them. How much? Studies by Common Sense Media assert that the average teen spends nine hours a day with digital media. Tweens average about six hours, and even children under eight clock about three hours of daily use. As for adults, the average comes in at a jaw dropping 11 hours per day, much of which involves work. These data suggest that, on average, most of us spend the majority of our waking hours on screens.

The brain, of course, responds heavily to external inputs, and, in kind, adapts to meet the demands of these stimuli. So, we are reasonably certain that interacting with screens alters the morphology and functioning of the brain. The question remains, is that for good or ill?

If you assembled a bunch of researchers who study this line of inquiry in one room and asked that question, you'd probably hear the full range of answers, from yes, it messes with our mental health, to no, it doesn't, to we're not sure.

A case in point. A recent study published by the Association for Psychological Science disputes the popular premise that excessive screen time causes mental health problems in teens. The researchers found no causative link between the amount of time adolescents spend on digital devices and maladies like depression, anxiety, alienation, etc. What's more, this proved true even when teens used screens right up to bedtime, a common "no-no" from parenting experts.

These findings are clearly controversial, as there are other studies from reputable sources claiming otherwise. Some assert a causative connection between time spent on social media and higher rates of depression and loneliness. Others, assert that excessive screen time is undermining learning in teens and children, depriving young people of real-time interactions with people and experiences that have traditionally been the bread and butter of education.

But, that's often how science works. Usually, over time, further research resolves these conflicts. We just don't have enough solid data yet to declare a winner, so to speak. But, the widely-held and popularized assumption that heavy screen use endangers mental health remains an open question.

What we do know is that putting reasonable time limits on screen time, particularly for younger children, is prudent, given the absence of certainty about its potential impacts. Also, we are certain that primary experiences are important to child development and adult well-being. Interacting with nature, other people, tangible objects, and events in real-time has been the modus operandi of the human brain for millennia, while our love affair with the cyber world is in its infancy.

In a sense, we are part of a huge experiment underway on a global level, and all of us who use digital media extensively are the lab rats.

Into the cyber-maze we go.