

**Title:** Digital Health & Coping with our Relationship  
**Age/Grade:** Middle School (7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> grade)  
**Length:** 40-minutes

---

**In this lesson, students will:**

- Improve their ability to critically analyze their own unhealthy online behavior.
- Analyze their online experiences and how they might be reacting to unsafe situations online.
- Understand the unhealthy habits we have normalized with the internet.
- Understand the differences between online and offline environments.
- Improve their coping capabilities to stressful online situations.

**Overview:**

Why do we use the internet? What are the reasons behind the decisions that we make day-to-day? Why do we continue to do things online that we know are not in our best interests? Social media and the internet is one of the most unique environments that we exist in, yet it is also where we spend (at times) a majority of our time. We far too often accept the negatives of the internet and the negative feelings we have because we chalk it up as: “this is just how it is”. Given that, what we want to achieve in this lesson is to analyze what “digital health” means, and identify what parts of our relationship with social media are unhealthy or unsustainable. Then we will explore coping mechanisms we might be able to incorporate into our online lives.

**This lesson seeks to address to following questions:**

- What are the benefits and the detriments of being online and for the amount of time we spend on it?
- What are healthy and unhealthy habits we exhibit online?
- What are the reasons we use social media and what are the diminishing returns we are getting from that relationship?
- What is it about our relationship with technology that is unhealthy and how can that change?

**Materials:**

- Headline Activity pages
- Writing utensil
- Premade post-it notes

## **Introduction: What is the internet to me?**

*10-minutes*

You want to start the session with the students by explaining who you are and why you are there. Introduce yourself and the purpose of being there. Also explain how you want the lesson to be very interactive and you want to learn and hear about the students' opinions and thoughts.

Start the discussion by aiming to gauge the students' opinions of social media and what it means to them. Achieve this by placing multiple pieces of paper around the room. Each piece of paper has a different headline on it. Explain to the kids that each piece of paper has a different headline on it. Explain to the students that they have been asked to help put together an online article about social media through the eyes of the teens; and they have the opportunity to walk around the room and add a bullet point, or sentence to each headline from their perspective. The headlines are as follows:

- What does the internet mean to a teenager?
- Teens have an unhealthy relationship with social media: Here is why...
- Social media positively changes teen's lives: Here is how...
- Adults don't get social media, and Teens are here to help...

These four headlines are placed around the room (either on large pad paper, or on smaller sheets on desks). Give each of the students a writing utensil and allow them about 5-8 minutes to walk around the room and write on the pieces of paper that they have thoughts on.

Explain to the students that they do not need to write on each paper, and that there are not any wrong answers. These are meant to gather their opinions and thoughts about the internet and social media. As the students walk around the classroom and participate in the workshop, make sure they understand the activity and answer any questions they might have.

## **Debrief: Reviewing the articles**

*5-minutes*

Once the students complete the first activity, the students can return to their seats and you should collect the papers and bring them to the front. Start with whichever has the most written on it, indicating that the students resonate or have the most to say about those topics/ideas. Each of these headlines are meant to gather the students' opinions and thoughts about social media and you want to discuss some of the main trends from their responses. Below are some topics, questions, and takeaways you hope to capture and cover from their responses:

- What does the internet mean to a teenager?
  - o *How do the students conceptualize the internet?* Is it a method to speak with friends? It is a way of interacting with information we wouldn't ever have the opportunity to do?
  - o *Is the general mood around "the internet" and social media positive or negative?* Do the students highlight the positives of its importance to them? Or do they only bring up the negatives?

- *What are the deviations between the way YOUTH view the internet, and the way that adults view it?* You want to gather as much of an understanding about the students and how their opinions and thoughts might differ from those of adults. Some of these might be very clear based on their responses – some might be less clear and will require further questioning with the students.
- Teens have an unhealthy relationship with social media: Here is why...
  - *What specific actions are they identifying as being unhealthy?* You want to gather the actual behaviors the youth are participating in that they view as being unhealthy.
  - *Are there specific trends pertaining to their relationship that are most commonly mentioned than others?* For example, are the students identifying an addiction to social media? Are they talking about their screentime? Are they talking about the way they communicate with people online? Or is it their reliance on it that is their concern?
- Social media positively changes teens lives: here is how...
  - *Are there any specific parts of youths' lives that are being changed for the better?* Are their relationships, mental health, or friendships strengthened by being on social media?
  - *Are the students identifying any changes to their behavior that they like more?* Do the students feel any differently online? For example, are they more confident online or more comfortable in that space?
  - *Do the students identify not only the "how", but the "why"?* You want to get a sense as to why the students might be happier or positively impacted online, not just the how.
- Adults don't get social media, and teens are here to help:
  - *Are the students focused more on the technical parts of social media (e.g. how to make a TikTok video) or the personal aspects of it (e.g. the realities of how they communicate with others online)?* Identifying this will be important at the beginning – there is no correct way for the students to respond, but it will lend an glimpse into how they perceive the breakdown between them and adults.
  - *Do the students share any thoughts about how they are taught online and internet safety?* They might not, however it is not uncommon for students to feel internet safety education is not being talked about in the way they are actually using the internet.

The main goal of reviewing the responses by the students is to examine how they view the internet. You will be able to learn:

- Do they view it more positively or negatively?
- What do they like about it?
- What do they not like about it?
- How often are they using it?
- Are they being talked to about it by adults and how?
- And the many things they are participating in online...

## Activity: Rating Our Healthiness

*10-minutes*

Next, you want to take what was discussed in the opening activity and debrief, to start analyzing some of the behaviors, habits, and experiences the youth might have online. The purpose of this activity is for the students to reflect on their digital health by analyzing the decisions they make online. Once they analyze these situations, determining the level of unhealthy-to-healthy they are along a scale, the students will then determine a coping strategy that can help in situations that they are most comfortable with.

To ensure the students have an understanding about what coping is and how it can help in situations online, take a moment to go over the term and what it means. Start by asking the students whether they know what this means. Explain that coping is the ability to handle stressful, uncomfortable situations. There are many examples of what that might entail (feel free to ask for any examples that they might have experienced). Share a situation:

An example might be that you build up an expectation in your head about how you have to look, the way you dress, and wear your hair. These image expectations start to make you anxious, and you start to think less of yourself. Therefore, you decide to change who you are following on Instagram so you no longer follow or see pictures of influencers that make you feel this way.

Explain further that a coping strategy can be a technical strategy (blocking, reporting, etc.), or something more personal (reaching out to friends, talking to a teacher, etc.). It is whatever they are most comfortable with.

Next, start the activity. You will give each student an post-it or two of online activities/habits/situations written on post-it notes. On the white board, draw a scale that looks like the one below:



1. Spending 8-hours a day online unrelated to schoolwork.
2. Checking every notification as soon as they pop up on your phone.
3. Things happening online causing you anxiety, but you want to keep up to date.
4. Using the snapchat location feature to track what your friends are up to.
5. Getting “burnt out” due to being connected all the time.
6. Having more online conversations than offline conversations with friends.
7. Never applying your actual name to your digital profiles.
8. Engaging with only with influencers and their accounts when on Instagram.
9. Communicating with people only online about things you enjoy.
10. Unfollowing or unfriending someone as soon as they begin to bother you with their posts.

Once you have handed these out, allow the students the chance to come up to the board and place their post-it notes on the scale wherever they determine them to be. Once the students take the time in doing so, follow-up by having a discussion about each habit and ask the students about *why* each habit was placed where it was. If there are any disagreements in the group, that is okay – allow it to be a discussion in the class.

### **Identifying Coping: What works? What doesn't?**

*8-minutes*

After the students have worked to identify what might be risky about their online lives and which of their actions are unhealthy, we now want to review specific actions and strategies to maximize their positive online lifestyles. For the post-it notes that have been placed on the side of the scale that the students deemed healthier, we want each student to develop an action plan of coping strategie(s) that the students are comfortable doing themselves.

Begin by putting together a list of coping strategies yourself. Some of these are listed below.

- Report a situation on the app
- Screenshot and bring to adult
- Reach out to friend
- Find new form of entertainment
- Respond to someone hurting you

After mentioning and writing some of these on the board, ask the students whether there are any strategies or ideas that they have, that they'd be comfortable doing. Express understanding that not everyone is comfortable or willing to do all of these options, but that we want to make ourselves comfortable to take the step forward. Write any additional ideas on the board. Then ask the students to choose one of the post-its deemed to be unhealthy, and identify one coping strategy they would be willing to implement into their lives.

After having the time to do so, review some of the strategies the students would be willing to do. Ask specifics whenever possible to help iron out some of the details – what does a text to a friend look like? Who would you be comfortable going to for help? What's a new source of entertainment that can get you off your phone?

### **Conclusion**

*2-4 minutes*

To close the lesson, bring the students back to the idea of maintaining a healthy online lifestyle. Their time online will likely only grow in the coming years, and we want to make sure they are being not only safe, but also healthy with that time. Express understanding that there are likely expectations about how their online lives should be, and that they should be saying and doing certain things online, however they should be improving their self-reflection and healthy reaction to their online reality.

Answer any final questions and close the lesson.