The Intersection of Social Media, Mental Illness, and Responsible Use

What and where is the intersection of responsible use of social media with mental illness? Can an individual with mental illness use social media responsibly? Do nurses have a role in helping those with mental illness achieve responsible use? Yes, individuals with mental illness can use social media regularly and responsibly without sounding alarms. Yes, nurses can play a role in helping their patients achieve a sound balance of use in their lives without social media wreaking functional distress. The intersection lies somewhere in the murky coexistence of all parties on the internet, neurotypical and atypical alike. Neurotypical individuals with irresponsible use can easily trigger an individual with a chronic mental illness into a daylong rant with significant repercussions.

As someone with bipolar 1 disorder, if I am tempted to venture on a keyboard rant, I wait 1 hour. If the hour has not resolved my urge to rant, I type it out and have a friend or family member read it. If my writing seems rational to their neurotypical brains, I hit send. Through this process I have given myself two safeguards before doing something I may regret. Thus far, it’s a successful process. Not perfect, as it has loopholes, but successful. That is the simple part. It is the variable I can control as it involves only myself.

The bigger challenge is resisting the urge to lash out at neurotypical individuals on social media for their inappropriate humor. Many times a day one sees a meme that pokes fun at obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, medications, or even one’s political beliefs. The list is endless. An individual who chooses to try to educate someone on how the post is offensive to others is “a snowflake who should have just kept scrolling and minded their business” (anonymou personal communication) and is defriended. Thus, the ignorance is perpetuated. Confronting ignorance to raise awareness of responsible use is a precarious choice, as one can lose friends, in some cases, long-time friends, and the ability to offer the teachable moment. The poster generally does not care about being offensive or genuinely lacks the insight as to how hurtful this type of post may be to certain individuals.

Responsible social media use with chronic mental illness means understanding when another person is being demeaning. It means knowing you sometimes have to be brave enough to use your voice (in a calm, rational, factual manner) and state that someone else’s behavior is not okay. It means when you want to make a passionate point, you have to check your emotions at the door before you start typing and not let your disorder speak for you. Responsible social media use means knowing that there are days, even weeks, when on occasion you must hand over the reins of your accounts to a loved one while you are not well for the sake of self-preservation. As I mentioned earlier, there are loopholes to my strategy, which is sometimes ignoring the rational voice for the sake of emotional satisfaction. Taking breaks from social media and deactivating one’s account can be a powerful tool on the journey to wellness and demonstrates maturity, levelheadedness, insight, and responsibility.

How do advanced practice RNs (APRNs) fit into responsible use? As key members of treatment teams, APRNs are in a powerful position to assess when social media consumes a patient’s life. APRNs can help encourage patients to track usage through tools, such as bullet journaling and graphs, exploring how use impacts functionality and makes the patient feel. If daily function is impaired and self-esteem is lost, cognitive-behavioral or dialectical-behavioral therapy are useful therapeutic modalities to learn to decrease social media use and explore the role of social media in the patient’s life. APRNs can help patients implement strategies for alternative, creative means to fill time instead of being online.

Once they learn those boundaries, neurotypical and atypical individuals alike can stand confidently at the intersection of responsible use and live peacefully with their social media neighbors.

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