

## Does Social Media Make People Sadder?

<sup>1</sup> In an interesting segment on the podcast, “Hidden Brain,” a researcher said, “Using Facebook makes you more comparative. You compare yourself to others more often. You judge yourself. Am I better or worse? Am I happier? Are other people happier than me?”

<sup>2</sup> The segment told the story of Rachel Leonard. When she was in her 20’s and 30’s, she lived in many different states in the U.S. and traveled all over the world. To keep in touch with the many people she had met in all these different places, she signed up for Facebook. She often included stories and pictures about her many trips.

<sup>3</sup> While she was sharing her adventures in foreign countries, she was also reading about the experiences her friends were having back home. Many of them were getting married; others were starting to have children. Some had found great jobs and bought beautiful homes.

<sup>4</sup> One day, she met a man who soon became her boyfriend. He convinced her to stop traveling, and instead, to stay with him in North Carolina. She still enjoyed traveling, and in fact, had recently received a job offer to teach in Southeast Asia. She was single and 33, but from Facebook, she noticed that many of her friends seemed to have wonderful lives with their spouses, children and great jobs. So she reluctantly agreed to move in with her boyfriend, and they soon got engaged.

<sup>5</sup> She began posting happy stories and beautiful pictures about her life with her boyfriend. They bought a house with a view of lovely mountains in one direction. Not surprisingly, she didn’t include pictures of the factory that was in the other direction. As Rachael said, “No one ever puts negative stuff on there.” If they did, other people

might wonder if the person is having some kind of trouble in their life.

<sup>6</sup> The podcast host, Shankar Vedantam, said that it seems that there are some “understood rules” concerning Facebook. We can post celebrations, like something we accomplished. Also, mourning a loss, like the death of someone close to us, is acceptable. But most people tend to avoid telling about “uncertainty and doubt.” For example, in general, people don’t tell about a rejection for a job or some marital problems.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel started to feel trapped because her real life, and her Facebook one were very different. Her Facebook showed her smiling, laughing and having great times with her husband, but in fact, they were fighting a lot.

<sup>8</sup> The more that her real life seemed to be becoming miserable, the more she felt the need to post positive messages about her life in order to make herself feel better. Friends of hers would post messages such as, “I’m so happy for you” and “You are finally settling down” and “You two look beautiful together.”

<sup>9</sup> However, Rachel started to realize that she and her husband were not suited for each other. The more unhappy she became, the more she read other people’s postings. She would compare their wonderful lives with her unhappy one, and she felt that she shouldn’t be feeling the way that she was. Everyone else seemed more successful and to be enjoying their marriages more.

<sup>10</sup> Soon she got a divorce, and she moved back to her hometown, Cleveland. To find out if anyone knew about job openings there, she posted that she was moving back home. Surprisingly, she suddenly received

many private messages from friends asking her if she was getting a divorce and telling her about their own divorces. Rachel was stunned. She went back to some of the pictures in those friends' previous postings and realized that their husbands hadn't been in them for quite a while.

<sup>11</sup> Now, she looks at Facebook differently. When she looks at friends' postings about their wonderful experiences, she wonders what other stories they are not telling.

## Part 2

<sup>12</sup> A researcher, Ohad Barzilay at Tel Aviv University in Israel, said, "It's not that you think that others are happier than you are, but you need to prove yourself to yourself over and over again, and this social-comparison engagement makes you less happy." Rachel was making up a fake life on Facebook to keep up with the wonderful lives her friends seemed to have, and she discovered, many of her friends were doing the same thing; they were trying to keep up with her.

<sup>13</sup> Barzilay wanted to explore the relationship between how much time we spend on social media and how happy we are. Many studies have shown that people who often use social media seem to be less happy than those who don't. However, the researchers wondered about two possible reasons for this. One would be a correlation. Are lonely people using social media to escape from their lonely or unhappy lives? The other would be cause: Is social media causing people to feel unhappy?

<sup>14</sup> Barzilay and his fellow researchers at Tel Aviv University in Israel wanted to answer those questions. They were able to do this by looking at what happened at a security company. This company made a rule that no employee could use Facebook because they needed to keep company information

private. Employees had to delete their Facebook accounts, or they would lose their jobs. However, after a few months had passed, some employees were allowed to re-open their Facebook accounts. As a result, the researchers had two groups that they could study: one group had accounts and other didn't. Also, none of the employees chose which group to be in; it was decided by the company.

<sup>15</sup> The researchers compared the groups. They looked at social comparisons, the perceptions employees had about others' lives and happiness.

<sup>16</sup> The researchers found that using Facebook makes people more comparative. In other words, they judge themselves by comparing their lives to others. They are looking to see if others' lives are more exciting and happier than their own. Interestingly, the study found that people did *not* think other people had better lives. They realized that people post mostly positive things on their Facebook, so they weren't fooled by those postings. In other words, they knew that people were presenting a better image of themselves than was actually true.

<sup>17</sup> Even though they knew this, the employees who used Facebook became less happy during the next few months than those who didn't. The researchers explain this by saying that continually comparing yourself to others forces you to prove to yourself that your life is good and that you are happy. This comparing yourself over and over again makes you less happy. We want our lives to be as good as, or even better than, our friends.

<sup>18</sup> There is a fear that others are having better lives than we have. There is another type of fear closely connected to social media. It's called *FOMO* (fear of missing

out). This can happen when we look at photos and descriptions of our friends' experiences on social media of events that we did not attend. This can cause us to be less happy at the present moment even if we ourselves had been having an enjoyable experience.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Kahn, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, started studying FOMO after observing one of her daughter's friends. One weekend, this friend chose to attend a wedding in an exotic place instead of joining her other friends at a party, which they often did together. During the wedding, she constantly was looking at her Facebook instead of enjoying the wedding that she was attending. She could see pictures of her friends at the beach.

<sup>20</sup> Kahn said that the friend who had chosen to attend the wedding was still sure that she had made the right choice, but because she was checking her Facebook during the event, her mind was continually "leaving" the wedding. In other words, FOMO was causing her to feel doubtful about her decision.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, it's possible that the friends who were at the beach party were experiencing FOMO too. They might have been thinking that they were missing a wedding at a great place.

<sup>22</sup> Kahn has analyzed FOMO more and has come to the conclusion that the stress we feel when we experience it isn't regret that we are missing something fun. Actually, the stress is caused because we fear that our friends are building close friendships with each other while we aren't there. We worry that something at the event that we missed will make our friends' connections tighter and that we will have missed this chance to tighten our bonds with them.

<sup>23</sup> Kahn believes that social media is making it easy for people to be aware of all the things that people are doing without us. And that is how it makes us less happy. So even if you have been spending the day skiing in the alps, or at a concert of your favorite performer, or hiking in an exotic South American forest, when you check your Facebook at the end of the day and see your friends back home are gathered at a picnic, your pleasure from that day will feel smaller after you have looked at their pictures.

