

## **Social media users do not have more stress than others But digital technology users are more aware of stressful events in the lives of friends and family, and that stress is contagious**

A new study disputes the notion that social media use is tied to higher stress. At the same time, it shows that social media users are more aware of stressful events in the lives of their friends and family. This awareness can translate into higher stress for themselves – it is the ‘cost of caring’.

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**Washington (January 15, 2015)** – Frequent use of digital technologies is not directly related to higher stress. In fact, women who are heavy users of some social media typically report lower stress, according to a new survey by the Pew Research Center.

However, the survey also shows that social media use can increase users’ awareness of stressful events in others’ lives, and awareness of these events can lead to higher levels of stress. This kind of stress is contagious and has been called the ‘cost of caring.’

The survey of 1,801 adults asked participants about the extent to which they felt their lives were stressful using a well-established scale of stress called the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). This scale is based on people’s answers to 10 questions that assess whether they feel that their life is overloaded, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Using those measures, the researchers found that **overall, internet, cell phone and social media users do not have higher levels of stress.** In fact, for women, the opposite is true for at least some digital technologies. Holding other factors constant, women who use Twitter, email, and cell phone picture sharing report lower levels of stress.

The survey also asked people if they were aware of a number of stressful events in their friends’ lives – such as family tragedies or struggles, or losing jobs or having work difficulties. It turns out that **social media use helps people learn about, and reminds them of stressful events in the lives of friends and family. If people are made aware of undesirable events in other’ lives, they feel more stress themselves. This is the ‘cost of caring.’**

“There is a complex relationship between social media use and stress,” said Prof. Keith Hampton, a Rutgers University scholar who is a main author of the Pew Research report on the findings. “There is no evidence in our data that social media users feel more stress than people who use digital technologies less or not at all. There is a great deal of speculation that social media users feel extra pressure to participate and keep up on social media, to avoid the ‘fear of missing out’ in activities that others share, and that they feel anxious after viewing the successful images that friends project on Facebook. But it turns out social media users don’t feel any more stress in everyday life than non-users or those who only

lightly use digital technologies. However, for some, the use of these technologies can be indirectly related to stress. The social aspect of these technologies makes people more aware of stressful events in other's lives. Learning about and being reminded of undesirable events in other people's lives makes people feel more stress themselves. This finding about the cost of caring adds to the evidence that stress can be contagious."

The Pew Research study finds that gender differences are a major part of this story. Women and men have different levels of stress; their use of digital technologies varies; and the impact of their technology use is different. The broad patterns are:

- Overall, women tend to report more stress than men. In this survey, women report an average score of 10.5 out of 30 on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Men reported an average score of 9.8 – a figure that is 7% lower than women.
- But, those women who use a number of digital technologies to communicate with others tend to report less stress than women who do not use these technologies. Compared with a woman who does not use these technologies, a woman who uses Twitter several times per day, sends or receives 25 emails per day, and shares two digital pictures through her mobile phone per day, scores 21% lower on our stress measure than a woman who does not use these technologies at all.
- Women are more aware of stressful events in the lives of their closest friends and family. And social media use is related to even higher levels of awareness of the stressful events that unfold in the lives of people they know.
- Awareness of stressful events in others' lives is a significant contributor to people's own stress. It is the only factor that we found that is common to both social media use and psychological stress. The number of undesirable events associated with stress is greater for women than for men.

Facebook was the one technology that for both men and women provides higher levels of awareness of stressful events taking place in the lives of both close and more distant acquaintances. Other technologies are more specialized: some provide awareness of major events in the lives of close relationships, while others provide an awareness of activities in the lives of acquaintances who are less socially close.

Among Facebook users:

- A woman with an average size network of Facebook friends is aware of 13% more stressful events in the lives of her closest social ties, and 14% more stressful events in the lives of her more-distant acquaintances when compared with a similar woman who does not use Facebook.
- A typical male Facebook user who comments regularly on others' posts is aware of 8% more stressful events amongst his closest social ties. A man with an average size network of Facebook friends is aware of 6% more major events in the lives of his acquaintances, compared with an equivalent male who does not use Facebook.

For women, awareness about stressful events in others' lives was also likely to be related to sharing pictures online, use of Pinterest, and Twitter. For men, awareness was particularly likely to be related to text messaging on their cell phone, email, and LinkedIn. These patterns are a result of both the tendency for men and women to use different technologies, and for them to use different technologies to keep in touch with different types of people – friends, family, workmates, and acquaintances.

- A woman who has an average number of Facebook friends, who shares photos online, and uses Pinterest at average levels, is typically aware of 29% more stressful events in the lives of their closest friends and family when compared to a woman who does not use these technologies at all.
- A man who is average in the number of comments he posts on Facebook, use of text messaging, and use of LinkedIn, is typically aware of 67% more stressful events in the lives of their closest friends and family when compared to a man who does not use these technologies at all.

The cost of caring is particularly felt by women. This is a result of two facts about women and stress: first, women report higher levels of stress to begin with, and second, women are aware of more stressful events in the lives of their friends and family.

Holding other factors constant, women who were aware that ...

- someone close to them experienced the death of a child, partner, or spouse scored 14% higher on our measure of stress.
- someone close has been hospitalized or experienced a serious accident or injury reported 5% higher stress.
- an acquaintance had been accused of or arrested for a crime scored 11% higher on the stress measure.
- an acquaintance experienced a demotion or cut in pay reported 9% higher stress in their own lives.

For men, of the events we explored, only two were associated with stress. Holding other factors constant, men who were aware that ...

- someone close to them had been accused of or arrested for a crime scored 15% higher on our measure of stress.
- an acquaintance had experienced a demotion or pay cut at work report 12% higher stress.

“For many, the new social reality is that people are pervasively and persistently connected through social media,” said Lee Rainie, director of internet, science, and technology research at the Pew Research Center. “In the most common circumstances as they use social media to learn about friends’ lives and share information about their own lives, this new social environment has its benefits, such as higher levels of social support and social capital, and doesn’t seem to add to stress. But when users find out about really distressing things in their friends’ lives, it can take its toll.”

### **About this Survey**

The analysis in this report is based on findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,801 American adults (ages 18+) by the Pew Research Center fielded August 7-September 16, 2013. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish on landline and cell phones (N=900). The margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus 2.6 percentage points. Some 1,076 respondents are users of social networking sites and the margin of error for that subgroup is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points.

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