Warning Signs of Depression and Social Media

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A study of first-year college students concluded that many would accept an offer of help for depression sparked by references to depression on their Facebook pages, but that those most in need of intervention would be least likely to accept such help from strangers. The research also revealed that most students prefer face-to-face interactions with friends or trusted adults about issues such as depression, rather than communication via social media. The authors suggested that programs in which peers and trusted adults on college campuses intervene in person with students whose Facebook pages include signs of depression might be an effective intervention for depression on college campuses and represent an opportunity to intervene “during the age window in which most mental health disorders first appear.”

The authors reported that almost all (93 percent) of the students interviewed indicated that they would want a friend or a trusted adult (such as a professor or a residence assistant) to intervene if that friend or adult noticed that the student displayed an indication of depression on their Facebook page. Sixty percent of the participants whose Facebook profiles contained no indications of depression said they would accept help from a stranger, compared to about 1/3 of participants whose Facebook page contained indications of depression. According to the authors, this “suggests that this is not an ideal intervention strategy among those who would truly need help.” Half of the students who had not displayed indications of depression on their Facebook page, and 60 percent of those who had, reported that they prefer face-to-face communication from friends or trusted adults, rather than any type of electronic communication.

The authors pointed out that:

• the small sample size may have limited their ability to detect statistically significant results
• young people who were excluded from the study because they had more restrictive privacy settings on their Facebook pages may be more reluctant to accept help based on warnings raised by their Facebook pages than other students
• the culture seems to be moving toward more concern with privacy, which would have implications for identifying people in need of mental health services through their Facebook profiles.


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