

Audio Transcript

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Guest:	Matthew Price, PhD
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Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. In this series, we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport.

On today's episode, we will be discussing the impact of social media use on PTSD. I'm joined today by Dr. Matthew Price, a George Albee Green and Gold Professor of Psychological Science and director of the Clinical Psychology Training Program at the University of Vermont. Welcome, Dr. Price.

Dr. Matthew Price:

Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

So, Dr. Price, let's start by just making sure that we all understand what we're talking about today. So can you explain what we mean by social media?

Dr. Matthew Price:

Certainly. I think when we think about social media, there are sort of two key pieces to consider. The first is who gets to create the content that we would see from this. And the answer is it's really anyone. It's our friends, family, various news organizations. There's really no restrictions to who can, display information on social media. It's a very democratic process, which has a lot of benefits, but also has some drawbacks. I think the second piece to consider with social media is how it's displayed to us. It is something that is often displayed in near limitless amount of information. The term "endless scroll" can sometimes be used to describe the way social media is used. And so that's usually what I think about when we think about defining social media.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

So, with social media, we have limitless access to content and information. How is this different than looking at, let's say news stories online?

Dr. Matthew Price:

That's a really good distinction to make. I think the big difference between social media and traditional media, is curation. Traditional media outlets often have editors or editorial teams that are reviewing some of the content before it's sent out. Whereas in social media, that's usually not the case. And then also I would say that with traditional media, there's usually a finite amount of it per day or per period, newspapers have a finite amount of information that they will display per day and that will turn over usually the next day. But it doesn't have the constant, second by second updating that we find with social media.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

So I understand that you've done some research that looks at different ways people with PTSD and depression use their smartphones. So for example, how much time they spend texting, browsing the internet, playing games, or checking social media. What did you learn in your research?

Dr. Matthew Price:

What we found is that people who have a trauma history and those who have more severe PTSD symptoms, and more depression symptoms tend to use their mobile devices, spending more time on social media, playing games on their phone, more time watching videos on their phone, more web browsing on their phone than people who don't have as severe symptoms or don't have these conditions. Now I do want to just caution everyone that we don't know which is coming first. If depression and PTSD are driving mobile phone use or mobile phone uses leading people to feel more severe PTSD and depression. There has been a handful of experimental work that has looked at this, which seems to indicate that if we spend a lot of time on our phone, specifically looking at social media, that can increase our feelings of negativity, make us feel a little sad, anxious.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

Yeah. And I think that that's an important point to make here that it's hard to know what came first. And I'm wondering what about specifically for people with PTSD, do we find that they are drawn to social media for any particular reason?

Dr. Matthew Price:

I think that for people with PTSD, there's sort of a push and a pull of social media. I think the push is that one of the hallmark symptoms of PTSD is avoidance. People with PTSD tend to be really anxious in their surroundings and not want to engage with things that they perceive to be dangerous, which as by the nature of PTSD is a lot of things. And so mobile devices provide this incredible opportunity to avoid when you're outside in the real world, you can take out your phone, you can look at social media. It has a near limitless amount of information that you can view that will really take you away and take you out of whatever it is that you're currently dealing with in the moment. I would also say that there's a bit of a pull with social media specifically, for those with PTSD. In many ways our mobile devices can sometimes seem like they have the answer to all of the problems. You don't know how to get to a particular place, your phone has a GPS. And social media can provide a way to learn about things. So, if you have PTSD and you're anxious and you're outside and something is making you nervous, it provides a great way to say, this is the solution to dealing with the challenges that I'm having in the moment. And avoidance can actually serve to perpetuate these PTSD symptoms. And so that is where I think that social media can be sometimes challenging for individuals with PTSD. It provides a way for them to avoid, which can start to perpetuate some of the challenges they're having.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

And I do really appreciate that you're highlighting how difficult it can be for people to avoid something that they know may be bad for them, but that we are encouraged to use our phones for everything these days. So it's quite a predicament. Now I know you've also done some research on "doom scrolling." Can you tell us what that term means?

Dr. Matthew Price:

Yes, that's a term that popped up right around the start of the pandemic. And it was used to capture the real increase in negative emotions that people had when they were usually on their mobile device, looking at social media stories that have a limitless scroll. So you're scrolling through your feed and you're just feeling this impending sense of doom.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

And why is doom scrolling bad for our mental health?

Dr. Matthew Price:

I think one of the things that's really problematic about doom scrolling is that it doesn't really lead to a particular solution or help us actually address some of the challenges we're having. But it has this very insidious trait where it makes us feel like we're actually doing something. I think that we would all agree that learning more about a particular topic is a helpful or good thing to do. A real challenge of that though is that once we learn something, we then need to figure out a plan to act on that information. Oftentimes a lot of doom scrolling will just give you a lot of really negative or challenging information, makes you feel anxious or worried and doesn't really lead you to any particular solution or ideas on how to actually address the problem.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

And how does all the negative emotion that comes with doom scrolling impact those with PTSD in particular?

Dr. Matthew Price:

With doom scrolling, you are putting yourself in a position where you are taking in a lot of emotionally charged information that is likely going to make you feel angry, anxious, sad, or worried. And you are injecting that into this individual who has PTSD and it's unclear if they're going to have the skills and the tools necessary to accurately handle all of that negative emotions that they're feeling. And this is where I think getting people who have PTSD to get into evidence-based treatment can be really helpful. It will help them address some of their PTSD symptoms as well as give them the skills to deal with some of those things that can pop up if they engage in behaviors like doom scrolling.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

Yeah. So, in terms of the chicken and the egg question, it sounds like it's a combination of both people with PTSD may use social media more and using social media may make PTSD symptoms worse. So, I think coming back to your last point, if someone realizes that their mental health is suffering, what can they do about it?

Dr. Matthew Price:

I think the first thing for anyone to do who is looking for treatment is to go out and get evidence-based care from a provider. There are fantastic providers through the VA and in many local communities that are able to offer this type of evidence-based treatment for PTSD. As part of that treatment, it can be helpful to think about how one's social media use or even more broadly one's mobile phone use might be contributing to some of the challenges that they're experiencing.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

For our listeners who have PTSD, what advice would you give them about how to use their smartphones? Do you have any tips or suggestions for those who want to limit the impact of social media or other apps on their health?

Dr. Matthew Price:

One of the things that I think is really useful about mobile devices is there are ways on your device to see how much time you're spending in different applications. Looking at that data can give you some insight into how you're using your phone and if that seems to be potentially problematic. Some broad general advice for people who are noticing, they think they're spending a lot of time on their mobile device and maybe aren't feeling super great when they're using it, is to think about putting limits on their screen time availability. Our mobile devices can do so many things, so we're going to be very cautious about saying that it's your entire mobile device that's problematic. Sometimes you can need the GPS to get to work. But if you find yourself after you get to work starting to scroll through social media, that's where you might want to think about putting some type of restriction in place to help you not turn to social media so frequently. You could think about different steps to take, some of the settings on your device to help limit your ability to access certain applications, saying that you can only use different types of applications for a certain period of time. Alternatively, you can even think about deleting a social media application from your device. Maybe you can find another way to access that platform, like accessing it through a computer or a tablet. So those I think are some of the important little steps that people can take if they want to cut down or find that their social media use may be problematic. But first and foremost a person who is struggling with PTSD really should look into getting into evidence-based treatment with a clinician, which will be helpful in addressing those symptoms.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

You also mentioned earlier that some of these apps are going to be important for their daily life. Are there other ways people can be using their smartphones that might actually be good for their mental health? Are there helpful apps out there?

Dr. Matthew Price:

Yes, there are a range of helpful mobile applications that people can use to help address their PTSD symptoms. Many of them are actually made by the VA. These are things like PTSD Coach, as well as other applications that are meant to be used when doing evidence-based treatment like PE Coach or CPT Coach. And using these tools can give people with PTSD an introduction to some skills or help them use some skills to help better manage some of the symptoms that they're having. It can be really helpful to try and make sure that we're building those habits to pick up our phones, to go to those helpful applications and avoid some of the bad ones. And using some of the strategies we've talked about before, setting some screen time limits, considering taking a break by uninstalling some mobile applications can be some of those ways to make sure that we're using our phones in a way to help us rather than to exacerbate some of the symptoms we have.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

Wonderful. Well, unfortunately, that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much Dr. Price for joining us today to talk about social media.

Dr. Matthew Price:

It was my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Colleen Beckett-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, VA Mental Health apps are free and available for anyone who might find them helpful. Learn more about these apps and find links to download at www.ptsd.va.gov/mobile.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.