

Social media makes people feel like they're missing out

By Justin White, Washington Post

Have you heard about FOMO – “fear of missing out”? Most common among the under-30 crowd, it happens when someone feels nervous about not attending social events, like that awesome party everyone else enjoyed last weekend.

People have always been concerned about their social standing, but the explosion of social media has made FOMO a bigger issue, for everyone from middle schoolers newly toting smartphones to adults. Now researchers have developed a quiz to test just how fearful people are about missing out.

Among the questions the FOMO quiz asks are how often someone checks social media (“when eating breakfast?” “when eating lunch?” “in the 15 minutes before you go to sleep?”) and how worried he or she feels when friends are hanging out without them. As the intro to the quiz puts it, “FOMO . . . is a relatively new concept where people are concerned that others may be having more fun and rewarding experiences than them. It is characterized as the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing.”

FOMO is often associated with a perceived low social rank, which can cause feelings of anxiety and inferiority. When someone misses a party, vacation or other social event, he or she can feel a little less cool than those who showed up and snapped photos. In some cases, people are even afraid to miss out on bad stuff. FOMO is most common in people ages 18 to 33 – in one survey, two-thirds of people in this age group said they experience these fears. The survey also suggests FOMO is more common among guys than ladies, though it's unclear why.

Research suggests FOMO can take a negative toll on

psychological health. Constant fear of missing events can cause anxiety and depression, especially for young people.

Over the past few years, there's been a lot of research on the way social media influences FOMO. Recent research suggests people who experience FOMO are most likely to value social media as part of their social development. Status updates and tweets ("OMG best night ever!") let us know about all the exciting activities happening while we're home catching up with the "Jersey Shore" crowd. Some psychologists even suggest FOMO helps drive the success of social media platforms, since we feel we need to use the technology to let us know what's happening elsewhere. But in some cases, FOMO might actually be a motivator, encouraging us to socialize with friends.

Some argue that the feelings associated with FOMO strengthen connections with others, encouraging people to be more socially active. While it might be antisocial to sit around checking out the Facebook pages of

pseudo-strangers, it's possible to use social media in a constructive way, like keeping in touch with friends and planning activities. (Maybe it's time to reconnect with an old buddy who lives nearby?)

Psychologists say fears about missing out may be a type of cognitive distortion, causing irrational thoughts – such as believing that friends hate you if you didn't get an invite to last week's party – associated with depression. For people prone to such thoughts, modern technology may just exacerbate their fears about missing out. So experts say unplugging all those gadgets might not solve the problem as well as engaging in cognitive behavioral therapy or another kind of talk therapy might.

Whatever you do, remember when scoping out other people's plans, especially online, that many people project their most idealized selves on the Web. So spy with a skeptical eye. And

to those who are confident enough in their plans for this
Friday night ... well, hats off.