

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Can Social Media Help People with Serious Mental Illness Feel More Connected to Their Community?

People with serious mental illness (SMI) have conditions like depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder that can affect their ability to participate in their communities and build social relationships. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, allows people with and without disabilities to connect with friends and family, both locally and far away. Many people with SMI use social media to communicate with friends, find peer support from others with similar conditions, or receive health-related information. In past studies, people with SMI have reported that using social media helped them feel more connected with other people, but could it also help them to become more involved with their community? In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at the connections between social media use and participation in community activities for people with SMI. They wanted to find out whether people with SMI who were more active on social media were also more engaged in their local communities and civic life. They also wanted to find out if social media use was associated with any negative outcomes, like feelings of loneliness.

Researchers at the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Community Living and Participation Among Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities \(TU Collaborative\)](#) interviewed 232 people with SMI from 13 states. All were receiving publicly funded mental health services. The researchers asked the participants if they had a social media account. If they did, they were asked how much time per week they spent using it and their reasons for using social media. The researchers also asked the participants about their community participation and civic involvement. For community participation, the participants indicated how many community activities, out of a list of 22, they had participated in during the past month and how many days during the month they spent engaging in each activity. The list of community activities included activities such as shopping, visiting family or friends, working, or religious activities. For civic involvement, the participants indicated whether or not they had voted in the most recent election, engaged in a picket or protest during the past year, and donated money to organizations in their community during the past year. Finally, the participants answered questions about how often they felt lonely, and their overall quality of life.

The researchers found that a third of the participants had at least one social media account. Nearly all of these participants used Facebook as their primary social media platform, but some participants also used Twitter, Google Plus, LinkedIn, or other social media platforms. Nearly two-thirds of the participants with a social media account used it at least once daily. More than half of the participants who used social media said it was important or very important to them. These participants used social media for a variety of reasons, such as keeping up with friends, family, and colleagues; learning

more about people they met in real life; and keeping up with the news and social trends. Younger participants were more likely than older participants to use social media.

The researchers found that social media use was associated with greater community participation and civic involvement. The participants who used social media at least once a week reported participating in a greater variety of community activities, and participating in these activities more often, than those participants who used social media less than once a week or not at all. In addition, the participants who used social media at least 30 minutes daily were more likely to have voted in the most recent election and to have picketed or protested than those who used social media less than 30 minutes daily or not at all. The researchers found there was no connection between social media use and increased loneliness or lower quality of life.

The authors noted that for participants in this study, social media and community participation were connected, and using social media was not associated with any negative outcomes like loneliness or isolation. In fact, many of the participants said that social media helped them feel less lonely. The authors suggested that people with SMI may have difficulties with face-to-face interactions, and may thus find it easier to keep up with their friends and events in their communities using social media platforms. Social media may help these individuals to feel closer to their friends and to build new relationships. They may also use social media to learn about job opportunities, community events, and civic issues in their community.

Social media like Facebook and Twitter may offer people with SMI and their care teams a tool to find support and connect with events and opportunities in their community. Young adults with SMI, in particular, may benefit from peer support interventions that utilize social media, while older adults who do not yet use social media may benefit from programs that encourage them to create social media accounts. Researchers may want to investigate which tools are most effective for different aspects of participation, and how specific social media-based programs might help people with SMI enhance their participation in community life.

[To Learn More](#)

The TU Collaborative offers many reports, guides, and factsheets to help people with SMI to be more active in their community, from leisure activities and recreation with the family to creating welcoming congregations. Find them online at <http://www.tucollaborative.org>

This issue of Frontline Initiative shows from the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals how Direct Support Professionals use social media and other tools to help their clients connect https://ici.umn.edu/products/Frontline_Initiative/FI_12_1.pdf

[To Learn More About this Study](#)

Brusilovskiy, E., Townley, G., Snethen, G., and Salzer, M.S. (2016) [Social media use, community participation, and psychological well-being among individuals with serious mental illnesses](#). Computers in Human Behavior, 65, 232-240.

Research In Focus is a publication of the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC), a library and information center focusing on disability and rehabilitation research, with a special focus on the research funded by NIDILRR. NARIC provides information, referral, and document delivery on a wide range of disability and rehabilitation topics. To learn more about this study and the work of the greater NIDILRR grantee community, visit NARIC at www.naric.com or call 800/346-2742 to speak to an information specialist.

NARIC operates under a contract from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, contract #GS-06F-0726Z.