

Social Networking Websites and Relationships: Tips for Discussion in MRE Workshops

Social networking sites have revolutionized the way many people interact and have created a variety of implications for intimate partner relationships. Facebook alone has more than 500 million users and half of its members log on to the site every day. Six percent of the U.S. adult population has a Twitter account, a mere five years after launch of the site. According to a 2010 Pew Internet study, social media use has increased rapidly over the past few years. While individuals classified as Millennials (ages 18-33) are more likely to use social media, GenXers (ages 34-45) and Boomers (46-64) have made notable gains. More than half of online adults in these groups are active users of social media sites.

Social media profiles, which are viewable by an individual's network of "friends" (including real-life connections and online-only acquaintances), can become a public demonstration of an individual's relationship. For example, on Facebook, couples can make their relationship status public; post public displays of affection on each other's walls; share photographs of themselves together as a couple; and even share their profile passwords with one another. For many relationships, technology also creates difficult situations involving emotional intimacy and fidelity. This Tip Sheet is for marriage and relationship (MRE) educators who wish to understand the impact social media might have on relationships and address it in their MRE workshops. It outlines some of the common pitfalls that couples may encounter and suggests preventive measures to keep relationships strong.



Social media can cause challenges for couples in a variety of ways. Reuniting with former romantic interests or connecting with new people online is as easy as clicking a mouse. Further, most social media sites are "sticky" (a sticky website is a website that makes it difficult for people to leave). A 2010 report showed that people spend more time per month on Facebook than Google, Yahoo, Amazon, Wikipedia and Microsoft combined. Individuals often spend more time than they realize on these sites, sometimes at the expense of face-to-face time with a partner.

Practical Matters: Staying Together while Staying Social

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a relationship. Encourage couples to have open communication by:

- **Communicating about expectations and boundaries.** Sample scenarios to cover include:
 - ◆ Becoming Facebook friends with an ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend.
 - ◆ Blocking friends or family members who do not respect the relationship.
 - ◆ Blocking friends or family members who post inappropriate messages online.
- **Establishing that online activity is just as “real” as anything done in real life.** If you wouldn’t say it in person, don’t say it online. Explain the importance of considering their partner’s feelings and avoiding online interaction that their partner would not be comfortable with.
- **Putting more energy into their relationships.** It is important to keep the relationship strong and the lines of communication open. Encourage couples to make their dates a “no online networking zone” to give them a chance to connect without distraction. If they feel the urge to update their status all the time, remind them that in-person communication also comes with immediate gratification.
- **Erring on the side of caution.** Tone, context and subtext are often missing from online communications. It is difficult to pick up on sarcasm or flirting. It’s important for your couples to keep this in mind as they’re drafting communications with each other and anyone else. What sounds fine in a person’s head may not translate well on the computer screen. Have the couple brainstorm and discuss scenarios where in-person communication would be best

Workshop Activity

You may want to integrate an exercise in your MRE workshop that allows couples to discuss the questions below. Encourage couples to create ground rules for their relationships. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The point of this exercise is for each individual to be aware of how they feel, share that with his or her partner and then create some ground rules that work for the couple. Note: When you are working with a group of couples from different generations, consider that for some couples social networking has always been a part of how they communicate whereas older couples may struggle more with how it fits in to their life and how much time it takes.

Communication with Others

Is it okay to post information about our relationship? One partner might be more open and less inhibited than the other and more prone to sharing details of their life publicly. The other partner might not want certain information shared. It is important that both partners feel respected in terms of information shared (for example, details about date nights, “inside jokes,” pictures, etc.). Couples should be advised against venting relationship problems publicly. The couple needs to come to an agreement about what is appropriate and what is unacceptable.

How will we guard against becoming emotionally intimate with others? Emotional infidelity is a major concern for many couples who use social media because online connections tend to feel less real than in-person relationships. Thus, an individual may not realize he or she is becoming intimate with another. It can become a problem when an individual begins to rely on another person rather than his or her partner for advice, comfort, support, etc.

Communication between Partners

Should we be friends on Facebook? Some couples choose to have their own separate lives on the social networking service, opting to focus on their communication offline (in-person). Some argue that maintaining separate lives makes it easier and eliminates a lot of potential jealousy. Others argue that if you're friends and interact in every other space – why not online as well?

Do we link our profiles to show we are together? Facebook gives the option to post a variety of relationship statuses: single, in a relationship, in an open relationship, “it’s complicated,” engaged, married, divorced, widowed, or separated. If a couple changes their relationship status, say from “in a relationship” to “engaged,” or from “married” to “separated,” that news is broadcast to all of their friends. More private couples might not choose to link their profiles or change their privacy settings so a relationship change wouldn’t be broadcast across the site.

Jealousy and Trust

Is it appropriate to share passwords? Sharing passwords might give the couples peace of mind and be a constant incentive to be on their best behavior. On the other hand, some couples might resist, feeling that sharing passwords is an invasion of their privacy and that their partner lacks trust in them. This is up to each couple. What is important is for couples to discuss and agree to what works for them, and why.

How much time is acceptable to spend on social networking sites? Both parties should agree on what's “excessive” and what's normal.

Do we “friend” people of the opposite sex? Some couples might make a distinction between

old friendships (that existed before the relationship) and new friendships. Depending on what the couple is comfortable with, it might be best to limit private interaction with members of the opposite sex.

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Can we talk to each other if one of us feels we might have gone too far in an online conversation? Couples should be able to be open and honest with each other about their online behavior. However, in order for this to be most effective, the couple needs to agree on what is considered inappropriate.

Social media presents new opportunities and challenges to relationships, whether dating, married or somewhere in between. It is important for MRE practitioners to stay abreast of the latest technologies and their impact on relationships. Because this area is so new, couples often don't know what to expect or don't have the skills to deal with sticky situations on their own. Being able to incorporate lessons for couples around their social media use will be useful to MRE program participants.

Additional Resources

[Emotional Cheating](#)

[Preventing Infidelity: How to Stop Affairs before they Start](#)

[Can Social Media Break Up A Marriage?](#)

[Do's and Don'ts for Facebooking Couples](#)

[Don't Blame Twitter: How TMI can Kill Any Relationship](#)

[The Distracted Partner: Competing with Technology for his/her Attention](#)

[Shared Lives, Shared Passwords?](#)

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