

What I learned from taking 16 months off of Social Media

In January of 2016, I had just passed on the title of Miss Texas Teen USA and was enjoying my time to breathe. During those weeks, I asked myself some honest questions about a myriad of things, and one of them was social media. Why do I post? What am I wanting people to feel or think as a result? What is social media's purpose in my life? In order for me to really consider those answers, I felt that I needed to completely unplug for a while. I didn't know how long that would be, but the weeks began to evolve into months, months became a year, and then some after that. For a time I thought I would never go back on the grid, until I had another honest question session with myself a few months ago. I came to pinpoint 5 major pitfalls of social media that had kept me nice and snuggly under my rock, but I developed a new perspective that ultimately caused me to reopen the door.

Pitfall No. 1, I had allowed social media to consume the little moments of my life. Scrolling was easier than being left alone with my own thoughts; contemplation and meditation were supplanted with distraction. What scared me most about this is that everything in life begins with an idea. Every invention, book, cure, breakthrough, work of art, adventure, goal, dream, everything, all comes from one little thought in someone's mind. How many kick-starting thoughts had I traded in for boredom-relief? How many epiphanies or moments of discovery had I sacrificed to mind-numbing diversion? Of course, one is still capable of thinking while scrolling, and what we read on social media can truly inspire us. More often than not, however, (unless we make a conscious effort to avoid it) I believe we can all too easily fall into a vortex of daily escapism that has the potential to rob us of treasures immediately surrounding us, or even within us.

Pitfall No. 2, I found that social media encouraged two prominent evils to rear their ugly heads in my heart: comparison and pride. I found myself slipping into comparison of experiences, material things, friendships, physical appearances, etc. It was so easy to analyze the highlight reel of those I followed and grow discontent with my own life, or allow a sense of sordid pride to swell about my own.

Pitfall No. 3, the presence of social media in my life had cheapened some elements of present human connection. I specify "present" because I found myself subconsciously choosing to connect with the people I follow on Instagram rather than those immediately surrounding around me, whether I was in a doctor's office, at the grocery store, waiting for a class to start, or even sitting across from someone I love during a meal. I discovered that my brain (on the hunt for a serotonin boost) would much rather fill any potential awkward pause or moment of silence with a screen than press into those spaces long enough to allow a genuine, present, human connection to be cultivated.

Pitfall No. 4, I allowed too many moments in my life to be diminished by an anxiety to capture them. I could only let a sight or experience sink in so much, because the fear of not capturing the fullness of its glory stole the fullness of its joy. There is an element of richness in being fully present during an experience that you feel no need to justly reproduce for people.

Pitfall No. 5, it was so easy to project the life of a shiny, perfect self. I found that social media had lacked a realness and vulnerability that people need to experience when connecting with one another. Life is hard, and people struggle. All people. Everyday. In its potential presentation of perfection, social media can lack the raw and real elements of

humanity that binds us all together. Perfection is isolating, because no one can exist in that category. Brokenness is unifying, because everyone on this earth is a fractured vessel, as capable of beauty and brilliance as they are of darkness and failure. I would argue that to pretend we are not is not only counterproductive, but also damaging.

In light of these pitfalls, here I am, diving headfirst back into the deep-end. Why? Well, because of a very crucial conclusion I finally came to. All of them, every last one, are avoidable. They are all *potential* pitfalls. While observing it from the outside looking in, the realities of social media, alongside its potential pitfalls are what became crystal clear to me.

At the end of the day, social media is remarkable. Stunning, really. Social media has created the ability to widely disseminate messages in an instant, and has afforded us a level of connection that men and women just 50 years ago could never have dreamed of. Social media gives people a voice and platform that enables collaboration and communication on a miraculous scale. Within the human connection of social media lies tremendous power and positive potential that I felt was foolish to set-aside in my effort to avoid its possible dangers.

I also found that these pitfalls are not unique to social media; they come with the territory of human nature. Does social media provide more opportunities to fall into them? Absolutely. But while living unplugged I have daily struggled with distraction, comparison, pride, looking at my email to avoid awkward situations, not living fully present in every moment, or attempting to conceal my brokenness my projecting perfection. By stepping away from social media I found other ways to fall into the same traps, yet while setting aside the benefits of our a mass communication marvel.

In light of these realities, I believe it to be true that social media has as much power to be destructive as it does to be productive. Many people suffer from the robust array of pitfalls that it provides, while not utilizing it's power in a positive way. If any of the pitfalls above resonate with you, consider unplugging for a time. Reevaluate your relationship with your phone and social media. Ponder some healthy boundaries that once established, could enable you harness the power of our new technologies in the healthiest, most life-giving way possible.

Learning how to utilize social media as a positive force in our lives will be a constant learning process as it evolves and changes, and I am sure that it will be littered with imperfection and moments of hypocrisy (as most learning processes are). Despite its shortcomings, the scale of communication, commerce, and connection that social media has created in our modern world is powerful, and it's colossal potential for good makes learning how to traverse it's field of pitfalls is worth it all the more.