

SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY AND EATING DISORDERS

A Deep Dive

January 2021

Brought to you by the Cigna Eating Disorders Team:

Shelby Maniccia Wachtel, LMHC

Melissa Harvey, LMFT

Together, all the way.®



What is Social Media?

- Social media are interactive computer-mediated technologies that **facilitate the creation or sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression** via virtual communities and networks.*



*Wikipedia. Social media. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media



The Lingo

Mental Health

- Restriction
- Purging
- Binging
- Compulsive or excessive exercise
- Body dysmorphia
- Orthorexic*

Social Media

- Algorithm
- Hashtag
- Stories

*Orthorexia is an obsession with eating foods that one perceives to be “healthy” and restricting “unhealthy foods”



How Is Social Media Used?

The 3 C's

- Connection
 - Supporting each other, expressing themselves, and identity
 - COVID19
- Comparison
 - Online vs. reality
 - Your experience vs. your child/teen's experience
 - Levels of importance and value
- Caution
 - Children/teens can access social media regardless of the precautions you believe you have in place
 - Public access and following accounts
 - Continual supervision of social media and the accounts children/teens are following
 - Discussions with children/teens and thinking critically



How Does Social Media Impact Eating Disorders?

Positively

- Allows those in recovery from eating disorders to follow others who are farther along in their recovery journey
- Provides tips for remaining in recovery
- Encourages a body-positive or body-neutral attitude

Negatively

- Promotes pro-eating disorder content
- Provides details about diets, workouts, body sizes/measurements, etc.
- Presents triggering information and images
- Represents an unrealistic perspective



Social Media and Mental Health Data

- 13-18 year old used phone media for **avg. 7 hours 22 minutes daily** in 2019¹
 - 2015: 24% 9-12 year old & 67% 13-19 year old had smartphones¹
 - 2019: 41% 9-12 year old & 84% 13-90 year old had smartphones¹
- Over the last decade, teens depression symptoms increased 52% & young adults' increased 63%²
- Eating disorders (ED) are the deadliest mental illnesses, second only to opioid addiction³
 - 26% of people with eating disorders attempt suicide⁴
 - 10,200 deaths per year as a direct result of an eating disorder, which equates to 1 death every 52 minutes.⁴

¹Common Sense Census. Tweens, Tech, and Mental health: Coming of Age in an Increasingly Digital, Uncertain, and Unequal World. 2020. <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/tweens-teens-tech-and-mental-health>

²National Survey on Drug Use & Health. 2019. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/release/2019-national-survey-drug-use-and-health-nsduh-releases>

³Millie Plotkin, MLS & F.E.A.S.T. Eating Disorders by the Numbers. 2020. <https://www.feast-ed.org/eating-disorders-by-the-numbers/>

⁴The Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders (STRIPED) & the Academy for Eating Disorders. The Social and Economic Cost of Eating Disorders in the United States of America. 2019. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/report-economic-costs-of-eating-disorders/>



Caution for Parents/Caregivers

- If your child is in recovery from an ED, it is important to be vigilant about his/her social media usage because *things are not always what they seem on social media*:
 - Accounts being followed
 - Videos being watched
 - Websites being visited
 - Information being consumed

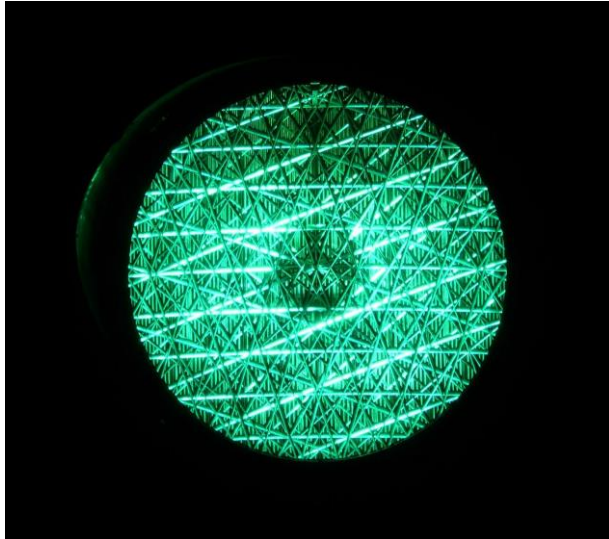


Our Focus

Instagram & YouTube



Green Light



- The following are social media characteristics to look for that are **positive, appropriate, and recovery-focused**

Green Light Characteristics

- Encourages recovery
- Promotes self-love at all sizes/shapes
- Reflects that ED is the enemy – not food or your body
- Promotes setting boundaries
- Reflects that you are more than your weight/appearance/what you eat



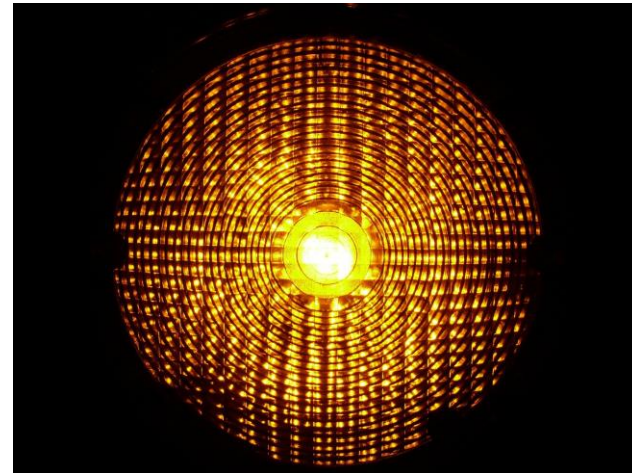
Green Light Characteristics

- Promotes listening to your body
- Promotes joyful movement
- Busts food myths and breaks food rules
- Encourages honest self-reflection



Yellow Light

- “Proceed with caution”
- Characteristics that may require further exploration to determine whether the account is **positive or negative**.



Yellow Light Characteristics

- Pushes certain lifestyles/diets
- Topics and hash-tags of "what I eat in a day"
- Promotes exercise as a way to burn calories or feel better about what you ate
- Not all registered dietitians (RDs) are created equal
- **Don't assume that #recovery, #recoverywarrior, or #eatingdisorderrecovery mean the account/channel is appropriate**



Yellow Light Characteristics

Instagram

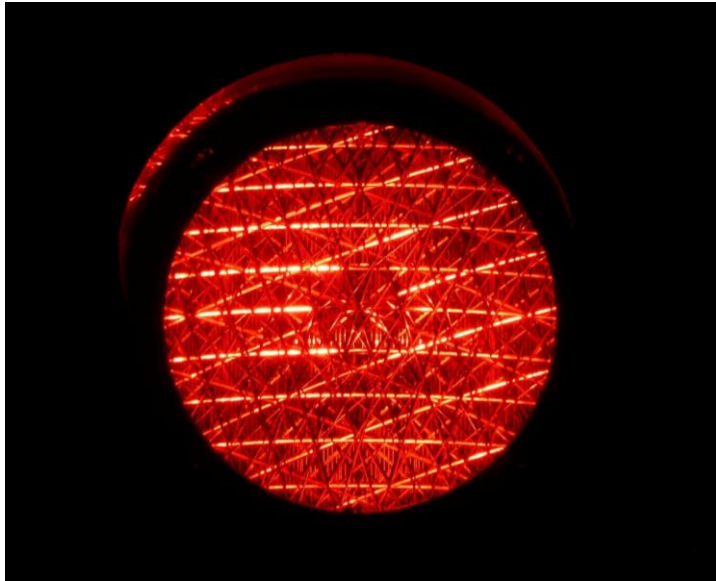
- Accounts showing:
 - individuals with limited clothing
 - often posting workouts
 - pictures of orthorexic*/small meals/snacks
 - pushing a certain diet/lifestyle

YouTube

- Condemning ideas such as intuitive eating
- Videos touting vegan, vegetarian, keto, intermittent fasting, etc. as the best way of eating/living
- Recovery videos



Red Light



- The following are social media characteristics to look for that are **negative, inappropriate, or ED-focused.**

Red Light Characteristics

- Displays photos of
 - food with inappropriate portions
 - extremely thin people or body parts
- Categorizes foods and/or suggest cutting out food groups
- Shares specific numbers or promotes diet mentality/culture
- “My eating disorder story” and “what I eat in a day” videos



Red Light Characteristics

- Promotions/affiliate links
- Algorithms* are set from initial searches
 - the algorithm will continue to show disordered content
 - a new account may be necessary to reset the algorithm
- Scroll through the channel to get a sense of what the channel is promoting

* Algorithms are the equations utilized in all social media platforms that identifies what posts/videos/channels/accounts to show you based on what content you interact with on said platform.



Red Light Characteristics

- “Proana” and “promia” accounts (accounts that promote eating disorders as a “lifestyle choice” and/or encourage/teach others to develop eating disorders)
 - anachick, Ana’s secret, starve
 - thin, skinny, thinspo
 - mystery workouts, fat weight loss, weight loss foods
 - only water, skinny psycho diet, stopping cravings
- If an account states that it’s not pro-eating disorder and/or if it states “please don’t report my account, just block me,” **it is likely a pro-eating disorder account**



Conclusions

- Avoid making assumptions
- Do your research
- View social media as a business
- Remember that social media is an ever evolving, continuous part of culture with both positive and negative qualities and uses



Positive/Appropriate/Recovery-Focused	Proceed with Caution		Negative/Inappropriate/ED-focused
Accounts that are encouraging about recovery, balanced eating, body image, etc.	Beware of accounts pushing certain lifestyles/diets (vegan, gluten-free, etc.) – these can counteract being open to all foods in recovery		Accounts that display photos of food with inappropriate portions and photos of extremely thin people or body parts
Accounts that promote self-love, self-care, and body-love at all sizes/shapes	Be careful of topics and hashtags of “what I eat in a day” as many show unbalanced meals/snacks and promote disordered eating patterns (i.e. low carb)		Accounts that categorize foods into good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, etc. and suggest cutting out whole food groups (i.e. no carbs)
Accounts that promote recovery and putting recovery first, challenge diet culture, and reflect that ED is the enemy –not food or your body	Use caution when exercise is discussed as not all movement is considered healthy in someone’s individual recovery journey		Accounts that share specific numbers (calories, weights, etc.), sneak in posts about losing “fat,” promote any diet mentality or diet culture (i.e. earning food, demonizing food groups, etc.), or encourage burning twice the amount of calories consumed
Accounts that promote setting boundaries with unhealthy people, thoughts, behaviors, etc.	Not all RDs are created equal – they can sometimes be biased towards certain diets/lifestyles or weight loss. Look for RD who welcomes all foods		Watch out for “my eating disorder story” and “what I eat in a day” videos as they can explicitly discuss ED behaviors, have triggering photos, and promote certain diets/lifestyles that are not congruent with recovery
Accounts that reflect that idea that you are more than your weight/appearance/what you eat, that it is okay to make mistakes, and you do not have to be perfect			Be wary of any promotions/affiliate links (e.g. protein powders, clothing brands, teas, “detox,” workout programs, etc.) in description boxes of YouTube videos or Instagram posts
Accounts that send the message that eating is non-negotiable and promote listening to your body	Stay away from those wearing few items of clothing, often posting workouts, pictures of inappropriate meals/snacks, and/or pushing certain diet/lifestyle	Use caution with those stories pushing certain meal plans and condemning ideas such as intuitive eating	Algorithms are set from initial searches, and while you may be looking at true recovery accounts now, the algorithm will continue to show disordered content and a new account may be necessary to reset the algorithm
Accounts that promote movement for fun, body awareness, stress relief, etc. rather than getting fit, burning calories, or losing weight	Do look for accounts that balance healthy movement with an appropriate diet	There are great recovery story videos, but there are also many that may start out appropriate or helpful but take a turn a few minutes in	YouTube: Read channel descriptions and look for non-recovery based identifiers such as vegan, fitness, models, etc. and scroll through the channel to look at video titles and thumbnails to get a sense of what the channel is promoting
Accounts that bust food myths (e.g. superfoods, gluten free, etc.), break food rules, and provide tools for staying in recovery	Don’t assume that #recovery, #recoverywarrior, or #eatingdisorderrecovery mean the account/channel is appropriate – watch a few videos/scroll through posts and get an idea of the true message		“Proana” and “promia” accounts are pro-eating disorder and will include keywords such as anachick, thin, skinny, mystery workouts, only water, fat weight loss, skinny psycho diet, anas secret, stopping cravings, weight loss foods, starve, and thinspo
Accounts that encourage authenticity and honest self-reflection (i.e. “how are you REALLY feeling?”)			If an account states that it’s not pro eating disorder and/or if it states “please don’t report my account, just block me,” it is likely a pro-eating disorder account



The information provided in this document is for educational purposes only. It is not medical advice. Always consult with your doctor for appropriate examinations, treatment, testing and care recommendations. References to third-party organizations or companies, and/or their products, processes or services, do not constitute an endorsement or warranty thereof.

All Cigna products and services are provided exclusively by or through operating subsidiaries of Cigna Corporation, including Cigna Health and Life Insurance Company and Cigna Behavioral Health, Inc. The Cigna name, logo, and other Cigna marks are owned by Cigna Intellectual Property, Inc.

