

Connect Corner: A Review of My Own Facebook Feed

Paula Wadell, MD

I don't spend that much time on Facebook and frequently consider deleting it. However, there is one thing that keeps me there: the moms' groups. I belong to several; the most powerful and important one being my neighborhood group. This group linked me to other mothers when my family moved to the neighborhood, which in turn linked my children to friends. The families we connected with as a result created a village that supports my children and contribute significantly to our family's happiness. We gained access to childcare opportunities, sports, extracurricular activities, and fun weekend outings. This is arguably Facebook at its best: a fun way to build social connection.

Yet there is another side to Facebook, and we know from studies of wellbeing and social media use that a negative correlation appears to be present.¹ I realized that I needed to ask myself how my Facebook feed could be harming my wellbeing. I thought back to the last post I read in one of my local mothers' groups. The author asked for tips on how to fit in 1 hour of exercise per day, as instructed by her doctor. She posted her schedule which clearly showed she is working full time and caring for 2 young children. I looked at her schedule and immediately knew the answer: she can't. Her life does not create a situation in which she can choose to be well. This seemed quite obvious to me, but the 34 replies were quite different. Many suggested she wake up extremely early to get this done, thereby sacrificing sleep. Others suggested she cram in YouTube fitness videos and sets of squats during her workday. The metamessage is: you just find a way to squeeze more in because true wellness is impossible. As I reflected on this idea, I realized it was everywhere, accentuated by the pandemic. If you google the phrase "working parent" the internet answers with all sorts of gems like "the parental shame that haunts working parents" and "what if it never gets easier to be a working parent" and

"what America asks of working parents is impossible." For the purposes of this commentary, the content of these articles does not matter (and I did not read any of them because they sounded depressing). The meta-message for me is that balancing work and parenting in a fulfilling way is hopeless, and wellness is a fantasy. Everyone posts about the impossible pressure they feel, and this becomes the expectation we all have for our lives. To be a working mother is to live in an impossible pressure cooker. This message echoes and reverberates throughout my Facebook feed, confirming that achieving any sort of wellness is beyond reach, and the result is: I continue to work full time, parent 2 young children, neglect my own wellness, feel badly about that, and accept the fact that this is just how it must be.

The seeds of this idea probably started very early on as part of the American ideal of productivity. As a young girl I learned that I was expected to have a career, an expectation I whole-heartedly wanted. I loved school, and it's no surprise I chose to go to medical school. Yet, in medical school, I learned how health can be achieved, while I also learned that such a thing would not be possible for myself. Doctors routinely laughed at how unwell they were. So much so that the message became "to be a good doctor, one sacrifices their own wellness." This was made particularly obvious to me during my internal medicine clerkship, when my intern proudly shared how he rounded while ill with gastroenteritis. To make it through the day, he just hooked himself up to an IV he could pull around. Those around him congratulated him on his commitment; I was quietly horrified.

In psychiatry I found colleagues who seemed to have some awareness of wellness and its importance, but we are swimming upstream. Our world has set up a system of expectations for all of us, in particular for mothers, where we accept the idea that being well is forever out of reach.

Before attending medical school, I worked at the CDC during a time when there was growing alarm at the increasing rates of type 2 diabetes in children. I saw a grand rounds presentation where the public health presenter showed the many factors that were contributing to the increasing rates: diminishing opportunities for physical activity, the abundance of processed foods, the relative expense of health foods. He argued that we had created a world in which health could not be obtained for the average American and we have a responsibility to create an environment where one could choose to be healthy. I will add that as a physician and mother, I feel a call to push for change that leads to an environment where we can choose to be well. Part of that choice involves recognizing the voices that normalize (and

sometimes elevate) being unwell. My review of my own Facebook feed must therefore conclude that it is ultimately harmful as it encourages me to accept a lifetime of being unwell. I don't feel that I can or need to delete it because it is still a significant connection tool for my children, but I can limit my engagement with it even more and I can be a voice for change. With small steps, we can create an environment that supports real self-care and realistic expectations of ourselves and others.

Reference

1. Kross E, Verduyn P, Demiralp E *et al.* Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being in young adults. *PLoS One*. 2013;8(8):e69841. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0069841>

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