

Social Media and Your Brain

By Fr. Dave Heney

The world of social media, phone apps, internet sites, podcasts, and streaming services are enormously popular. You can easily access any number of sources that will send you exactly what you are looking for, whether for business, school, relationships, or just entertainment. But how do they affect your brain?

HOW YOUR BRAIN IS DESIGNED

You arrive in the world as a baby with limited brain function. As you age in years, your brain develops to slowly see and understand the world around you. How fast and how accurately your brain understands reality and the world around you and then chooses the most successful response is the way that science measures intelligence, or what we simply call IQ.

All of your five senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch are designed to bring information to your brain for processing and to assess accurately what is going on around you. From there you can make the right and wise choice of action. This is actually the true measurement of good mental health!

Of course, in our human evolutionary history, our brain developed first from a primitive animal brain that always responded instinctively without thinking and then on to a higher developed human brain that can understand smarter choices based on reason and free will. Good mental health is making freely chosen good moral decisions.

This is affirmed in the Genesis account when God said to Adam and Eve, "You are free..." (Genesis 2:16) Free will is the central feature of your creation. Without free will there is no love,

and you were personally created by God to receive and give love. That is your noble purpose!

OUR EVOLUTIONARY SUCCESS

Our evolutionary history affirms that our early human ancestors protected and cared for children to grow into old age by passing on learning, knowledge, and wisdom for survival in life. Each generation knew more and more useful wisdom! Each child learned to take in the world with their five senses, think about it accurately, craft several choices, and choose just the right behavior to face their many challenges successfully. Each person slowly became master of his or her thoughts, and well-practiced in thinking about the world around them. They soon were in charge of their life in every way.

The internet is an amazing source of information and data, but it takes a wise human brain to correctly know what is valuable and useful, and what is not.

Taking in information is great but learning to think on your own helps develop your critical brain skills to wisely interpret the world and internet sources correctly. You learn to initiate, create, and generate *your own ideas* that lead to other ideas that may lead again to perhaps even a breakthrough insight.



THE LOSS OF SELF CONTROL

Looking at screen images commands your attention! When you look at any screen your mind focuses on it, and nothing else. The screen images capture your attention and determines what you see and hear. The screen is providing everything to your brain. You follow what the screen shows as a passive spectator watching a show. Worse still, this habit can become an addiction. *You are no longer in charge of your own thoughts!*

The screen is filling your brain with images and ideas according to the choices of the website, app, podcast, or streaming video. The screen is now *...in charge of your brain!*

THE LOSS OF SILENCE

Excessive screen time has led people to stop thinking quietly on their own. If you instantly grab a phone or device whenever there is a free moment you can gradually lose the key function of your brain that God designed for you, which is to generate and create your own ideas. Silence is your chance to think!

THE LOSS OF CONVERSATION

There is nothing more stimulating than live conversation. It is often unpredictable, so it trains your brain to be nimble and quick to adapt. Learning how to “read” another person is the highest and most important brain function there is, and the most practical skill for success in life. Grabbing an internet device rather than talking with people prevents that important brain growth!

RESTORING YOUR HUMAN NATURE

Learn to be comfortable in silence without any devices. Schedule regular quiet times for contemplating what is going on in your life. Also engage in more stimulating conversations with people. You will be developing the cognitive skills that made for our original human evolutionary success, and in accord with the way God personally made you.

Your brain is God’s gift to you to be used well, and how it was designed to function. Do not let internet distractions take you away from its primary function. You must be in charge of your own thoughts, and not surrender them to a constant stream of internet images.

An ancient tradition of the church is practicing daily *meditation*. This is a quiet time every day when you simply sit still and think about things, whether scripture or even your daily schedule. You can do this anywhere, even in your commute to work.

WHAT ABOUT AI?

This is a new capability that can search online resources more comprehensively than ever before. How it affects the economy and ensures human dignity is worthy of study as Pope Leo advises. However, it can also tragically mimic a personal relationship for lonely people. AI was created by humans and so must always have humans in charge to prevent this misuse.

YOUR BRAIN IS THE TOP OF CREATION

Nothing in the universe compares to your brain. Of the trillions of galaxies in the universe, not a single one can ever love, feel deep regret, seek forgiveness, or laugh. *No array of AI computers is actually alive, or has free will, or will sacrifice its life for you.* You have all these powers as created by God, so you do not want to waste your brain power by surrendering to online forces. Now is the time think for yourself.

CONCLUSION

Internet sites today are amazing sources of information and entertainment. Nothing wrong with that at all, unless they are the **ONLY** source of thinking in your brain. There must be a time when you disengage and spend time thinking of things by yourself, converse with others, and draw on all the wisdom from our faith to make wise decisions.

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