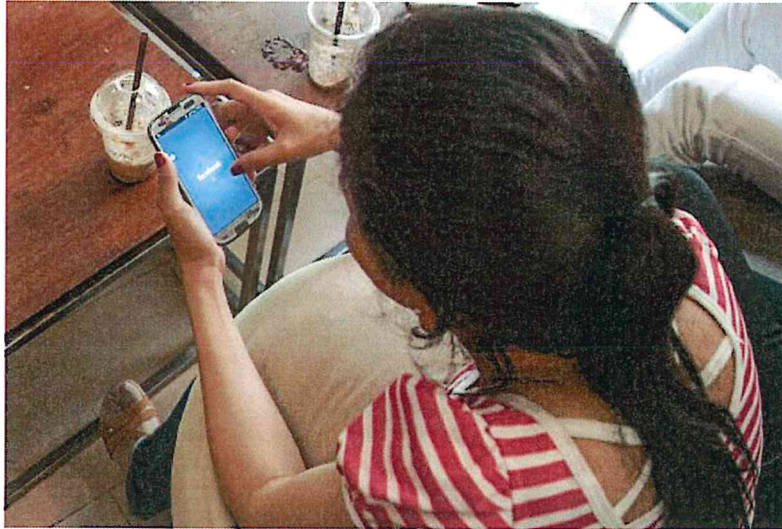


What's the Psychology Behind the Fear of Missing Out?

By Quora Contributor



"What am I missing?!"

Photo by Omar Havana/Getty Images

This question originally appeared on Quora, the best answer to any question. Ask a question, get a great answer. Learn from experts and access insider knowledge. You can follow Quora on Twitter, Facebook, and Google Plus.

ADVERTISING



Replay

Answer by Anita Sanz, clinical psychologist:

Advertisement

The fear of missing out is an old—actually an ancient—fear, being triggered by the newest form of communication: social media.

Our survival as an individual within a tribe, and thus our survival as a species, once hinged on our being aware of threats both to ourselves and to the larger group. To be “in the know” when we roamed around in small groups was critical to survival. To not be aware of a new food source, for example, meant you literally missed out on something that could mean the difference between life and death. When humans began to create more stable farming communities, being in the know involved paying attention, being in the right places at the right times to get resources and information, and engaging in the gossip of the day as it filtered through the community.

We all know that systems to consolidate and enhance communication among humans to keep each other informed of important information, including potential sources of danger to our tribes/countries/species, developed over time and include the forms we interact with today such as television, newspapers, the Internet, and social media platforms.

Slate is made possible by the support of readers like you. [Click here to do your part.](#)

Because being left out is considered that important an event for us to pay attention to and to respond to quickly, we actually have a part of our brain that is specialized for sensing if we are being left out. Not that it is usually a matter of life and death anymore whether you are on Facebook or Twitter, but for many people social media has become their community lifeline.

Advertisement

That specialized part of the brain is a part of the limbic system, the amygdala, whose job it is to detect whether something could be a threat to our survival. Not having vital information or getting the impression that one is not a part of the “in” group is enough for many individuals' amygdalas to engage the stress or activation response or the “fight or flight” response.

Feeling physiologically stressed does not feel good, and that is one of the reasons why feeling left out or the “fear of missing out” feels bad and people want to avoid it. In an attempt to prevent the stress response, some people will (unfortunately) redouble their efforts to not miss out on anything and end up in an almost constant process of “checking” behavior. That is, they are constantly looking at their Facebook or Twitter feeds to see if they are missing out on anything, which doesn't actually lessen their stress that much. Being in a hypervigilant state is the complete opposite of being at peace.

Most recommendations for people who are struggling with FOMO include taking breaks from social media and focusing more on the environment and people around them in the present moment. This would give the amygdala a break from perceiving threats and reduce stress and anxiety.

In terms of which people may be at most risk for fear of missing out, my best guess would be individuals whose amygdalas are already highly sensitive to perceiving threats in the environment. This could include people who tend to be anxious and socially anxious, those who have experienced some kind of emotional trauma in the past, and/or who tend to be obsessive or compulsive (or have an actual diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder).

ADVERTISING



inRead invented by Teads

What is the psychology behind FOMO? originally appeared on Quora. More questions on Quora:

- **Mental health:** If depression can be caused by events, why can't it be cured by events as well?
- **Depression:** How does a person try to get out of bed when depression is keeping them in?
- **Psychotherapy:** What typically goes on during a therapy session?



THE SLATEST THE MOST IMPORTANT NEWS AND COMMENTARY TO READ RIGHT NOW.

CIA, FBI Already Warning of Russian Interference in 2018 Midterms

By Aaron Mak

Slate is made possible by the support of readers like you. [Click here to do your part.](#)