

Why FOMO and MOMO are making you feel friendless

By Elani Kaufman and Charlie Connelly

**Chicago Tribune
(MCT)**

It's Friday night, you have no plans and you're taking a break from binge-watching Netflix to scroll through your Instagram feed when you see it: a photo of your friends hanging out without you.

Why didn't anyone invite you? Why does it look like they're having so much fun? What are they doing later? Should you text them? What if no one responds?

Sounds like a classic case of FOMO.

FOMO, or "fear of missing out," is a form of anxiety that causes people to feel like they're missing out on something – a party, outing or social event. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as, "Anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on a social media website."

And yes, the acronym was added to the publication last year. But just how serious is FOMO?

"I absolutely think that this is a significant issue for adolescents," said Jonathan Pochlyly, an adolescent psychiatrist at Lurie Children's Hospital. "The concept of (FOMO) is something that I am familiar with and talk with kids about, no question about it."

According to a study by JWTIntelligence, 47 percent of teen millennials (13-17 years old) feel uneasy or nervous when they learn friends or peers are doing something they're not. Forty-one percent said they spread themselves too thin to avoid FOMO. Sixty-five percent said it's important to keep up a certain image on social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter.

"FOMO doesn't make me feel good because I see everyone else doing stuff and most of the time it's my friends, and I'm just sitting at home doing nothing," said Jones freshman Emmy Brewer.

The anxiety doesn't just strike on the weekends. Patricia McAvoy, a social studies teacher at Mather, said the constant need to check social media is alarming – even in the classroom.

"Social media is an issue in class as (students) are constantly checking their phones for updates," McAvoy said. "They feel a one hour class without being in contact is an issue, which I find a little over the top."

Pochlyly said the ease of today's technology is both beneficial and hurtful to teens' feelings.

"(Technology) is one of the things that makes life special for adolescents these days," he explained. "There's a lot of focus on what everyone else is doing. It became a trend and now that's the thing to do, so there's pressure to maintain that and keep up with it."

As social media feeds constantly update with statuses about where friends are, what they're doing and photos of them doing it, it's easier than ever to feel left out.

But what about those rare instances when social media goes quiet – when even the most savvy Facebook users can't figure out what their friends are doing? There's a word for that, too: MOMO, or "mystery of missing out."

MOMO is the hunch or feeling that you're missing out on something, but you just don't know what it is. Let's say your best friend is "busy" on Friday night but doesn't post a single photo, update or check-in on social media. There's no hard proof that you missed out on anything, but the feeling of not knowing could cause anxiety.

"I constantly think that my friends are doing something without me when they don't respond to a text or when I surf the Internet and they haven't posted anything in a while," said Riverside Brookfield senior Jake Lucas. "It's a ridiculous feeling that I know I shouldn't be having, but it still happens nonetheless."

To combat FOMO and MOMO, Brewer said she uses a direct approach. If she starts feeling left out, she takes matters into her own hands.

"I usually just call people and talk to them," she said. "I'd be upset for a bit, but then I realize that I should be reaching out to them."

Oak Park and River Forest High School senior James Cullinane said he fights off FOMO by living in the now.

"If I'm hanging out with my friends around a bonfire, or even just sitting at home on my couch, I think it's best to stay off social media and focus on what you're doing in the moment," Cullinane said.



Why FOMO and MOMO are making you feel friendless

By Elani Kaufman and Charlie Connelly
(continued)

Other teens like Riverside Brookfield High School senior Renee Kunkel stay completely disconnected from social media to avoid FOMO and MOMO.

"Sometimes I do feel like I'm out of the loop a little bit, but while I'm doing something in the moment I never have the urge to be doing something else," Kunkel said. "I've always tried my best to be a person who lives in the moment."

There's no doubt that FOMO and MOMO will continue to affect teens, but Pochyly said he believes these feelings are simply side effects of growing up.

"These types of interactions with people are, by their very nature, a function of kids being more independent, seeking out connections with other people, moving away from just being a child in a home, and moving toward adulthood," he explained.

In other words, sometimes growing up means not being invited to the party of the year or not being allowed to go to the sleepover on Saturday.

"You have to have the mentality that who you are with and what you are currently doing is the most important thing to you at the moment," Cullinane said. "Otherwise, you're putting yourself in a state of mind you really don't want to be in."

— — —

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Elani Kaufman attends Lincoln Park High School and is a correspondent for The Mash. Charlie Connelly attends Riverside Brookfield and is a correspondent for The Mash.

— — —

The Mash is the Chicago Tribune's newspaper and website written for teens, by teens. The paper is distributed for free each Thursday at Chicago-area high schools and is written largely by high school students.

— — —

©2014 Chicago Tribune 9-26-14.

Distributed by MCT Information Services