

# Op-ed: In the age of social media, how do we protect young women's well-being? Nurture resilience.

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This 2018 photo shows application icons from left, Facebook, Facebook Messenger and Messenger Kids on an iPhone in New York. (Jenny Kane / AP) It's disappointing that Facebook continues to downplay its negative impact on young people's mental health. But what's most aggravating about the social media giant's response, following the leak of internal documents [detailing how its platforms exacerbate mental health issues](#), especially for young girls, is that it has failed to offer much in the way of real guidance on how to change course and positively affect well-being.

I'm president of one of the top colleges in the country focused on women and a cognitive scientist who studies the way women's mental health affects their ability to perform in school and work. I'm also the parent of a 10-year-old girl. I am intimately familiar with the outsize impact social media are having on young women right now.

And like most educators and parents, I know that “getting kids off social media” isn’t a feasible solution to protect our youth from the adverse consequences of these platforms.

Instead, we need to better arm young people with the psychological tools they need to enhance well-being. Social media could actually help in this endeavor.

Having resilience means adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, grief or other significant source of stress. For young women, stress can include everything from dealing with academic pressure to bullying to financial hardship at home to dating problems. By helping young women build mental resilience, we can help them navigate and bounce back from difficult moments.

Our level of resilience isn’t set in stone. It’s a cognitive “muscle” that can be strengthened over time.

One way of doing so is to uplift and reinforce a person’s multiple “selves.” To paraphrase poet Walt Whitman, every one of us contains multitudes — a complex structure of interrelated identities. None of us is ever just one person or one self all the time. My own [research](#) shows that embracing the multiple parts of ourselves enables us to be resilient when any single, isolated part of our broader identity gets challenged.

When I have a stressful day at work, I am able to embrace other parts of myself to stay strong. By empowering young women to activate their various selves, we can teach them to see themselves as so much more than the “pretty pictures” they perpetually see on Instagram.

Self-affirmation can also be a powerful psychological tool. [Research](#) has shown that self-affirmations decrease acute and chronic stress, leading to better problem-solving and creativity. However, unlocking these benefits requires more than just posting about how “#blessed” we are.

As we all know, we tend to be our own worst critics — and in the context of social media, it is usually our own brains telling us to feel bad for not getting enough likes on our posts. But [studies have found](#) that we can thwart that negative voice by paying ourselves a much-deserved compliment or giving ourselves a few words of encouragement in third-person — using our names instead of “I.”

Another trick is to talk to ourselves as if we were a good friend. These simple techniques can convince the brain that positive, valuable feedback is being received from an external source, making us feel more confident about ourselves.

Parents and educators also have a responsibility to help facilitate the growth of resiliency. Just as office cultures are starting to recognize the importance of employees bringing their “whole selves” to work to prevent burnout, so, too, should we encourage young people to embrace multiple passions, through extracurriculars and home activities. Parents and teachers should take the lead by demonstrating what positive self-speak can look like.

And on a larger scale, access to mental health support through counselors, therapists, support groups and message boards at schools and on college campuses is a must to ensure that an environment of resiliency is being met with real diagnostic help.

I'm not that confident that social media are properly incentivized to change how they operate. So far, Facebook's efforts to promote mental health awareness across its platforms, from selfie filters and the "Stop the Stigma" campaign to the addition of [new emotional health resources](#), has been limited to "raising awareness" as opposed to actively helping young people build healthy habits.

Removing the "like" button has been a popular suggestion — but what about replacing it with a button that sends a direct message of encouragement? Instead of filters designed to distort, how about filters to provide clarity? How about a button that encourages us to list all our multiple selves? We should all be advocating for social media products that help celebrate us as our best selves rather than make us wish we were other people.

It feels only fitting that we are having this discussion around the same time as World Mental Health Day. But this year, I'd like to challenge everyone to do more than simply acknowledging our global mental health problem. Instead, we should be considering concrete ways to safeguard our collective well-being at both the individual and societal level. Then maybe we can even drive change at the product level too.

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