

The Psychology of FOMO

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Every eight minutes, someone on Twitter gets FOMO. It may seem like little more than the superficial distress call of an overly connected (and oversensitive) populace, but FOMO, or the fear of missing out, says as much about the evolution of humans as it does about who we are today—and what we're really missing. Brooklyn-based psychiatrist [Johnny Lops](#) believes that when the acronym was added to the [Oxford Dictionaries Online](#) in 2013, it heralded a transformative confluence of technology and social awareness. "We have so many different ways to communicate through our phones and through Twitter and Facebook. I have access to hear everything you're doing on a daily basis," he says, "and [it can heighten my insecurities](#) and jealous emotions because I feel like I'm not out doing as many cool things as you are." This modern emotion is rooted in an ancient survival instinct, and there's good reason the saying starts with "fear," according to [Jenny Giblin](#), a psychotherapist in New York. The stress you feel from seeing how much more fun everyone else is having begins in a part of the brain called the amygdala, which is one of the key components of the limbic system, the source of emotions and long-term memory, and one of the brain's most primal segments. "The amygdala is kind of like a smoke detector. It signals the brain to activate the flight or fight response when we begin to feel threatened or unsafe," Giblin explains. Giblin says that FOMO arises when we become preoccupied with the feeling that we are not good enough and that we may never be. It's stress spiraling out of control, and even the anticipation or expectation of the feeling is enough to get the chain reaction started. "These irrational negative beliefs come from a place of feeling as if there is not enough to go around or worrying deep inside that we can not have—[or do not deserve](#)—what we really want," she says. "One thought leads to another and another, and without us even realizing it can develop into a pattern." In a [series of studies](#) published in 2013 in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, the University of Essex's Dr. Andrew Przybylski created a 10-item "Fear of Missing Out scale" to measure individual inclinations toward FOMO. What he found was that those at the upper end of the FOMO scale tended to be younger and report lower mood and lower life satisfaction. Importantly, Przybylski also found that FOMO drives people to Facebook—not the other way around. "Social media engagement presents a high-efficiency, low-friction path for those who are oriented toward a continual connection with what is going on," he writes. "There is good reason then to expect that those who are high in fear of missing out gravitate toward social media." Sufferers of FOMO were more likely to check their phones as soon as they woke up in the morning, right before they went to bed and, disturbingly, while they were driving. The good news is that once you understand whence these feelings arise, FOMO can be reversed and spun in a positive direction. You don't have to turn off your phone or de-friend your awesomest acquaintances. Doing so could even up the FOMO factor as your imagination runs wild with all the fantastic things people *might be doing* right now. "If you find yourself comparing yourself to others, feeling jealous or behind in life, remember that there is absolutely no reason why you cannot have those things, too, other than

the thought that you can't. And that's all it is—literally just a thought,” says Giblin. So turn your attention toward your own life, and fill the void from the inside out. Here are five ways to get started.

Take a “me” break. Sure, a full-on [social media cleanse](#) might temporarily combat the feeling that you're missing out, but it's not a long-term cure. Instead, learn to take routine mental breaks. At the onset of FOMO, Lops suggests a three-hour hiatus of alone time to read a book, go for a walk or run, take a yoga class or meditate. “Get out of your mind and the tendency for your mind to go to those dark places,” he advises.

Live in the present. A yoga instructor on the side, Giblin recommends taking a few deep breaths, noticing your thoughts and realizing “that where you are right now is perfect. Let go of any regret or blame from the past, and see if you can remember moments where you thought you made a mistake that ended up leading you to exactly where you needed to be in life. Trust that even if you have missed out on something, it will come back in the future, if it is meant to, in a bigger and better way.”

Be curious instead of jealous. “We've lost our curiosity where we get excited for each other and about how another person has shaped their life,” Lops laments. “I might be a doctor, you might be a travel expert. I'm not insecure that you travel the world while I'm working at the hospital. I'd be more excited to sit down and have lunch and have you tell me what it's like to travel the world. That is what would inspire me and teach me something I didn't know.” Capitalize on the chance at their mentorship rather than being jealous of their endeavors. Giblin concurs: “You can use FOMO to motivate and inspire you.”

Count your blessings—and accept new ones. Giblin recommends listing 10 things for which you are [grateful](#) right now. “Often we get caught up in worrying that without whatever we want to happen, our life will not be good enough. And that's not true. By focusing on the things you love about the present, you can begin to erase the FOMO, and this energy allows you to become more open to receiving all of the things that you want by approaching things in a more calm and relaxed way.”

Diversify your life. “People invest too much in one ‘stock’ like social media to value who they are, and it's not healthy,” Lops warns. “Diversify as if your life were a mutual fund, and you'll have other options to feel good about yourself.” Spend more time and energy on work, friends, family, hobbies and experiences in addition to social media, and reap the real-life return on those investments.