



EDC Leads Discussion to Address the Negative Impact of Social Media on Children and Teens Through Congressional Briefing

WASHINGTON, D.C. (November 11, 2021) — This week, the Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (EDC) and Sandy Hook Promise, in conjunction with the Congressional Mental Health Caucus hosted a virtual Congressional Briefing entitled “Behind the Images: Social Media’s Impact on Body Image and Eating Disorders” to highlight the outpouring of reports on the negative impacts social media has on children and teens wellbeing. The briefing featured experts in the field of eating disorders and social media algorithms, as well as a personal story of recovery. The full recording can be watched [here](#).

Laura Donahue, EDC Board Member; Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility for CarMax; and mother of a daughter who struggled with an eating disorder, opened the briefing with shared remarks on behalf of her daughter. “I was so vulnerable and social media’s influence was toxic,” shared Laura from a passage from her daughter. “The worst part is that once I started interacting with pages like that, similar pages and accounts were boosted and recommended to me until my whole feed was filled with it.” Unfortunately, this experience is not uncommon and through recent news and testimony to Congress we continue to learn more about the harmful effects of social media.

Dr. Bryn Austin, Professor, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health; and Director, Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders (STRIPED), discussed the reciprocal relationship found between adolescents depressed mood and engagement in social media. She also shared the link between high frequency use of social media and negative appearance comparison, which can increase the risk for eating disorders symptoms. “Engagement-tailored algorithms feed extreme eating disorder, user-generated content to vulnerable users, then place ads for youth brands between extreme eating disorder content/videos,” stated Dr. Austin. “Currently, there is no transparency or accountability for algorithms.”

Jake Appel, Chief Strategist, O’Neil Risk Consulting & Algorithmic Auditing (ORCAA) shared his expertise designing tests and analyses to assess the performance of algorithms and their impacts on viewers. Jake explained how algorithms’ main task is to serve content and make personalized suggestions that matches the users’ interests. However, one negative effect is that viral/“charged” content creates more engagement, no matter the topic, causing algorithms to serve up more content of the issue to viewers. Mr. Appel recommends the need for audits for specific harms to certain vulnerable groups, “forcing social media platforms to participate in at least providing evidence that gets to the question whether and how much harm those platforms and products are causing in certain areas, [and] eating disorders could be the first [group],” stated Mr. Appel.

The briefing continued with Dr. Joann Hendelman, Clinical Director, National Alliance for Eating Disorders (formerly the Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness) and Clinical Director, Alliance Psychological Services. Dr. Hendelman discussed the development and role social media has in providing adolescents an avenue to interact more with peers, increasing peer influence, and potentially leading to a greater impact on eating behaviors and body standards. Dr. Hendelman shared that “social media does have positive aspects and can enhance creativity and exploration of new ideas.” However, users must be mindful of the negative characteristics such as “decrease [in] self-esteem and negative body image.” Dr. Hendelman

is hopeful there can be improvement stating, “Society and media impact each other equally. As such, it is possible to change both social standards around weight and change social media content.”

The briefing concluded with Kelsey Wu, high school student and eating disorder and mental health activist, Founder of For You, and survivor of an eating disorder. Kelsey shared the everyday struggles social media has on her peers. “Social media is a medium of our society and it’s the most popular and accessible medium there is,” said Ms. Wu. Her presentation showed what it is like to be a teen on social media today through viral video trends that have negatively impacted her and millions of other teens. An example she shared involved utilizing an inverted filter to test how symmetric the users face is as a means to test one’s attractiveness. Today, Ms. Wu is using social media for good through her organization, For You, where she uses social media to promote body confidence and body acceptance.

“The EDC is actively working with the House and Senate on legislation around social media and algorithms,” said Chase Bannister, MDIV, MSW, LCSW, CEDS, Board President, EDC. “This briefing served to educate congressional staff on the prevalence of social media content that uplifts harmful content related to eating disorders and disordered eating among young users. It is EDC’s goal to have Congress understand the magnitude of this issue and address this issue with commonsense solutions. We hope Congress can come together to put forth a bipartisan bill that protects our children and teens.”

The Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (EDC) is a Washington, DC-based, federal advocacy organization comprised of advocacy organizations, academics, treatment providers, family/loved ones of children with eating disorders and people experiencing eating disorders nationwide. The EDC advances the recognition of eating disorders as a public health priority throughout the United States. Additional resources can also be found at eatingdisorderscoalition.org

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