

Regulate Social Media Usage to Avoid 'Digital Shame', Counsellors Warn

Internet users need to regulate their social media usage to avoid 'digital shame' and protect their mental health, Ireland's largest professional counselling organisation has warned.

The Irish Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy (IACP), which represents almost 4,000 counsellors and psychotherapists across Ireland, said that it was receiving increasing numbers of calls from members of the public who regretted something they had said or posted online and which was now causing them anxiety or trauma.

The IACP's spokesman, Shane Kelly, said: "Dealing with 'digital shame' is a problem that has increased in recent years. More and more, our members are advising people who have posted or shared something that they subsequently regretted. The problem they then face is that they cannot, or find it difficult to, erase this part of their digital footprint."

The IACP said that typically, social media users who make posts or share content that they later regret are tired, upset, angry or post after having consumed alcohol.

"We would advise internet users to avoid social media altogether when they are in an emotional state. This could involve alcohol or it could simply be if they are in bad form or are overworked and stressed out," Mr Kelly added.

"People sometimes post comments or photos that they think are funny or entertaining at the time, only to regret it later - usually the morning after."

The IACP advises that social media users and internet users generally should follow the same behavioural etiquette online that they would use in real life.

"You wouldn't shout at or make disparaging remarks to random strangers in real life, so if you apply the same approach online as you do offline, then you will avoid experiencing digital shame," Mr Kelly said.

However, in some instances, what social media users post can later cause them extreme distress.

"Before social media, if we did something silly or behaved inappropriately, we would feel embarrassed for a few days or weeks. However, the proliferation of smartphones with the capability of taking photos and videos means social media users are re-traumatised by an incident over and over again," Mr Kelly said.

Instead of learning a lesson about behaving inappropriately and moving on, internet users are faced with re-living an embarrassing event over and over again on social media.

Replaying such an incident can have a detrimental effect on some users' mental health, as can the feeling that an incident that lasted for a couple of minutes in real life can last forever on the internet, the IACP warned.

"People feel that their whole life is defined by an action that lasted a few seconds. This can be very hard to get over and we should help and support anyone in this situation, as these posts can also be used to bully and further shame individuals.

"This may involve posting comments or photos in an inebriated state. Not only can such posts impact negatively on an individual's career as employers nowadays check candidates' online profiles, it can also have an adverse impact on the user's mental health," Mr Kelly noted.

In such cases, the IACP advises that social media users should speak to a health professional or an accredited IACP counsellor or psychotherapist. They should also contact the relevant social media provider to have posts or content removed, Mr Kelly said.