

# Are you a midlife Instagram addict?

Is real life – you know, the one with family and friends in it – passing you by while you scroll and tap away at your phone? If so, you've joined the rising tide of app-obsessed adults. Enough is enough, says Alix O'Neill

Recently, I read an article in which an anonymous mother confessed to her eight-month-old crawling across the bedroom floor and on to the landing, then falling down the stairs. She didn't realise her baby was out of sight until she heard the thud, as she'd been engrossed in her Instagram feed. I was shocked – until I remembered that I'd dropped my phone on my then seven-month-old son's head last summer while stalking the profiles of Love Island contestants.

Then there was the time I failed to notice him throwing my copy of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* out the window (we'll need to talk about toxic masculinity at some stage) because I was busy trying to figure out which filter to use on my latest Instagram post...

But my biggest confession is this: a few weeks ago, I – a 35-year-old mother with a toddler and a baby on the way – actually found myself buying Instagram followers. Looking back, I'm mortified. I'd always thought of buying social-media followers as desperate – the digital equivalent of paying for perfect strangers to come to a house party. But when I saw an ad on Google for an LA-based company that promised to 'grow your Instagram audience authentically', I thought I'd give it a whirl. It didn't say how they did it precisely, or even how many more followers it would bring me – at the time I had 760 – but it did promise that any new followers would be real people, not 'bots' (fake accounts).

I justified it by telling myself that a bigger social-media platform would be good for my work as a freelance journalist. But the truth was, I needed a confidence boost. I'd just moved to France and was feeling a bit lost without family and friends nearby. I craved community and approval – in any form.

It was only when I'd handed over my credit card details to pay the \$15-per-week fee that it hit me. I might consider myself more mature than most millennials, with their phones forever glued to their hands, but I'm no better. Scrolling through my feed during a vulnerable moment has the potential to make me feel down for days, while an alert that I've a handful of new followers is a guaranteed boost. It's baffling that my mood can fluctuate so precariously because of an app.

The damaging impact of social media on young minds is no secret, but, until recently, little was known about its effect on the wellbeing of midlife users. A 2016 paper by US data-measurement company Nielsen found that those in Generation X (then aged 35 to 49) spent the most time on social media – almost seven hours a week (while millennials came in second at just over six hours). Women were also slightly more susceptible, spending six per cent more time on social media than men. Meanwhile, a more recent study by researchers at Temple University in Pennsylvania revealed this midlife age group is also more likely to report mental health problems if they use social media regularly. So what's going on?

**Dr Natasha Bijlani, psychiatrist at The Priory, explains: 'By our 30s and 40s, most of us realise that we have lived nearly half of our expected lives. We tend to take stock of unfulfilled goals and desires. Comparing ourselves to our peers is a natural way to gain perspective on this, and the widespread use and availability of social media as a "sharing platform" might make women around this age more vulnerable to feeling insecure.'**

Rebecca Doyle, 40, owner of Kent bridal boutique Isabella Grace, tries to have regular breaks from Instagram, but admits to getting 'carried away' occasionally. 'Once, I started running the children's bath and went to hang out the washing, then began scrolling through my feed, oblivious to the fact that the bath was overflowing upstairs.' I thought I was fairly disciplined about my social-media use.

I set myself boundaries (no phones in the bedroom or during mealtimes), deleted my Facebook account, and rarely go on Twitter when I'm not working. But Instagram is my Achilles heel. I've lost hours to it, an obsession that began when I was on maternity leave. Whenever my son, who is now 15 months old, was glued to my breast and I was confined to the sofa, I'd check in on what my peers were doing. More often than not, they were landing book deals and attending glamorous industry parties – leaving me worried I was falling behind. I realise now that I didn't fully appreciate those precious first few months of motherhood.

Kate Beavis, 46, a vintage expert and events organiser, can relate. She has three Instagram accounts, totalling more than 65,000 followers. 'As my numbers started to grow, I became hooked, wanting to get to 5,000 then 10,000,' she admits. 'I'd see someone at an event I wasn't invited to and would feel like I wasn't good enough.' She admits to missing special moments because of being online: 'The usual mum stuff – my daughter finally cracking the butterfly in swimming lessons.'

So, what is it that makes social-media apps so addictive? Catherine Price, author of *How to Break Up with Your Phone*, explains that they are designed precisely to hook us, with triggers for dopamine – the chemical that is the brain's way of recording when something is worth doing again – baked into them. 'Dopamine exists because it reminds us to do things that are essential to the survival of the species, for example, eat and procreate,' says Price.

She also compares Instagram to being in a casino. 'There are no clocks or windows – you have no sense of time. It's the same with many of these apps – there's no stopping cue. If you're bingeing on ice cream, eventually your spoon will hit the bottom of the container. That's your stopping cue. You don't have that on Instagram.' Of course, there are upsides to Instagram.

Many women feel it's a safe space to share and it can be a great resource for work and creative inspiration. Why then can it make us feel so bad? The problem isn't Instagram but how we use it, says Hilda Burke, psycho-therapist and author of *The Phone Addiction Workbook*.

'Whether it's our waist size, home, job, relationship, children or lack of children, comparing oneself to others is an innate and powerful drive, and for many, social media exacerbates this. For someone who has a tendency to compare themselves unfavourably to others, it can be particularly damaging... I see older women do this as much as the millennial ones, particularly in the run-up to a landmark birthday.'

Here's the thing – I'm not unhappy with my lot. I have a wonderful family, a job I love, and since moving across the Channel, I regularly eat my own body weight in brioche. I know I'm lucky, and most days I feel it. But I've always been insecure when it comes to friendships, especially after a bumpy first year in university when I took some time to find my tribe.

That vulnerability stuck. And now, despite having lots of great women in my life, when I'm tired or my confidence is low, going on Instagram and looking at this clique of beautiful, talented women can feel like turning up to a party I'm not invited to.

Price says there are many ways to break the cycle of addiction. 'Check your feed no more than three times a day. If you need to post, use a tool that allows you to schedule ahead of time. It's about taking back control.' She also suggests deleting the app altogether for three days – even if you use it for work. 'Get honest with yourself and ask how much you really use it for work. You don't need to check the app while waiting for a card payment to go through when buying lunch.'

As for boosting my followers, I never did find out whether the company could deliver what it promised. After losing my mind for those few crazy minutes, I cancelled my subscription and got my money back. I thought about what I'd say to my son if, down the line, he came to me upset because a photo he posted on social media didn't receive any 'likes'.

I'd tell him that the approval of a handful of people who care about you means so much more than a million tiny hearts on a screen. Because it's true. It just takes a flooded kitchen, signing up to a dodgy website or, er, hearing your baby fall down the stairs to remind us of that sometimes.

Are you a midlife Instagram addict? What tips do you have for curbing an Instagram addiction? We want to hear from you in the comments section below.