

# To Deal With Obsession, Some Defriend Facebook

By [KATIE HAFNER](#)

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[Facebook](#), the popular networking site, has 350 million members worldwide who, collectively, spend 10 billion minutes there every day, checking in with friends, writing on people's electronic walls, clicking through photos and generally keeping pace with the drift of their social world.

Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

Neeka Salmasi, 15, a high school sophomore in Ann Arbor, Mich., got better grades after having her sister change her Facebook password on Sunday nights and reveal it to her on Friday nights.

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Make that 9.9 billion and change. Recently, Halley Lamberson, 17, and Monica Reed, 16, juniors at San Francisco University High School, made a pact to help each other resist the lure of the login. Their status might as well now read, "I can't be bothered."

"We decided we spent way too much time obsessing over Facebook and it would be better if we took a break from it," Halley said.

By mutual agreement, the two friends now allow themselves to log on to Facebook on the first Saturday of every month — and only on that day.

The two are among the many teenagers, especially girls, who are recognizing the huge distraction Facebook presents — the hours it consumes every day, to say nothing of the toll it takes during finals and college applications, according to parents, teachers and the students themselves.

Some teenagers, like Monica and Halley, form a support group to enforce their Facebook hiatus. Others deactivate their accounts. Still others ask someone they trust to change their password and keep control of it until they feel ready to have it back.

Facebook will not reveal how many users have deactivated service, but Kimberly Young, a psychologist who is the director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery in Bradford, Pa., said she had spoken with dozens of teenagers trying to break the Facebook habit.

“It’s like any other addiction,” Dr. Young said. “It’s hard to wean yourself.”

Dr. Young said she admired teenagers who came up with their own strategies for taking Facebook breaks in the absence of computer-addiction programs aimed at them.

“A lot of them are finding their own balance,” she said. “It’s like an eating disorder. You can’t eliminate food. You just have to make better choices about what you eat.” She added, “And what you do online.”

Michael Diamonti, head of school at San Francisco University High School, which Monica and Halley attend, said administrators were pondering what the school’s role should be, since students used Facebook mostly at home, although excessive use could affect their grades.

“It’s such uncharted territory,” Dr. Diamonti said. “I’m definitely in support of these kids recognizing that they need to exercise some control over their use of Facebook, that not only is it tremendously time consuming but perhaps not all that fulfilling.”

In October, Facebook reached 54.7 percent of people in the United States ages 12 to 17, up from 28.3 percent in October last year, according to the Nielsen Company, the market research firm.

Many high school seniors, now in the thick of the college application process, are acutely aware of those hours spent clicking one link after another on the site.

Gaby Lee, 17, a senior at Head-Royce School in Oakland, Calif., had two weeks to complete her early decision application to Pomona College. Desperate, she deactivated her Facebook account.

The account still existed, but it looked to others as if it did not.

“No one could go on and write on my wall or look at my profile,” she said.

The habit did not die easily. Gaby said she would sit down at the computer and find that “my fingers would automatically go to Facebook.”

In her coming book, “Alone Together” (Basic Books, 2010), Sherry Turkle, a psychologist who is director of the Initiative on Technology and Self at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), discusses teenagers who take breaks from Facebook.

For one 18-year-old boy completing a college application, Professor Turkle said, “Facebook wasn’t merely a distraction, but it was really confusing him about who he was,” and he opted to spend his senior year off the service. He was burned out, she said, trying to live up to his own descriptions of himself.

But Facebook does not make it easy to leave for long. Deactivating an account requires checking off one of six reasons — “I spend too much time using Facebook,” is one. “This is temporary. I’ll be back,” is another. And it is easy to reactivate an account by entering the old login and password.

For [Walter Mischel](#), a professor of psychology at [Columbia University](#), who studies self-

control and willpower, “what’s fascinating about this is that it involves spontaneous strategies of self-control, of trying to exert willpower after getting sucked into a huge temptation.”

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Professor Mischel performed a now-famous set of experiments at [Stanford University](#) in the late 1960s in which he tested young children’s ability to delay gratification when presented with what he called “hot” temptations, like marshmallows.

Some managed to stop themselves; others could not.

“Facebook is the marshmallow for these teenagers,” Professor Mischel said.

[Rachel Simmons](#), an educator and the author of “The Curse of the Good Girl: Raising Authentic Girls with Courage and Confidence” (Penguin Press, 2009), said Facebook’s new live feed format had made the site particularly difficult to tear oneself away from.

“You’re getting a feed of everything everyone is doing and saying,” Ms. Simmons said.

“You’re literally watching the social landscape on the screen, and if you’re obsessed with your position in that landscape, it’s very hard to look away.”

It is that addictive quality that makes having a partner who knows you well especially helpful. Monica said that when she was recently in bed sick for several days, she broke down and went on Facebook. And, of course, she felt guilty.

“At first I lied,” Monica said. “But we’re such good friends she could read my facial expression, so I ’fessed up.”

As punishment, the one who breaks the pact has to write something embarrassing on a near-stranger's Facebook wall.

After several failed efforts at self-regulation, Neeka Salmasi, 15, a sophomore at Greenhills School in Ann Arbor, Mich., finally asked her sister, Negin, 25, to change her Facebook password every Sunday night and give it back to her the following Friday night.

Neeka quickly saw an improvement in her grades.

Still better, she said, is that her mother no longer visits her room "every half an hour to see if I was on Facebook or doing homework."

"It was really annoying," she said.

Last year, Magellan Yadao, 18, a senior at Northside College Preparatory High School in Chicago, went on a 40-day Facebook fast for Lent.

"In my years as a Catholic, I hadn't really chosen something to give up that was very important to me," Magellan said in an e-mail message. "Apparently, Facebook was just that."

In his follow-up work, Professor Mischel said he found that some of the children who delayed gratification with the marshmallows turned out to be higher achievers as adults.

Halley said she and Monica expect their hiatus to continue at least through the rest of the school year. She added that they were enjoying a social life lived largely offline.

"Actually, I don't think either one of us wants it to end," she said.