Social Media Safety Tips

Many people find that they are less inhibited when they are interacting online. You might say or do something online that you wouldn’t normally do in the non-virtual world. This false sense of security can lead to many problems such as losing touch with reality. It’s possible to become completely engrossed in a virtual world and lose track of time and what’s happening in the rest of your world. Escaping the stresses of every day life is necessary sometimes, but when it begins to interfere with your perception of reality, it can be dangerous.

Since the nature of online interactions doesn’t allow you to understand tone or see non-verbal cues, it can be easy to misinterpret another person’s meaning. In school we are taught to interact directly with other people. Yet, some people are self-conscious about talking directly with others and find it easier to interact online. It’s good to be able to communicate effectively online, but not at the expense of losing interpersonal skills.

Think before you write.
Just because a profile asks for a piece of personal info doesn’t mean you must provide it. Do you really want your class schedule available to the whole campus? How about your cell phone number? Identity theft is a fast-growing crime. Be sure you aren’t placing yourself at risk for this crime by providing detailed personal information online.

Check privacy settings.
With many online communities you have the option to make parts of your profile accessible only to your friends, while leaving other parts public. The default setting is usually “all public.”

You can be vague about your location.
Want to list where you live? How about just your city and state? Listing your room, apartment, or house number provides a specific address for someone to find you. This can leave you vulnerable to identity theft, a stalker, unwanted visitors, or unsolicited mail.

Be careful what you write.
Free speech doesn’t protect hate speech.

Safety Tips
• Spend five minutes learning in and out of any social networking site.
• Choose a strong password that is different from your usual passwords; change it often.
• Don’t use your mother’s maiden name or your birthplace for security questions.
• Use a false date of birth; this information is critical to anybody that is intent on stealing your identity.
• Take time to customize your privacy settings, set all options to be viewed by friends only. Read the site’s privacy policy and help

Tips for first meeting with online friends
It can be exciting to meet new people online, and while you can build real relationships with well-intentioned people, it’s always good to practice safety precautions such as the following:
• Choose a public place like a coffee shop for your first meeting.
• Set a time to meet (e.g., We’ll meet from 5-7 pm) so that your time together has a definite end point.
• Let someone know where you will be and make a plan about checking in with that person at an agreed upon time.
• Remember, people are not always as they appear! It may be a good idea to plan your first few meetings using the three steps listed above.
• Until you develop trust, take your time in giving out personal information. You can let someone know which part of town you live in without telling them the number and the street.

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