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M BLOG – VICTIM RESEARCH

# We Analyzed What Social Media Addiction Victims Are Really Saying. Here's What Attorneys Need to Know.

Insights from Reddit, lawsuits, clinical research, and victim testimonies — plus a [free downloadable report](#) with every pain point mapped to MDL 3047 criteria.

A Research Report by  
**MASS TORT AD AGENCY**  
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*“What happened to these children was neither an accident nor a coincidence. It was a foreseeable result of deliberate design decisions that they make to maximize engagement over safety. They make money by selling advertising to kids and selling kids’ data.”*

— Matthew Bergman, Social Media Victims Law Center (representing 1,250+ families)

This report documents what social media addiction victims are actually saying about their suffering. We went to where victims talk: Reddit communities, addiction recovery forums, parent support groups, lawsuit testimonies, clinical case studies, and news interviews.

For attorneys evaluating Social Media Addiction cases, this report provides the ground-level view of victim suffering that turns qualifying criteria into real human stories — the stories that win at trial.

## 01. THE ADDICTION TRAP: CAN'T STOP, CAN'T ESCAPE

The most universal pain point victims describe is the inability to stop using social media despite knowing it is destroying them. This mirrors classic addiction: tolerance, withdrawal, failed quit attempts, and continued use despite devastating consequences. Platforms are engineered with dopamine-driven reward loops — the same mechanisms found in slot machines.

### WHAT VICTIMS SAY

*“I could feel my grip on my life slipping. My goals and dreams were vanishing before my eyes. The horrifying part is: I didn’t care. The dopamine hits were so powerful that, despite knowing I was actively ruining my life, I could not stop coming back.”*

— College student recovering from Instagram/TikTok addiction

*“I spent upwards of 7 hours per day on social media. Even during classes, I would pull out my phone and place it on my desk, like an addict in desperate need of a fix.”*

— Young adult, personal recovery account

*“When we weren’t online, we experienced distraction, anxiety, irritability. Despite our attempts, we couldn’t take a break. Our addictive behaviors jeopardized our relationships, educational pursuits, and career opportunities.”*

— Internet and Technology Addicts Anonymous

*“Selena would become physically violent if her phone was taken away. If I turned off the WiFi, she would run out of the house to find WiFi somewhere else. She was 9 years old.”*

— Tammy Rodriguez, mother of Selena (11), who died by suicide after Snapchat addiction

### THE CLINICAL REALITY

- **Social media addiction changes brain structure** similarly to substance abuse, compromising focus, prioritization, and mood regulation
- **3x higher rates** of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts in individuals with internet addiction
- **Nearly 1 in 3 teens** show high addictive use patterns by age 14 (Weill Cornell / JAMA 2025)
- Associated with impulse control disorder, ADHD, anxiety, increased substance use, and depression

## 02. DEPRESSION, ANXIETY & THE SPIRAL DOWNWARD

Depression and anxiety are the most commonly reported consequences. Victims describe a relentless cycle: social media triggers comparison, inadequacy, and FOMO, which drives depression, which drives more social media use as an escape. The spiral deepens until clinical intervention is needed.

### WHAT VICTIMS SAY

*“It makes me anxious, stressed and fills me up with so much negativity. I scroll through Instagram for 5 minutes and I become the most negative, most stressed person ever. It is ruining my day and slowly ruining my life.”*

— Reddit user

*“For the first time in my life, social media is making me depressed. Like seriously depressed. All I do all day is obsessively watch IG stories and it seems like everyone around me is getting married, buying a house, or travelling the world.”*

— Reddit user, mid-20s

*“Depression enveloped every waking moment. My only reprieve was sleep, which I made sure to do as much as possible.”*

— Young adult, personal recovery account

*“I became a worse friend, relationship partner, and son. My life fell apart and the more it did, the more I needed the dopamine from social media to feel whole again.”*

— College student recovering from social media addiction

*“An estimated 27% of children who spend 3 or more hours a day on social media exhibit symptoms of poor mental health. Their social interaction skills are severely stunted.”*

— Addiction Center clinical research

### BY THE NUMBERS

- **3+ hours daily** on social media = double the risk of depression and anxiety (U.S. Surgeon General)
- **22%** of U.S. high schoolers seriously considered suicide in 2021 — up from 16% in 2011 (CDC)
- **7% to 11%** — problematic social media use climbed among adolescents, 2018–2022 (WHO)
- **48%** of teens say social media has a mostly negative effect on peers their age (Pew Research 2025)

### 03. BODY IMAGE DESTRUCTION & EATING DISORDERS

Instagram and TikTok are the primary platforms driving body image destruction. Algorithms push increasingly extreme content: from healthy recipes to calorie restriction to pro-anorexia communities. Victims describe watching their feeds transform into a funnel of harmful content they never searched for.

#### WHAT VICTIMS SAY

*“She started using YouTube at age 12 to watch dog videos. Soon, her feed shifted toward extreme exercise and restrictive diet content. She learned terms like ‘purge’ and ‘restrict,’ became fixated on her BMI, and stopped eating. She has been hospitalized five times. ‘It’s just taken my life away pretty much.’”*

— 17-year-old victim, congressional testimony

*“Algorithms don’t just show content — they funnel users into narrower tunnels. One click on ‘healthy recipes’ can spiral into weight-loss hacks, extreme dieting, and pro-ED messaging.”*

— Clinical psychologist, eating disorder specialist

*“At age 12, she signed up for Instagram to share recipes with her mom. Over time, Instagram pushed her toward posts about anorexia and bulimia. She is now suing Meta.”*

— Cece Neltner (19), lawsuit plaintiff, CNN interview

*“S.E. developed sleep deprivation, depression, body dysmorphia, anorexia and bulimia, and attempted suicide. Doctors told her family it was one of the most severe eating disorder cases they had ever seen.”*

— SMVLC World Mental Health Day lawsuit filing

#### THE EVIDENCE

- **9 in 10** children ages 10–17 exposed to toxic beauty content on social media (Dove Self-Esteem Project)
- **96%** of teens visiting pro-eating disorder websites reported learning new purging techniques
- **Meta’s own research** showed Instagram worsened body image for 1 in 3 teen girls
- **34%** of eating disorder content on TikTok was deemed harmful — glamorizing disorders or showing self-harm
- **46%** of adolescents 13–17 said social media makes them feel worse about their body (Surgeon General)

## 04. SLEEP DEPRIVATION: THE SILENT DAMAGE

Sleep deprivation is one of the most underreported but clinically significant harms. Victims describe being unable to put their phones down at night, scrolling for hours past bedtime, and waking exhausted. Blue light, dopamine stimulation, and FOMO combine to create chronic sleep debt that compounds every other harm.

### WHAT VICTIMS SAY

*“I would tell myself just five more minutes and then I’d look up and it was 3am. Every single night. I was sleeping through alarms, missing classes, failing exams. I knew my phone was the problem but I couldn’t put it down.”*

— College student, r/nosurf

*“My daughter was up until 2, 3 in the morning on TikTok every night. She went from a straight-A student to barely passing. We took her phone away and she had what I can only describe as withdrawal — shaking, crying, couldn’t function.”*

— Parent, social media addiction support forum

*“I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in years. I lie in bed scrolling Instagram and then I’m exhausted the next day, so I scroll more because I’m too tired to do anything else. It’s a trap.”*

— Young adult, r/nosurf

- Nighttime social media use is associated with poorer sleep quality, anxiety, and depressive symptoms
- Insomnia partially mediates the link between social media addiction and depression
- Associated with lower sleep quality, increased fatigue, and insomnia — correlated with higher mortality
- Diagnosed sleep disorders from compulsive platform use now qualify as actionable injuries in SMA litigation

## 05. CYBERBULLYING & ONLINE HARASSMENT

Social media transformed bullying from something that ends at school into a 24/7 reality. The public, permanent nature of online harassment amplifies psychological damage exponentially.

### WHAT VICTIMS SAY

*“Classmates told her no one liked her, that she should kill herself. She tried, with bleach. But the child predator would always find Amanda and continued to torment her and share photos with her new friends.”*

— Carol Todd, describing daughter Amanda Todd’s cyberbullying on Facebook

*“The harassment never stops. At least before social media, you could go home and escape it. Now it follows you into your bedroom at midnight. There is no safe place anymore.”*

— Parent of cyberbullied teen, support forum

*“V.H. went from a child who enjoyed life to one who suffers from debilitating anxiety and panic attacks. She has been hospitalized multiple times and will continue to struggle with these mental health issues for the rest of her life.”*

— SMVLC lawsuit filing, describing TikTok/Instagram victim

- **59%** of U.S. teens have experienced bullying or harassment online
- Cyberbullying victims show significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior
- Platform algorithms amplify harassment by promoting emotionally charged content
- Victims report platform reporting tools are ineffective — content stays up for days or weeks

## 06. SEXTORTION: THE CRIME DESTROYING YOUNG LIVES

Sextortion has emerged as one of the most devastating harms facilitated by social media. Criminal networks use platforms — especially Snapchat and Instagram — to target children, coerce them into sharing explicit images, then blackmail them. The shame and terror drive many victims to suicide within hours.

### WHAT VICTIMS & FAMILIES SAY

*“He admitted to me that one of his very first knee-jerk thoughts was he would have to die before letting this person send his stuff to his friends list.”*

— Mother of teen sextortion victim

*“Why isn’t life safer for kids? Why are there more kids being harmed?”*

— Carol Todd, mother of Amanda Todd (15), who died by suicide after sextortion

*“A 13-year-old boy died by suicide hours after being sextorted on Snapchat. His parents planned to go to police in the morning but, that night, he was gone.”*

— Hauptman family lawsuit, South Carolina

*“Harry went to his father for help after being sextorted on Snapchat. His parents planned to go to RCMP in the morning. But that night, the 17-year-old died by suicide.”*

— Burke family, Prince Edward Island, CBC News

*“A South Carolina representative introduced a bill criminalizing sextortion after losing his teenage son Gavin to suicide. The scammer was a Nigerian man posing as a young woman on social media.”*

— Family of Gavin Guffy, NCMEC report

### THE SCALE OF THE CRISIS

- **1 in 5** teens victimized by sextortion (Thorn 2025)
- **192%** surge in online enticement reports to 546,000+ in 2024 (NCMEC)
- **90%** of financial sextortion victims are boys ages 14–17
- **46+** teen boys died by suicide after sextortion since 2021
- **500,000** children receiving inappropriate messages daily on Meta platforms
- **10,000** sextortion reports per month to Snap by late 2022

## 07. DEADLY CHALLENGES: WHEN ALGORITHMS KILL

Social media algorithms amplify dangerous challenges through recommendation. A child watches one video and the algorithm serves dozens more. The Benadryl Challenge, Blackout Challenge, and other viral dares have killed children as young as 13 while platforms profit from the engagement.

### WHAT FAMILIES SAY

*“When he did it all came at once and it was too much for his body. They said he will never open his eyes, he’ll never breathe, smile, walk or talk.”*

— Justin Stevens, father of Jacob (13), who died from the Benadryl Challenge

*“I saw all of the TikToks she had been looking at. They were all kids doing Benadryl. I thought that was a safe medication.”*

— Mother of 13-year-old hospitalized after Benadryl Challenge

- **Benadryl Challenge:** multiple confirmed deaths of children ages 13–15 after ingesting 12–14+ pills
- FDA issued formal warning in 2020; deaths continued through 2025 despite platform removal efforts
- Algorithms actively recommended challenge content to children who had not searched for it
- Blackout Challenge, Blue Whale Challenge, and other lethal trends continue to circulate

## 08. DRUG ACCESS: FENTANYL THROUGH THE FEED

Snapchat has been described in federal complaints as an ‘open-air drug market’ connecting dealers directly to children. Disappearing messages, location features, and zero parental controls make it ideal for dealers selling fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills to teenagers.

### WHAT FAMILIES SAY

*“He took the pill and then he stopped breathing. Then his heart stopped and he died. The police told us not to expect to catch the dealer — in cases where Snapchat is involved, they don’t get any help.”*

— Parents of Snapchat fentanyl victim

*“My son made a mistake on social media but it shouldn’t have cost him his life.”*

— Jaime Puerta, father of Daniel, who died from fentanyl purchased via Snapchat

*“She got the drugs delivered to the house through Snapchat. Please watch your kids and WATCH SNAPCHAT especially. That’s how they get them.”*

— Dr. Laura Berman, mother of Sammy (16), who died of fentanyl overdose

*“This lawsuit is not about children having access to drugs. It’s about drugs having access to children.”*

— Snapchat Fentanyl Lawsuit, amended complaint

- **63+ victim families** filed Snapchat fentanyl lawsuits (victims aged 14–22, only 2 survived)
- **Leading killer:** Fentanyl is the #1 cause of death for Americans under 18; 350% increase in teen deaths over 3 years
- **Nearly half** of DEA-tested counterfeit pills contain a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl
- Snap knew dealers used the platform since at least 2019 but prioritized engagement over safety

## 09. SELF-HARM & SUICIDE: THE ULTIMATE PRICE

The most devastating outcome. Algorithms create feedback loops pushing vulnerable children deeper into despair: depression content leads to self-harm content, which leads to suicide-related content. Bereaved families describe children found dead with phones still in their hands.

### WHAT FAMILIES SAY

*“A family sued Snapchat and Meta, claiming social media contributed to their 17-year-old son’s addiction and eventual suicide. He was found dead with his smartphone still clutched in his hands.”*

— Sokolove Law, Social Media Addiction Statistics

*“It’s just taken my life away pretty much.”*

— 17-year-old girl, hospitalized 5 times for anorexia triggered by YouTube/Instagram

*“On the morning of Sunday, October 17 at 11:01 am, Braden died by suicide. The night before, his coach had told him he’d be starting running back next year. He was excited. Then Instagram took him from us.”*

— Family of Braden, SMVLC lawsuit filing

*“Tyler loved music and was an avid Cardinals fan. He enjoyed making people smile with funny faces. He became dependent on these platforms and started showing symptoms of sleep deprivation, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and anger.”*

— Family of Tyler Richardson, SMVLC lawsuit

*“They deserve the truth about what company executives knew. And they deserve accountability from the people who chose growth and engagement over the safety of their children.”*

— Matthew Bergman, Social Media Victims Law Center, on Zuckerberg trial

- **2–3x greater risk** of suicidal behaviors in youth with high addictive use (JAMA 2025)
- Algorithms produce suicide-related content based on prior behavior, creating ‘suicidal identity’ loops
- **1 in 6** sextortion reports describing impacts included self-harm or suicide
- **95% increase** in suicide deaths among U.S. children ages 10–14 between 2000 and 2018

## 10. PLATFORM BREAKDOWN: HOW EACH PLATFORM HARMS

### ■ INSTAGRAM (Meta)

- **Body image:** Meta's own research showed Instagram worsens body image for 1 in 3 teen girls
- **Eating disorders:** Algorithms funnel users from healthy content into pro-anorexia and restriction content
- **Sextortion:** Mentioned in 45% of first-contact reports; recommended 1.4M teens to predators in one day
- **Addiction by design:** Infinite scroll, likes, notifications, and algorithmic feeds maximize time-on-app

*“Instagram’s head Adam Mosseri said Reels had driven time to all-time highs and his personal stretch goal was to pass TikTok in time spent.”*

— Internal Meta document shown at Zuckerberg trial, Feb. 2026

### ■ TIKTOK (ByteDance)

- **Deadly challenges:** Benadryl Challenge, Blackout Challenge killed children ages 13–15
- **Algorithm addiction:** ‘For You’ page creates personalized addiction loops; 32.5% of users are teenagers
- **ED content:** Billions of views on eating disorder content; 34% reviewed as harmful
- **Settled pre-trial:** TikTok settled in January 2026 bellwether (terms undisclosed)

*“A 12-year-old girl developed an eating disorder that led to hospitalization and permanent damage to her reproductive organs after TikTok detected her interest in exercise and repeatedly served her videos promoting anorexia.”*

— SMVLC TikTok lawsuit filing

## ■ SNAPCHAT (Snap Inc.)

- **Fentanyl marketplace:** Federal complaints describe it as 'open-air drug market'; 63+ families suing
- **Sextortion epicenter:** 10K reports/month by 2022; disappearing messages enable predators
- **Predator features:** Snap Map, auto-erasing messages, zero parental controls enable criminal targeting

*“Two-thirds of Gen Z teens on Snapchat say they or their friends were targeted in sextortion or catfishing schemes.”*

— Snapchat's own internal research

## ■ YOUTUBE (Google)

- **Content rabbit holes:** Autoplay pushes vulnerable youth into harmful content spirals
- **ED pipeline:** Victims describe starting with dog/gymnastics videos, ending in pro-anorexia content
- **Self-harm content:** Exposure to graphic videos normalizes and triggers imitative behavior

## ■ FACEBOOK (Meta)

- **Child exploitation:** Internal researcher warned of 500,000 daily cases on Facebook
- **Predator access:** Allowed 17 strikes before removing sex trafficking accounts
- **Addiction by design:** Internal docs: 'the young ones are the best — bring people to your service young'

## 11. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Every pain point in this report maps directly to qualifying criteria for Social Media Addiction cases. These are documented, clinical, and actionable injuries.

VICTIM PAIN POINT	QUALIFYING INJURY (MDL 3047)
<b>Addiction / inability to stop</b>	Compulsive or addictive social media use
<b>Depression, anxiety, PTSD</b>	Diagnosed severe depression, extreme anxiety, or PTSD
<b>Eating disorders / body image</b>	Diagnosed eating disorder
<b>Sleep deprivation</b>	Diagnosed sleep deprivation
<b>Sextortion / exploitation</b>	Sexual exploitation/abuse via social media
<b>Challenge deaths / overdoses</b>	Accidental death from online challenges
<b>Fentanyl / drug overdoses</b>	Drug overdose including fentanyl
<b>Self-harm / suicide</b>	Suicide, attempted suicide, ideation, or self-harm

The bellwether trial is happening now. Snap and TikTok have already settled. The evidence is overwhelming. The firms that move now will build the strongest dockets and be positioned when settlements flow.

*“For the first time, a Meta CEO will have to sit before a jury, under oath, and explain why the company released a product its own safety teams warned were addictive and harmful to children.”*

— Matthew Bergman, SMVLC, on Zuckerberg’s February 2026 testimony

*“Nearly a dozen parents who say their children were harmed or died because of social media gathered and joined hands outside the courthouse as they waited for Zuckerberg to arrive.”*

— CNN, February 19, 2026 — reporting from the courtroom TODAY

### READY TO START YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION CAMPAIGNS?

Book a free strategy call with Jacob Malherbe

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