

Submitted by Renee Mizrahi

## FACEBOOK -- FRIEND OR FOE?

Facebook, which started as a playground for Ivy League college kids, has now captivated the adult market -- by which I don't mean anything off color! The social network has literally changed our ability to connect with others wherever they might be, and people over age 50 are now the fastest-growing category of users, representing 42% according to recent Pew research. It's easy to see why. For example, I have a friend who was worried about a former neighbor now living in the Middle East, but she had no contact information. Her teenage daughter suggested Facebook, and in *less than a minute*, my friend had located the woman... within 10 minutes, she learned that her friend was fine... and a half-hour later, the two were "chatting" and enjoying looking at one another's photos from the holidays and recent family vacations!

### NOT YOUR THING?

Now, if you haven't used Facebook or used it only briefly, you may feel about as inclined to explore it as you are to hang out at a food court over French fries and soda -- as teenagers do -- and I agree that devoting time to using Facebook is not without its problems, as we shall see below in our conversation with Lauren Zander, life coach and *Daily Health News* contributor.

On the positive side, Facebook can be especially valuable for older folks to help them stay connected with others -- which has been shown to be a critical factor in longevity. One man I know who has become virtually housebound because of heart problems is having a great time exchanging jokes and tidbits with numerous friends, ranging from colleagues from his days in the corporate world to buddies from his boyhood. Even though he is physically isolated and in poor health, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that thanks to his "Facebook life," he is a reasonably happy guy. Facebook also can be terrific for people who aren't comfortable in social situations, offering the opportunity to share a more sparkling online self with friends new and old.

### FACEBOOK DANGER ZONES

But -- I told you there was a "but" to this story... there also are some problems with all this, Zander notes. We chatted (on the phone!) about several of the common ones.

*It's a performance.* Not only does Facebook allow socially awkward people to transcend their shyness, but it also allows people to carefully edit their lives so that what they end up presenting to the world isn't exactly the truth. Zander told me about someone she knows who has made a serious mess of his life, but to read his Facebook page, she says, "You would think he is a master of the universe who has licked all of life's problems." Many people make a practice of posting lots of pictures of themselves dressed to the nines... attending glorious parties and relaxing on lavish vacations... engaging in witty repartee with their long list of "friends." This can be deeply depressing to people who end up believing that others' lives are so much better than their own. Acknowledging that it is only natural to want to share life's high moments, Zander cautions us to remember that the happy faces on Facebook show just one side of life, and *everyone* has the other, more difficult side as well.

*It's a time sucker.* Hours spent socializing on Facebook can overtake the other parts of your life. These carefully crafted and highly filtered online interactions can be easier and more immediately gratifying than dealing with the daily challenges and drudgery of life with your spouse, kids, parents, siblings and neighbors --- but in the end, the online social world does not provide the same quality of interaction. (See *Daily Health News*, [January 6, 2011](#).) It's rather ironic for people to spend hours connecting with people across the country while ignoring those who are up the hall.

*It's an invitation to mischief.* It's not uncommon for people who are bored with their lives and, yes, their marriages to connect with past loves "just out of curiosity" and, if flirtations ensue, trouble (of the real-life kind) can come soon after. A 2010 study from the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers says that an astonishing 20% of divorce cases in this country now cite evidence from social-networking sites -- with Facebook leading the pack.

### HOW TO BE IN CONTROL

According to Zander, the choice of whether Facebook enriches or impoverishes your life is yours to make -- it's all about being clear on your goals and pursuing them... and *only* them. Do you want to cultivate dozens of "friends" to put your business front and center? Do you want to enliven your social life without going out? Perhaps you would like to be an active presence with your children and their families by regularly exchanging information and photos?

Whatever your preference, Zander says, it is wise to decide specifically what rules you want to set for yourself, including who you really want as Facebook friends and the amount of time you'll allow yourself to spend on the site each day. And then write these rules down -- literally -- and thumbtack them up where you can see them. Periodically review your rules to see if they are working for you. The idea is to be sure that you are in charge of Facebook rather than it being in charge of you. "It is a tool and a wonderful one," said Zander. "But using the tool wisely is up to you."

Source(s):

Lauren Zander, cofounder and chairman, The Handel Group, [www.thehandelgroup.com](http://www.thehandelgroup.com)

Have you ever used Facebook? Explain what you like or dislike about using this network.

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If you have never used Facebook, has this article convinced you to try it, or that there's no reason for you to try it? Identify which part of the article helped you decide.

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Summarize the reading. Be sure that you cover all of the key points made by the author.

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Choose an idea that the author discusses and write about whether you agree or disagree and why.

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