

Too Much Bad News: How to Do an Information Fast

Crime is going down, but you wouldn't know that from looking at national media because we still cover the same number of crimes, the same number of murderous trials, so there is a danger that we are not reflecting the world.

– Tony Gallagher

If it bleeds, it leads. – Adage about the news

How does the news affect my health?

In 2014, Harvard researchers asked 2,500 American adults what causes stress in their daily lives. Forty percent admitted that “watching, reading, or listening to the news” was one of their top life stressors.¹ Since then, more studies have shown that learning about bad news hurts our mental health more than listening to good news helps our mental health.²

Unfortunately, the media spends more time focusing on bad news than good news. One study found there are seventeen bits of bad news shared for every one that is about something good.³ That's because consumers are more likely to pay attention to stories about war, terrorism, bad weather, and natural or manmade disasters.⁴ Psychologists call this our “negativity bias.” We tend to react to bad news faster and remember it better.⁵

All of this bad news damages our health in the following ways:

- Increasing stress hormone (cortisol) levels in our body⁶
- Increasing depressive symptoms, loneliness, and hopelessness⁷
- Creating feelings of anxiety that last beyond the news program⁸
- Making us feel more threatened by others around us⁹
- Triggering post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms^{10, 11}

Studies done after the 9/11 attack and the Boston Marathon bombing showed that people who watched the news had more flashbacks about the attacks. Some even experienced more anxiety than the people who were present at the attacks.^{11, 12}

The more we are exposed to negative stories, the more it causes us anxiety.¹³ Stress and anxiety negatively affect our long-term health.

What types of media affect my health?

The studies mentioned in this handout looked at how we react to the news we get from newspapers, magazines, televisions, and websites. Recently, more Americans are also getting their news from social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, and Twitter. Polls show that 8 out of 10 Americans who use the internet also use social media, and a majority of Americans get news from social media.¹⁴ Negative reports on social media can also contribute to anxiety and depression. In fact, a recent study found that people exposed to multiple social media sites were up to 3 times as likely to have anxiety and depression as people who went to fewer sites.¹⁵

How can I avoid the mental health effects of the news?

Many of us rely on daily news sources at work and during our free time. And psychologists agree that some Americans are addicted to the news. Totally staying away from the news may be too hard for most of us. Instead, experts offer 3 practical ways to decrease anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms that may be related to watching the news:

- (1) Balance the negative news with positive news sources. The same studies mentioned earlier also found that good news stories bring out positive emotions in us. Seek out positive news sources such as the “Good News Network” and “Headlines for The Hopeful.” Get updates from the Constructive Journalism Project on how some people are trying to increase reporting of positive news topics.
- (2) If you think you might be addicted to the news or social media, consider using self-hypnosis. A self-hypnosis resource is provided below in the “For more information” table.
- (3) Try a media and information fast. This involves cutting down on TV, internet, radio, and newspaper sources of the news for a short time to allow your brain to rest and recover. There are many ways to do this without it throwing off your daily life. For more information, review the exercise below.

Exercise: How to do a Media and Information Fast

Before The Fast

Step 1: Start by keeping a media journal. This simply means keeping a small notebook with you throughout the day and writing down what news sources you use (TV, internet, phone applications, radio, etc). Keep track of how long you used them, what topics you reviewed, and how the news made you feel. Try to do it on at least 3 typical days, and look at both weekdays and weekends. This is a great mindful awareness practice.

Step 2: Once you complete your media journal, ask yourself what you want to get rid of during the information fast. This could be one of your information sources, or all of them. Consider starting with the news sources you use most often.

Step 3: Decide how long you want to take a break from these sources. Your media fast can be as short or long as you wish. Common times for a media fast are 24 hours, 3 days, 7 days, or

even 1 month. Another option is to choose specific days-off from media during the week. This may mean not checking the news on your phone during the weekend, or only watching TV news broadcasts on Mondays and Fridays.

During the Fast

Step 4: Take time to reflect on how you feel without your news sources. Do you feel out of touch? Do you miss the information? Have you saved time? Have you noticed that your mood is better and your stress is lower? Do you feel like you have less to talk to other people about? Keep notes of anything you feel is important to remember after the experience.

Step 5: Fill your extra time with activities that make you healthier and happier. Spend time with friends and family or in nature. Ask yourself if you feel like you have more time to do the things you enjoy.

After the Fast

Step 6: When you finish your fast, think back to Step 4. Do you feel the information fast improved your health? Which sources of information are most helpful to you and which are the most harmful? Find a balance between getting information and not being harmed by it. Start adding back what you feel you need the most.

Step 7: Consider repeating this exercise from time to time, like doing spring cleaning. Our sources of news and other information change quickly, so this exercise is worth doing at least once a year, if not more.

As one becomes aware of the decline of violence, the world begins to look different. The past seems less innocent; the present less sinister.¹⁶ - Steven Pinker

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of Integrative Whole Health handouts on your surroundings	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Good News Network	Website focused on publishing positive news stories	https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/
Hypnosis Download	Self-hypnosis guide to reducing news addiction	http://www.hypnosisdownloads.com/addiction-help/news-addiction



ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Headlines for The Hopeful	Positive news source which also focuses on Veterans experiences	https://hopefulheadlines.org/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Sagar Shah, MD, integrative and family medicine physician at Kaiser Permanente in Honolulu, Hawaii and student in Master of Public Health program at Emory University. It is based in part on a document for clinicians, "A Media and Information Fast" written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

Resources

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