

Coping with the news of today and the world around us

Technology and the Internet have changed the way we receive and react to news. At one time, people turned on their television set or opened a newspaper to find out what was happening in the world. Now news reaches us at lightning speed through the Internet. You can get news on the go from around the world via mobile devices almost at the time it is happening. With such easy accessibility, there's 24-hour access to events locally, nationally and internationally. Is this a positive or a negative? After all, it's important to know what's going on in the world, but have you ever wondered what impact news, especially bad news, can have on your mental health?

News can impact our mental health

There are many examples of unfortunate events that have shocked, saddened and provoked anxiety in us, from terrorism and violence to natural disasters. During these times of crisis, many people stayed glued to their computers and television sets watching the events as they unfolded. Various studies looked at the impact the 9/11 tragedy and subsequent news coverage had, specifically on Americans. About 90 per cent experienced one or more symptoms of stress as a result of what they heard and saw.

Researchers also found the more time participants spent watching the news coverage on television, the more likely they were to experience stress. A significant number of people watching the news developed one or more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a chronic, severe anxiety disorder resulting from a traumatic event such as involuntary confinement, military combat, physical assault or being a victim of a violent crime. In another study, when healthy people viewed footage of traumatic events, almost one out of five developed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder even though their only link to the event was a video.

With the wide availability of video newscasts, it's possible to see every gory detail and hear the sounds of virtually any event. Never before have so many people had such up-close encounters with traumatic events from around the world.

People respond differently to bad news

Are some people more susceptible to the negative impact of bad news? According to a study from *PLOS One* (a peer-reviewed, open access journal), women are more likely to be "sensitized" to bad news. Researchers found that women exposed to negative news were more likely to react with fear and anxiety to a subsequent stressor. Why women had this response and men didn't isn't clear, although some research shows that women are more empathetic than men. This may explain why women are more strongly impacted mentally by the suffering of others.

Children are also vulnerable to the negative effects of bad news. Seeing graphic images of disturbing events can confuse and frighten kids, and can lead to anxiety and nightmares. Young children lack the experience and knowledge to put news into perspective. When they see disturbing events happening overseas, they may believe it's happening close to home and think they're in danger. Parents need to be aware of what kids are watching and be ready to explain what's going on in terms they can understand.

The constant bad news we're exposed to online and on television can trigger anxiety and mental stress. The world has grown smaller as a result of the Internet and that makes us feel more anxious and vulnerable when we hear and read about tragedy. Instead of internalizing bad news, and feeling stressed, anxious or sad, we should try to be proactive in minimizing the impact of negative world events.

Five tips for coping with bad news from around the world

Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by all the bad news you read about online and hear about on the radio and television? Round-the-clock news has never been so easy to access as it is today. It's important to be informed, but being exposed to so much bad news isn't good for your mental health.

Research shows that people who are exposed to negative news, even when it doesn't directly impact them, can develop symptoms of psychological stress. Are you finding yourself sad or anxious about all the tragedies you hear and read about? Fortunately, there are things you can do to lessen their impact.

Tips for constructively dealing with bad news

- **Take a break from the news** - It's good to be informed but don't become a news junkie. Limit the amount of time you spend following the news, watching news videos and reading about world events. Get the facts and turn your attention to other things. Set aside a designated time daily for reading the news and limit it to that. Focusing too much on negative events leads to a sense of helplessness that carries over to other parts of your life. It can also lead to a sense of discouragement and hopelessness. There's no need to hide from the news, but don't make it the focus of your day. If you do, you risk letting negativity take control.
- **Balance negative news with good news** - Why do the media focus so much on bad news? News agencies are concerned with attracting and keeping an audience so they can sell advertising. Unfortunately, bad news attracts more attention than good news - and it keeps people coming back for updates. Many people are drawn to bad news and tragedy even when it causes them stress; you don't have to be one of them! Seek out sites online with inspirational stories to keep things in balance. There *is* good news in the world, but mainstream media sources don't always focus on it. After digesting the day's bad news, find an inspiring story online and share them with others. You may give someone else's day a lift too. Keep your life balanced by reading about what's good in the world.
- **Do something to help others in times of tragedy** - If a particular news story touches you, ask what you can do to help. You may be able to send a donation to help the victims or their families. We often feel powerless in the wake of tragedy, but taking action reduces that sense of helplessness – and helps others too.
- **Alleviate stress and talk about it** - If something in the news deeply disturbs you, talk about it with someone you trust or write an online post about how the news impacted you. Getting your feelings out in the open is therapeutic and helps to alleviate stress. If you don't want to go public, write it down in a journal.
- **Be a force for positive change** - You can't change all the bad things that are happening in the world, but you can help out in a small way by volunteering for a good cause. For example, if you read stories about elderly neglect that deeply disturbs you, take action by volunteering at a local nursing home or offer your services to another group that caters to the needs of the elderly. It's another way to feel less helpless in the face of bad news and have a positive impact at the same time.

Try to keep bad news in perspective and balance it with uplifting, inspirational stories. You have control over how much bad news you digest in a day, so try not to focus only on the bad. When you feel impassioned by a story or a particular cause, ask if there's anything you can do to help – then take action.

References:

PLOS One. "There Is No News Like Bad News: Women Are More Remembering and Stress Reactive after Reading Real Negative News than Men" <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0047189>

N Engl J Med 2001; 345:1507-1512. <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM200111153452024>.

British Journal of Psychology. Volume 88, Issue 1, pages 85–91, February 1997. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1997.tb02622.x/abstract>

International Journal of Behavioral Medicine. June 2007, Volume 14, Issue 2, pp 57-62. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2FBF03004169>.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at **1 800 387-4765** or visit workhealthlife.com.