



Is Breaking News Breaking You? How to Stay Informed while Minimizing Stress

Almost two-thirds of all Americans say that the daily news causes them stress, according to an American Psychological Association (APA) survey. Feeling anxious, depressed, hopeless, irritable and worn out are some of the symptoms of "headline stress disorder," a phrase coined by psychologist Steven Stosny.

Since we no longer have to wait for the 6 pm news or the morning paper, most people see the news much more often throughout the day than was possible 15-20 years ago. We have 24/7 access to news on TV and with the touch of an app on our smartphone.

Even when we aren't looking for the news, it finds us. Walking into a pizza joint or waiting for an oil change, a TV is sure to be blaring. How often have you taken a break to check on your social media friends and quickly stumbled upon posts about hot topics in the national news? It probably happens regularly since 65% of the 2.4 billion internet users get their news mainly from social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube), as *Forbes Magazine* reported.

If you think there is too much news and you can't keep up, you are in good company. A Pew Research Center survey found that 68% of Americans are exhausted by the amount of news out there. Not only

is the news constant and abundant, but the nature of it tends to be more visual and explicit, or shocking. Bystander videos that go viral (spread quickly and widely) are an example. Seeing a violent act or angry words exchanged on video can be far more upsetting than reading or hearing about them.

So, when the news overwhelms us or makes us anxious or sad, why do we keep seeking it out? For one, most feel it is important to stay informed. But also, Loretta Breuning, author of *Habits of a Happy Brain*, explains that our brains are wired to detect threats, not to overlook them. This can make it challenging to avoid the negatives and seek out positives in our lives.

A Balancing Act

Are you experiencing information overload or worrying about negative news? Maybe you've had an increase in stomachaches, headaches, sadness or arguments with friends or family. These symptoms of stress can have a serious impact on health. When stressed, our bodies make the hormone cortisol. Over time, cortisol can lead to inflammation, which is linked to all sorts of health conditions. A flair up of back pain, worsening stiffness with rheumatoid arthritis, high blood pressure, a new illness...the list of possible complications from stress is long.

Managing Your Screen Time

Americans spend more than 11 hours a day looking at screens. Since screen time can be hard on our eyes, posture, relationships and mood, here are some ways to reduce it:

- Eat without a screen. Enjoy meals by talking with your table mates or by simply savoring the food.
- Decide how much non-work screen time is best and set a timer. Use spare time doing things you enjoy and being with family/friends.
- Request phone or in-person meetings instead of emailing/texting/chatting.
- Avoid watching TV/movies in bed. It is easier to say no to another episode if you're on the couch.
- Charge your phone at night outside your bedroom.

Focusing on the Positive

Some argue that there isn't necessarily worse news now than ever before. War, poverty, crime, illness and inequities of all kinds have long plagued people. What's new is how easy it is to get constant news and how much of it there is. Given the ease with which we are guided towards negative news, it helps to focus on the positive.

- Put energy into what you can change, not what you can't. Support causes you care about, for example, volunteer at a homeless shelter or mentor teens.
- Spend less time alone. Loneliness can make you feel isolated and can be just as risky to your health as smoking or carrying excess weight. If you don't have family and friends where you live, you can reduce alone time by taking classes, volunteering, or asking someone new out for coffee.
- Enjoy the outdoors. Even when it is cold out, there are times of day that are better for spending time outside. Nature and fresh air are always good for clearing your mind and lifting your spirits.
- Be mindful of what *you* post on social media, make sure you contribute constructive, positive messages!

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How can you break the cycle of headline stress disorder? Try taking a vacation from the news and social media to help you regain perspective. When you've had a good rest, but miss staying informed, make conscious decisions about letting the news back in and what you can do differently.

Think through how you like to get your news: radio, TV, newspaper, internet sources. Decide which sources you trust. Ask yourself when and how often you are going to seek news. Can you settle on 30 minutes in the morning and evening with a 5-minute check-in mid-day? Is that still too much or not enough? Whatever you decide, make sure it's less than what led you to feel stressed. Set a timer to make sure you don't overdo it.

Consider subscribing to news digests from a trusted source. This way you can quickly get the highlights of the news and help you reduce your screen time (see box). Since the sound or vibration from notifications can be distracting (and an instant stressor), turn them off. If you have multiple notifications set and can't manage cutting them all, pick one that you value the most. Aim to finish your news wrap up well before bed-time so it's less likely to affect your sleep, which is essential for good health.

Deciding how to manage your news intake has to be made in combination with your new approach to social media. Facebook and other social media platforms can be a great way to keep up with friends and family, reconnect with people from the past, and see funny stories and cute pet pictures. But a constant stream of social media posts and attention-grabbing news alerts can trigger or add to those feelings of stress and overload.

Another type of stress from social media is that the pictures and sentiments posted are often very carefully curated to show "perfect" lives. Some social media users say they feel inadequate after spending time on social media.

Given how you interacted with social media in the past and how it made you feel, what needs to change? If you were checking your feed(s) every chance you had, can you reduce it to once every 3-4 hours or once or twice a day? Or every other day? Decide how much time you will allow for each site, and as with the news, set a timer so you don't get sucked in longer than is healthy.

Consider moving social media apps off your home page to help reduce the urge to check them. Try limiting the amount of time you spend on negative topics that drain your brain and add to the stress load. Another good reason to curb your social media time is because it takes emotional energy to make those split-second decisions about what you will scroll quickly past.

As you reboot your relationship with the news and social media, seek ways to build in positive activities. Maybe now is the time to try out that new hobby, take flowers to a friend or visit a lonely elder.

KnovaSolutions is Ready!

When it comes to any health challenge you and your family are facing, KnovaSolutions can assist. We can help you identify your stressors and learn coping skills to better manage whatever challenges come your way. Let us know what we can do. Call us at **800/355-0885**, Monday - Friday, 8 am-8 pm, MT.

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