

WHERE DID OUR CALM GO?

Experts say the state of the world is stressing us out to a dangerous degree. What we all need: a pocket of peace in this time of amped-up alarm.

BY JENNIFER ABBASI ILLUSTRATED BY C.J. BURTON



Last November, Sara Larson of Salt Lake City had just logged on to Twitter to respond to a few tweets when news about the Paris terrorist attacks started popping up on her feed. “What would have been five minutes spent away from my children turned into an hour,” recalls the 33-year-old writer. “I was trying to find out what was happening, and I couldn’t pull myself away from it. Even when I put the phone down and tried to focus on the kids, I was distracted, thinking, *I should check again*, though there was nothing I could do about the situation.” If only this had been just one bad day. “Over the past year or two, it feels as if there’s been a constant barrage of awful things like this in the world,” says Larson. “It makes me wonder when the other shoe is going to drop on me.”

Fire up your computer, check your phone, click on the TV...freak out. Can this possibly be our new normal? “With the current social and political climate, I’m seeing women with more low-level anxiety and feelings of unease and irritability,” says Sheenie Ambaradar, M.D., a psychiatrist based in Beverly Hills, CA. Women are coming to her office agitated about the San Bernardino workplace shooting, active-shooter drills at universities, and even the negative “America is in dire straits” speeches by political candidates.

So much alarming info these days ambushes us the way it did Larson. We used to *choose* when to watch the news, but now it sneaks up, hits us from all sides, and comes in a constant stream from Facebook, Twitter, mobile alerts, and more. When we step onto the elevator at work or the treadmill at the gym, we’re often unavoidably faced with disturbing messages and imagery: “Zika virus hits the U.S.; spread by sexual contact!” “Hurricane headed for our shores!”

In the competition for our attention, media outlets up the ante with increasingly disconcerting stories and an endless loop of shocking pictures and videos. “They play the same images over and over again, and it’s always the most eye-grabbing thing,” says Alison Holman, Ph.D., interim director and an associate professor of nursing science at the University of California, Irvine, who has studied the effects of traumatic

news reports on stress and health. Even seemingly harmless click-bait can rattle you. A friend posts a link: “If you love animals, you’ve got to see this!” Sucker that you are for cute cat videos, you click—and it takes you to a story about kittens being tortured, with pleas to sign a petition. *Gaaa!*

It’s getting to us, and not just tying our shoulders in knots and stealing our sleep. Holman’s research suggests that the more time people spend watching news reports about disasters, the more likely they are to have symptoms of acute stress (such as unwanted images popping into their heads) and health problems (like asthma, diabetes, stroke, and even cancer) years later. It turns out that stress spikes from bad news could have repercussions on our health that long outlast the latest shocking headline.

OUR FRAZZLED BRAINS

We may not realize at first how the news amps us up as we go about our lives. “It can be a subtle kind of change,” Holman says. She’s found, though, that the impact is cumulative—that our stress response to traumatic news lingers and snowballs, making us more vulnerable the next time we hear about a similar event. In one study on the news reports of the Boston Marathon bombings, people who had watched the most coverage of previous tragedies (9/11, Superstorm Sandy, and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting) had much higher stress symptoms than others did. And get this: People who binge-

watched news about Boston were way more stressed than those who actually attended the marathon.

So why does watching or hearing bad news reverberate so powerfully? Experts say it likely triggers areas in the brain related to the stress response system, called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. “Because of continuous emotional stress, the HPA axis may be chronically stimulated,” Ambaradar says.

Even benign places like the mall or the movie theater give some people the jitters, because these spots are associated with recent violence and we’re losing our ability to put the risk into perspective. “Our brains may be getting rewired to produce stress responses that are out of proportion to the actual situation,” says Darshan Mehta, M.D., medical director of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. He believes the constant influx of modern stressors can alter the HPA axis, changing the way the brain works to calm our responses. The result, he says: a chronic low-grade state of fight or flight, hypervigilance, and a shift in our sense of safety and well-being.

THE STEADY STREAM OF TENSION

There’s no getting away from stress, of course, but lingering in a constant state of alert can do a major number on your health, thanks in large part to the stress hormone cortisol. It makes the body less receptive to the feel-good neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine, Ambaradar says,

HOW DO I
TURN IT OFF?

so much
bad news.

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How to curb social media's constant fire-hose blast of bad news? Unsubscribe from feeds that are overly dark or alarmist.



making anxiety and depression worse. And chronic stress can also lead to headaches, insomnia, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, lowered immunity.... We'll stop there, but trust us, it's a health bad guy.

Ashley Warren, 27, a technology researcher in Reno, NV, with a passion for political and social issues, was drawn into debates about topics like gay marriage and income equality on Facebook and Reddit, where people with opposing viewpoints often attacked her personally. "During one discussion on Reddit about equal pay for women, for example, a person who disagreed with me called me a 'bitch' and a 'whore' repeatedly whenever I commented," she says.

The heated online exchanges were stressful and even frightening, and she began having

did you see that awful video?

WHOA, I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT

frequent headaches and near panic attacks while simply defending her values and perspectives. "My heart rate would speed up and I'd get short of breath," she says.

Finally, her husband asked her to spend less time engaging with politics online. "He saw how anxious it was making me and suggested that I put my energy elsewhere," Warren says. "I've pulled back a lot, and that's helped me manage my stress and sleep better." Now she has more bandwidth to exercise and spend time on off-line hobbies. And she found healthier ways to stay connected to social issues, by volunteering as an emergency responder and mentoring kids and teens.

RECLAIM YOUR CALM

With your health on the line, it couldn't be more important to get a handle on the grating effects of the negative social climate. Take charge this way:

Don't bookend your day with the news. A good rule: No news first thing in the A.M. or right before bed. An embargo like this—even a 15-minute buffer—can set the tone for a calmer morning and a better night's sleep.

Give yourself permission to be less informed. You don't need to be the local expert on, say, domestic terrorism to have a grasp on current events, Ambardar says. "Recognize when the news is making your mood worse, and cut back a bit."

Carefully curate your social media feed. Curb the constant fire-hose blast of bad news by unsubscribing from feeds that are overly dark or alarmist. And consider "unfollowing" friends on Facebook who regularly share things that rile you up or bring you down. (You don't need to unfriend them to do that.)

Skip the truly gruesome stuff. You can be aware of what's going on without watching a video that shows hideous violence, Holman says. Remember: You can't un-see something.

Inject some Zen into your days. To counterbalance stressors with equal parts joy and celebration, prioritize things that bring you a sense of calm and thankfulness. Sounds obvious, but so often the buzz of the news is louder. Get out to see friends, or turn up Spotify good and loud when a great song comes on. Whatever you do, Ambardar says, "find the thing that brings you peace." ■