

On My Mind: Beware the news



Like most people I encounter on the Vineyard and beyond, I find the news disturbing. I read the headlines every day, but find myself limiting the stories that conjure thoughts of apocalypse to about one a day. I watch very little news, because the more I watch, the more space it takes up in my mind. Sometimes I wonder whether I am putting my head in the sand and avoiding reality.

Even though I did not watch much TV news at the time, I watched the planes crash into the Twin Towers often enough that the images are sealed in my memory. Some people I knew watched those images hundreds of times, and could think of little else. I have often wondered about how all of the bad news and human suffering that we are exposed to affects our brains and our functioning.

Shankar Vedantam, NPR's social science correspondent, recently offered an interesting perspective: "For nearly all of human history, people had no idea about stuff happening in another part of the world. So it would have taken days or weeks in the 18th or 19th century for someone in California to hear about an earthquake in Mexico. For most of our evolutionary history, if you heard or saw

something bad, it was because that bad thing was happening right next to you. Now, in recent decades, we've changed that. We can now hear and see things that are happening in faraway places. And with radio or television, you can feel as if you are actually right in the area that is being devastated by a hurricane ... there are still ancient algorithms in the brain that tell us if we can see and hear something terrible happening, it's probably because that terrible thing is happening right next to us."

Furthermore, we have evolved to be vigilant to danger. Think about our ancestors on the savannah. If they wondered if every brown rock was a lion, on the rare occasion when they actually walked near a lion ready to pounce, they would be geared up and ready to run. Any ancestor who assumed that a lion was a brown rock was probably eaten. We are programmed to pay attention to, and perhaps overestimate, risk.

For many people who have experienced terrifying situations in their lives (and that may be the majority of us), being exposed to bad news can be retraumatizing. Particularly for those people who have struggled with anxiety, watching troubling images can trigger post-traumatic stress symptoms such as excessive worries, helplessness, hypervigilance, and the feeling that they are experiencing trauma themselves.

For people who are vulnerable to PTSD, rather than the news evoking compassion and calls to action, it can evoke the classic triad of the fear response; an urge to freeze, fight, or flee. When we are repeatedly exposed to trauma, the natural human reaction is to disconnect and become numb, to have a hair-trigger rage response, or to simply escape as quickly as possible. These responses are also associated with depression, and they can mute the brain's ability to learn and reason.

After the last presidential election, there were a lot of Vineyarders who felt traumatized. (See bit.ly/politicsmentalhealth.) Many responded by attending rallies, signing petitions, making charitable donations, turning off the news, and engaging in political actions. Many of those same former activists now find that political action leaves them feeling helpless, and have given up on it. Some news junkies are back to hours a day in front of the TV. Rather than jump-starting them into action, the news now leaves many people numb, blue, and withdrawn. When they feel overwhelmed, they find it harder to act and reason.

A particular challenge of the news these days is that it is so often unclear what is true, untrue, or distorted. Referencing research psychologist Daniel Gilbert, [Maria](#)

[Konnikova](#) suggested in the January/February edition of Politico magazine that “when we are overwhelmed with false, or potentially false, statements, our brains pretty quickly become so overworked that we stop trying to sift through everything. It’s called cognitive load — our limited cognitive resources are overburdened ... Eventually, without quite realizing it, our brains just give up trying to figure out what is true.”

If news exposure leaves us confused or consumed with anxiety, is it any wonder that more teenagers than ever are suffering from anxiety and depression?

According to a survey by the American College Health Association, 61.9 percent of college students had felt overwhelming anxiety within the past 12 months. If repeated exposure to traumatic events on the news and social media leaves adults with increased anxiety, think about what the impact is on the developing brain. Because the adolescent brain is still developing, it is more excitable, and learns information with a prowess no longer available at older ages. What our children are learning is that their world is dangerous and frightening. The natural response is to find ways to zone out, to flee from reality, or to react with intense anger.

A 20-year-old told me that the news also leaves him worrying about his future, feeling guilty that he is not doing more to help, and suffering from shame that he is among the privileged who — for the moment at least — are buffered from much of the world’s suffering. At times he feels that his life lacks meaning, but he also told me that when he finds activities that are meaningful to him — that is, when he has a sense of purpose and impact, and feels valued — the power of the news to trouble him is muted. This is good advice for all of us. There is also plenty of evidence that engaging in intensive exercise and meditative activity clears the emotional baggage of the day. For most of the people I know on the Vineyard, communing with nature is also healing.

And of course, finding what level of news exposure is safe for you is essential. It may be that reading rather than watching the news will help. And when it feels overwhelming, stop. Research from the field of positive psychology tells us that when we focus on good news, it makes us more productive and successful at finding solutions to problems. Also, when we are focused on the positive, it positively infects the people around us.

It is important to know when to avoid too much negative preoccupation with the news, and break away from bad news mongering. Paradoxically, creating boundaries with news exposure will help us be more responsive to life’s risks and tragedies, rather than less.

