

Coronavirus news on social media stressing you out? Here's how to handle the anxiety

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Pandemic. Politics. An upending of life at a level that few Americans

have ever experienced. And all of it amplified by social media.

The ever-shifting news has some people constantly checking their phones for updates—and others saying they're ready to walk away from their feeds entirely.

"It's really the perfect recipe for [anxiety](#) and panic," said licensed clinical psychologist Debra Kissen of Chicago. And stress, it should be noted, may be a factor in heart disease.

But Kissen, CEO of Light on Anxiety CBT Treatment Center, and others say anxiety can be managed—and social media, used properly, doesn't have to send you on a mental-health spiral. It also can help you find balance.

Kissen acknowledged the [coronavirus](#) pandemic is unprecedented because of the way uncertainty has crept into "every little nook and cranny" of life. People worry: Is your neighbor's cough going to be the one? Is that touch going to be what does you in? Will I get infected in the supermarket?

Your brain's response to such uncertainty is the very definition of anxiety, she said.

"Anxiety is all about a future 'what if?'" Kissen said. "Is something bad going to happen, and what can I do to protect myself?"

In the face of a visible threat, your brain can choose a course of action—say, fight or flight. But amid uncertainty, your brain looks for what it can control, even when nothing helpful can be done. That's when problems can start.

Some people keep looking for actions to take, following unhealthy

impulses that say, "Let me hoard more. Let me read more," she said, "versus accepting that there are just limits to my control at this point."

Keith Hampton, a professor in the department of media and information at Michigan State University in East Lansing, said social media amplifies stress by giving us a [personal connection](#) to people experiencing bad news directly.

But Hampton, who led a study for the Pew Research Center about this "cost of caring," said our relationship with social media doesn't have to be all negative.

"We know, for example, that people who use more social media tend to perceive there's more social support available to them" from friends and family, online and offline, he said.

And when people experience positive things, he said, they also get a bit of a psychological uplift.

So, part of the solution to managing social media in a time of high anxiety is to make sure you're sharing not just what alarms you, but whatever good news you experience as well.

Knowing people are safe and improving, "that type of positive information can be contagious," he said.

Which is part of why he doesn't recommend turning off social [media](#) entirely.

We may need social distancing, the practice of creating physical space between you and another person to prevent spread of the virus. But, he said, "this is not a time for social isolation.

This is a time for seeking and giving [social support](#) to those who need it. And [social media](#) can be a very powerful tool for checking on friends and family, for providing emotional support to those who are in need to organizing to provide resources to neighbors, to the elderly, to children, to those people who are no longer getting or can't access the resources that they need."

But, he and Kissen said, be mindful about how you use it.

Keeping up with high-quality information is vital. "We can't put our heads in the sand and pretend this is not happening, because that's not healthy or good," Kissen said. So, pick a news source, decide, "OK, I'm going to allow myself like 30 minutes a day, or 10 high-quality articles, and check in with them."

Keeping your worried brain off of autopilot through mindfulness is the key to reducing anxiety in all aspects of life, she said. "It's not some hokey spiritual voodoo. It's about enhancing one's ability to return to the present moment."

Apps for CBT—cognitive behavioral therapy—can be helpful, she said. So can time-honored tricks such as getting exercise, taking a walk and being active.

"Think of a computer that has 20 windows open and is frozen because there's too much going on," she said. That forces a reboot. "What do we do to reboot ourselves? Is it a jumping jack? Is it just standing up and stretching? Is it getting fresh air? What kind of input can we give our body to kind of move on and get unstuck?"

Overall, she said, the goal is to break that endless loop of anxious anticipation.

Your brain may say, "shouldn't I be doing more? Shouldn't I be doing more?" Kissen said. "But sometimes there's just not more to be done."

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