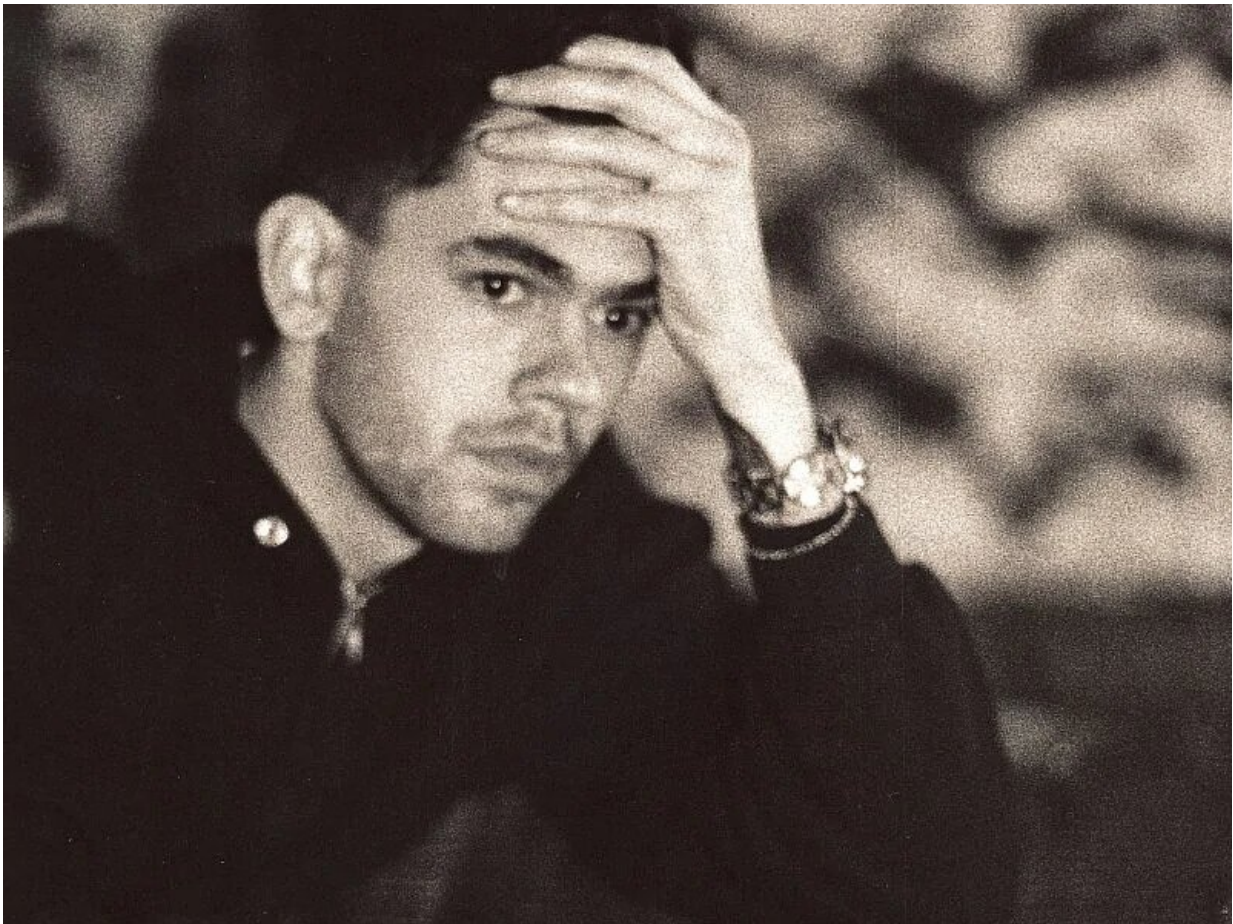


## Beware of 'media overload' during coronavirus crisis, experts say

April 7 2020, by Amy Norton

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If you feel like the news about coronavirus is growing worse by the hour,

then it might be time to take stock: How much do you really need to know?

As the pandemic unfolds, and people routinely wake up to uncertainty, it is necessary to stay informed, psychologists say.

At the same time, they caution, remember that media overload is real. And it may raise anxiety to a level that does more harm than good.

"The data show that the harm does not come from staying informed in a reasonable way—like reading your morning paper every day," said Dana Rose Garfin, an assistant adjunct professor at the University of California, Irvine's School of Nursing.

And in the midst of a pandemic, she pointed out, a little worry is normal and necessary.

"Some amount of concern is a good thing, so that we're not complacent," Garfin said. "We want to be aware of—and following—[public health guidelines](#)."

But there is such a thing as too much.

"There's a big difference between staying informed and having the news on all day long, repeating the same things," said Garfin, co-author of a commentary on [coronavirus](#) media exposure that was recently published in the journal *Health Psychology*.

Beyond the amount of news, the content matters, too: News outlets have taken to tracking daily death tolls and infection rates by zip code, while some stories include graphic images like body bags, Garfin noted.

The question, she said, is whether that information is actually useful to

you or is simply fueling anxiety.

At this point, no one knows exactly how media coverage of COVID-19 is affecting people's mental [health](#). But research on past disasters offers some clues.

Take one post-9/11 study, for example. Researchers found that Americans who spent a few hours a day watching TV coverage of the attacks were more likely to show post-traumatic stress symptoms than those who watched less. They also had a greater risk of developing new physical health conditions two to three years later.

Another study found that greater exposure to coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing—especially graphic imagery—was linked to higher risks of post-traumatic stress and worse mental health months later.

Of course, the people who are most worried may seek more news, Garfin and her colleagues noted. In that case, a vicious cycle can ensue—with the information stoking already heightened anxiety.

That may be particularly likely when the information itself is changing and firm answers are elusive, Garfin said.

Because the virus that causes COVID-19 is new, scientists do not have conclusive answers to everyone's questions. Meanwhile, public health officials are giving "inconsistent messages," Garfin pointed out.

"And we know that mixed messages are more anxiety-provoking," she said.

Christopher Fagundes, an associate professor of psychological sciences at Rice University in Houston, said it's only natural to seek information during uncertain times.

"The [human brain](#) evolved that way—to try to make sense of things, to want some sense of control," he said.

But some people, he added, can't discern when to turn the information stream off. If that sounds like you, Fagundes suggested creating specific times each day that are devoted to checking the news.

"Set boundaries for how much time you'll spend digesting the information," he said. "I'm not saying ignore what's going on. But you do want to avoid ruminating."

The coronavirus pandemic is in many ways unique—one being that half the planet is under lockdown. That isolation, coupled with the need to know, can make it easy to get caught up in the [news](#) or social media.

So Fagundes recommended using technology in a different way: Have a Zoom get-together with friends, FaceTime with family, or find online activities that ease your anxiety, like a yoga class or meditation.

Creating [daily routines](#), including a regular sleep schedule, can be grounding, Fagundes said. It can also help you avoid falling down the internet rabbit hole, he noted.

Garfin agreed it's important to have "start points and stop points" for your daily activities, including media consumption.

She also advised limiting yourself to a "few trusted sources" for updates—like the World Health Organization or U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—and taking social media posts with a grain of salt if you can't verify the source of the information.

**More information:** For more on coping with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, visit the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and](#)

[Prevention.](#)

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