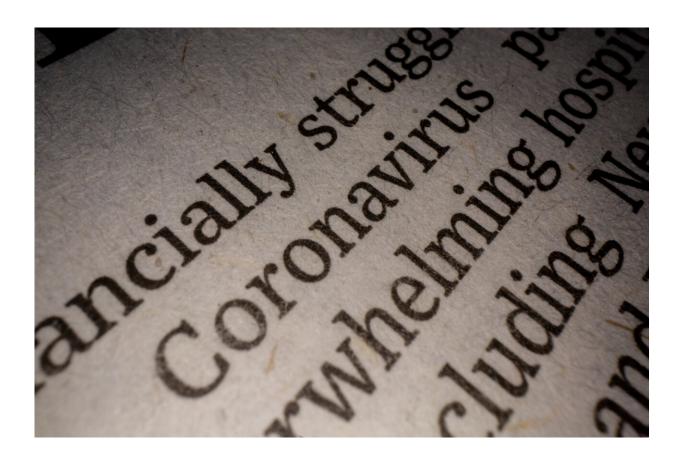# Doomscrolling COVID news takes an emotional toll: How to make your social media a happier place

October 25 2021, by Kathryn Buchanan, Gillian Sandstrom, Lara Aknin, Shaaba Lotun

Credit: Kelly from Pexels

Picture this: It's April 2020, you're between Zoom meetings, and

scrolling through your social media newsfeed. Headlines like "Death toll continues to rise," "COVID-19 may cause long-term health implications" and "Health-care systems overwhelmed" flash across your screen. Your mood takes a dive, but you can't stop scrolling.

If this scenario rings true for you, you're not alone. [Research shows](#) people have a tendency to seek out information during uncertain times—it's a natural coping mechanism. But is persistent information-seeking on social media, sometimes called doomscrolling, helpful during a pandemic, or any time?

Research on the effects of bad [news](#) on mood [more generally](#) suggest exposure to negative COVID news is likely to be detrimental to our emotional wellbeing. And indeed, early evidence on the effects of COVID news consumption on mental distress reflected this. For instance, [one study](#) conducted in March 2020 involving more than 6,000 Americans found that the more time participants spent consuming COVID news in a day, the unhappier they felt.

These findings are striking but leave a few key questions unanswered. Does doomscrolling make people unhappy, or are unhappy people just more likely to doomscroll? How much time spent doomscrolling is a problem? And what would happen if, instead of doomscrolling, we were "kindness scrolling"—reading about humanity's positive responses to a global crisis?

To find out, we conducted [a study](#) where we showed hundreds of people real-world content on either Twitter or YouTube for two to four minutes. The Twitter feeds and YouTube videos featured either general news about COVID, or news about kindness during COVID. We then measured these participants' moods using a questionnaire, and compared their moods with participants who did not engage with any content at all.

People who were shown general COVID-related news experienced lower moods than people who were shown nothing at all. Meanwhile, people who were shown COVID news stories involving acts of kindness didn't experience the same decline in mood, but also didn't gain the boost in mood we'd predicted.

These findings suggest that spending as little as two to four minutes consuming negative news about COVID-19 can have a detrimental impact on our mood.

Although we didn't see an improvement in mood among participants who were shown positive news stories involving acts of kindness, this may be because the stories were still related to COVID. In [other research](#), positive news stories have been associated with improvements in mood.

Making your social media a more positive place

Our research was published earlier this month. Ironically, [news coverage](#) of our findings, with [headlines such as](#) "Just five minutes spent on social media is enough to make you miserable, study finds," could be part of a person's doomscrolling content.

But we didn't find that all social media use makes people miserable. Rather, we found that consuming negative content about COVID via Twitter or YouTube in the midst of a pandemic does.

So what can we do to look after ourselves, and make our time on social media more pleasurable?

One option is to delete our [social media accounts](#) altogether. Figures show almost half of Facebook users in [the UK](#) and [the US](#) considered leaving the platform in 2020.

But how realistic is it to distance ourselves from platforms that connect [nearly half](#) of the world's population, particularly when these platforms offer social interactions at a time when face-to-face interactions can be risky, or impossible?

Given that avoidance might not be practical, here are some other ways to make your experience on social media more positive.

1. Be mindful of what you consume on social media. If you log on to connect with other people, focus on the personal news and photos shared instead of the latest headlines.
2. Seek out content that makes you happy to balance out your newsfeed. This may be images of cute kittens, beautiful landscapes, drool-worthy food videos or something else. You could even follow a social media account dedicated to sharing only happy and positive news.
3. Use social media to promote positivity and kindness. Sharing good things that are happening in your life can [improve your mood](#), and your positive [mood](#) can spread to others. You may also like to [compliment others](#) on social [media](#). While this might sound awkward, people will appreciate it more than you think.

Importantly, we're not suggesting that you avoid all news and negative content. We need to know what's happening in the world. However, we should also be mindful of our mental health.

As the pandemic continues to alter our lives and newsfeeds, our findings highlight the importance of being aware of the emotional toll negative news takes on us. But there are steps we can take to mitigate this toll and make our [social media](#) a happier place.

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