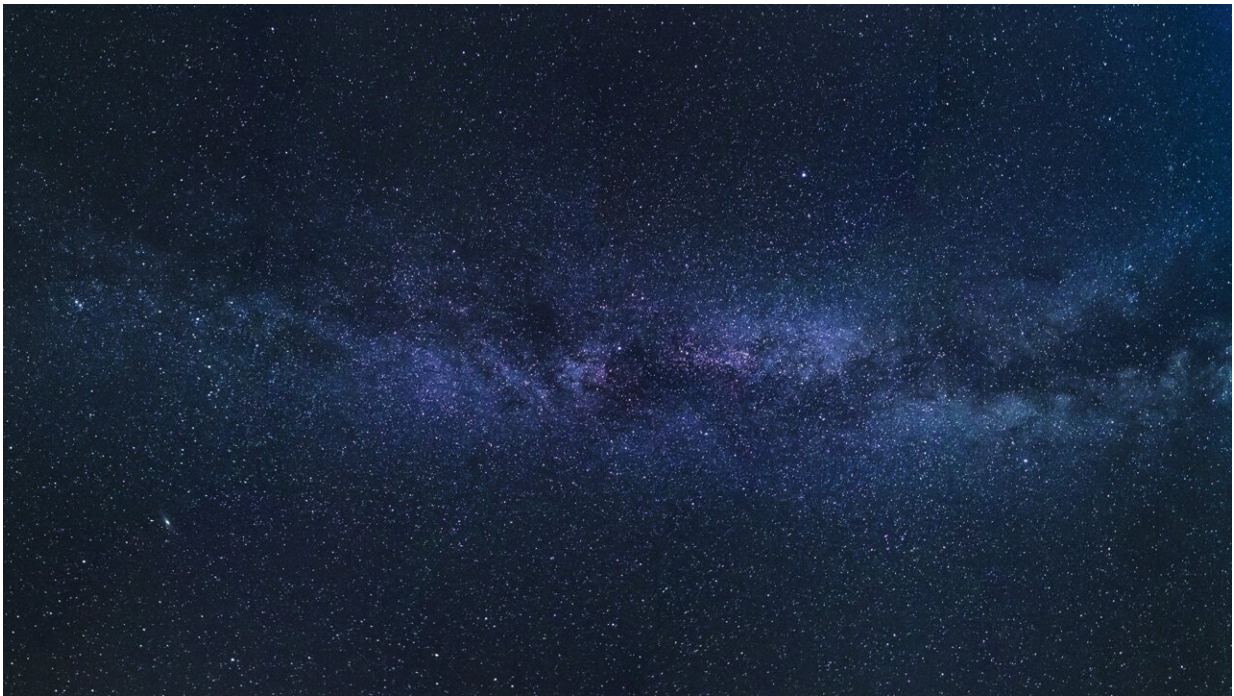


# Ukraine doomscrolling can harm your cognition as well as your mood: What to do about it

March 11 2022, by Barbara Jacquelyn Sahakian, Christelle Langley, Chun Shen, Jianfeng Feng

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Credit: Felix Mittermeier from Pexels

Many people have experienced chronic stress since the pandemic lockdowns. Added to this are the climate crisis, the increasing cost of living and most recently threats to European and global security due to

the conflict in Ukraine.

To some, it may seem that there is never any good news anymore. This is of course not true, but when we're doomscrolling—spending an excessive amount of screen time devoted to reading negative news—we can become locked into thinking it is.

Doomscrolling can promote feelings of anxiety and depression. For example, consider how sad and exhausted you may feel when watching a drama with tragic events and sad music in the background. In contrast, if you watch a funny film or romantic comedy with lively music, you may feel upbeat and energized. This is due to two psychological phenomena: "[mood induction](#)" (an intervention that can change our [mood](#)) and empathy.

Serotonin is an important brain chemical for regulating mood, and it can drop when we are chronically stressed or saddened by bad news for extended periods of time. Studies show that it is even possible to [exacerbate the effects of reducing serotonin](#) in healthy people through mood induction by playing sad music. Pharmacological treatments which increase serotonin are used to treat depression and anxiety.

Empathy is a good trait which helps us live successfully with others and promotes a flourishing society. However, excessive empathy, when viewing tragic world events on the news, may lead to ruminating on negative thoughts, which have an impact on our mental health and wellbeing. Constantly thinking [negative thoughts](#) can lead to depression or anxiety.

Such conditions can over time have a huge effect on our minds, leading to actual cognitive impairments such as reduced [attention](#) or problems with memory and reasoning. After all, if negative information hijacks our attention and memory, it will drain cognitive power that could be

used for other things. And when we are constantly soaking up [negative news](#) and recording negative memories, we feel even more down—creating a vicious cycle.

The longer we are stuck with a low mood, the harder it becomes for us to think flexibly, easily switching between different perspectives. This is how we can become "stuck" with a thought such as "this is never going to end" or "there is no good news"—leading to intense feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

You don't have to be clinically depressed to develop problems with attention, though. We know that attention is critical for cognition and mental health and that technology [can affect it](#).

For example, one study examined the effects of receiving real-time instant messages on their mobile phones while studying for a test. The group who were interrupted by messages took significantly [longer to complete the test](#) and experienced increased levels of stress compared to the group who were able to study without distraction. We know that problems of severe distraction are seen in [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#).

So it isn't just the negative content we are consuming that can harm our attention, the very technology we are using to access it is also a problem. And this may ultimately affect our performance at work, school or even in social settings.

Problems with attention can itself make us more anxious—creating another feedback loop. Over-focusing our attention on threatening things, such as obsessively checking the latest tragic news, can in fact be detrimental to wellbeing. In severe cases it may lead to repetitive checking behavior, seen in [obsessive compulsive disorder](#) (OCD). And we know that children with OCD and perfectionism [have increased](#)

[levels of anxiety.](#)

## Reset your brain

So what can we do about it? It is important to avoid obsessive doomscrolling but instead show resilience and gain mastery over the situation. To do that, you need to have some positive moments of respite. So try to schedule something you enjoy and which relaxes and de-stresses you daily, such as reading a good book, watching a fun film, visiting friends and family or [mindfulness training](#). Exercise or learning something new, such as a different language or a musical instrument, can also be good—boosting both mood as well as cognition.

Another way to take control of the situation is by taking action, perhaps joining or supporting a charity that is involved in helping civilians in Ukraine. When you perform an act of kindness, it activates the reward system in the brain—and gives you some power over the situation.

If you continue to be disturbed by doomscrolling, you may wish to contact a [clinical psychologist](#) who can help you reduce this activity and its effects, through the use of cognitive behavioral therapy. Interestingly, one study showed it is possible to improve your mood through [cognitive mood induction](#)—rewarding people for their performance on a cognitive test.

In a modern globalized world with many forms of technology and constant bombardment of information and streams of stimulation—some good and some bad—it is important to identify your goals. But it is equally important to develop a strategy for achieving them and for avoiding distraction. So the bottom line is to try to stay positive and resilient—for your sake and others.

After all, what use are we in helping to solve difficult global challenges,

such as conflict and [climate change](#), if we're so depressed and cognitively depleted that we can't think of the best actions to take?

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