

As atrocities in Gaza and Israel unfold, psychiatrists give advice on coping

October 17 2023, by Cara Murez



Whether or not you have loved ones in the Middle East, the horrors of

the violence and suffering in Israel and Gaza are heart-wrenching and difficult to bear.

"It's important to be informed, but don't stress yourself out," said Dr. Gary Small, chair of psychiatry at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey.

Ration your exposure to what you see, given the impact graphic news reports can have on [mental health](#), Small advises in a hospital news release.

"We live every day in a denial of the horrors out there in the world," Small said, adding that [catastrophic events](#), such as the massacres and kidnappings in Israel and the Sept. 11 [terror attacks](#), put the very worst of [human behavior](#) in front of people's eyes.

He recommends finding a balance between being up to date with news and doing calming activities. These might include watching a light television show, spending time with loved ones or reading an engaging book.

Brutal events like the attacks in Gaza and Israel can also lead to "[social contagion](#)," where information and images are amplified and a collective stress emerges, Small said.

To protect yourself, take breaks from social media, especially if you find yourself watching horrific images repeatedly, he advised.

Reports of the violence in the Middle East can also trigger anxiety and depression, both in children and adults, for those reading and viewing reports of what's happening.

Dr. Stacy Doumas, chief of child and [adolescent psychiatry](#) at Jersey

Shore University Medical Center, offers some additional guidance for protecting children from disturbing media.

"The situation in Israel and Gaza is tragic," Dumas said. "It's OK to let children know innocent people have been impacted. Parents should help children avoid disturbing news and images, while providing them with age-appropriate information. Let them know that war is complicated and information online is not always accurate. Address their fears so they feel safe and supported."

Parents should listen and make themselves available to talk, child psychiatrists say. They should feel confident initiating the conversations. Don't assume your child doesn't know about it just because they haven't brought it up to you. Here are some other tips for parents:

- Work through your own feelings before talking to your children.
- Consider what's age appropriate when giving children information. Keep in mind each child's particular sensitivity level.
- For preschoolers, limit details of the violence. Elementary age children can handle a few more details. Middle school age children will start to differentiate their own thoughts from those of their parents.
- High schoolers can understand the horrific consequences of war. Ask your teens what they've seen on [social media](#) and how they feel about it. Consider watching or reading coverage of the war with your teen to help discuss what's reliable.
- Emphasize the ways people are helping within volunteer organizations, the U.S. government and other governments around the world.
- Monitor children's media exposure.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention has more on [mental health](#).

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