
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Doomscrolling: Why do we do it?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sam

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Sam.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Sam

Have you heard the expression **doomscrolling** Neil? It's when people spend a lot of time reading, or 'scrolling', a mobile phone or computer screen in order to read negative news stories – stories full of doom.

Neil

I hate to admit it, but I do sometimes doomscroll.

Sam

Well don't feel too bad, Neil, because you're not alone. Research from the University of California found that people all over the world doomscroll, regardless of culture. What's more, there may even be evolutionary reasons why we're attracted to bad news.

Neil

In this programme, we'll be investigating why we feel **compelled** to look at, and even seek out, bad news. And, as usual, we'll be learning some new vocabulary, as well.

Sam

But before that I have a question for you, Neil. Doomscrolling is a very modern idea which is only possible with the 24/7, non-stop cycle of news reporting. So, according to international news agency, Reuters, what has been the top global news story of 2023 so far? Is it:

- a) The war in Ukraine?
- b) Increasing prices and inflation?, or,
- c) Prince Harry's autobiography?

Neil

I think the answer is an issue that's affecting everyone – inflation.

Sam

OK, Neil. I'll reveal the answer at the end of the programme. Now, it might be true that the non-stop news cycle makes doomscrolling possible, but that doesn't explain *why* we do it. Anthropologist Ella al-Shamahi thinks the answer may lie in human evolution. Here she outlines the problem for BBC Radio 4 programme, Why Do We Do That?

Ella al-Shamahi

We go searching out for bad news, looking for things that will make us **feel ick** inside. And so many of us do it. Is it a result of 24/7 doom **on tap** on our phones? Or, is it some kind of **compulsion** that comes from somewhere way, way back?

Sam

Reading bad news stories makes us **feel ick** – an informal American phrase which means feel sick, often because of something disgusting or disturbing. It's a feeling caused by the fact that, thanks to the internet, now we have the news **on tap** – easily available so that you can have as much of it as you want, whenever you want.

Neil

But Ella thinks that's not the whole story. There's another theory: way back in human history, when we lived in caves, it seemed everything could kill us, from wild animals to eating the wrong mushroom. Knowing what the dangers were, and how to avoid them, was vital to our survival, and from an evolutionary **perspective**, survival is everything. As a result, we humans naturally pay attention to the negative stuff, something Ella calls 'negativity bias'.

Sam

But while cavemen only knew what was happening in their local area, nowadays we know the bad news from all over the world. Here's Ella again, discussing this with her friend, TV presenter, Clara Amfo, for BBC Radio 4 programme, Why Do We Do That?

Ella al-Shamahi

Before it would be like, I don't know, I'm assuming you'd go to the neighbour's cave and they'd only know... the bad news from... that particular mountain. Whereas

now, it's like, 'Let me tell you about the really bad information and situation that's going on in some island somewhere...'. It's just the good news doesn't **make up** for it...

Clara Amfo

It really doesn't, and I think trauma's **romanticised**, really. '**What doesn't kill you makes you stronger**', 'this is a test'. I think we're conditioned to believe that negative experiences shape us more than joyous ones.

Neil

Reading bad news from around the world can depress us, and Ella thinks that the little good news we do hear doesn't **make up for** the depressing news. To **make up for** something means to compensate for something bad with something good.

Sam

Good news is hard to find. In fact, Clara thinks society has **romanticised** bad, traumatic news. If you **romanticise** something, you talk about it in a way that makes it sound better than it really is. Connected to this is the saying, '**What doesn't kill you makes you stronger**', meaning that by going through difficult experiences in life, people build up strength and resilience for the future.

Neil

Maybe it's best to stop doomscrolling altogether, but with so much bad news pouring into our mobile phones every day, it's not easy.

Sam

OK, it's time to reveal the answer to my question, Neil. I asked you what news agency, Reuters, considers the top news story of 2023 so far.

Neil

And I guessed it was b) inflation.

Sam

Which was... the correct answer, although there's still plenty of time for 2023 to bring us more doom, hopefully along with a little positivity too. OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned from this programme about **doomscrolling** – spending lots of time reading bad news stories on your phone.

Neil

Feeling ick is American slang for feeling sick, often because of something disgusting or disturbing.

Sam

When something is **on tap**, it's easily available so that you can have as much of it as you want.

Neil

The phrasal verb to **make up for something** means to compensate for something bad with something good.

Sam

When we **romanticise** something, we make it sound better than it is.

Neil

And finally, the saying '**what doesn't kill you makes you stronger**' means that by going through difficult life experiences, people build up strength for the future.

Sam

Once again our six minutes are up, but if doomscrolling's not for you, remember you can find lots of positive news stories to build your vocabulary here at 6 Minute English.

Neil

Don't forget that there is more to BBC Learning English than 6 Minute English. Why not try to improve your vocabulary through the language in news headlines. Try the News Review video on our website or download the podcast.

Sam

But that's bye for now!

Neil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

doomscrolling

spending a lot of time looking at your computer screen or mobile phone and reading bad news stories

feel ick

(US slang) feel sick, often because of something disgusting or disturbing

on tap

easily available so that you can have of much of it as you want, whenever you want

make up for (something)

compensate for something bad with something good

romanticise (something)

talk about something in a way that makes it sound better than it really is

'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'

phrase which expresses the idea that by going through difficult life experiences, people build up strength and resilience for the future