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Coffee with your morning dose of stress?

Every morning I wake up to several notifications waiting patiently on my phone's home screen. I'm subscribed to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and CNN, and each sends out updates on the day's news bright and early. At ten in the morning on February 27th, the *Times* greets me with a headline: "Your Morning Briefing is ready: The US coronavirus response, a mass shooting in Milwaukee, the history of alligators in New York Sewers." The list is preceded by a sun emoji, as if that's supposed to brighten this disheartening collection of information (depending on how you feel about alligators, specifically in city sewers). Another from the *Post* declares: "The world is on fire." This statement feels apt and powerful, even if it continues on to ask if Trevor Noah is the savior of late night television.

The constant stream of news that we are exposed to is a newer phenomenon that has been facilitated by the rise of technology that allows us to access information faster than ever. We are able to be alerted to events and stories with convenient notifications sent to our phones, and the social media platforms we use every day, like Twitter and Facebook, have specified pages to keep you informed while you scroll through friends' and relatives' updates. Twitter even organizes their Discover page into categories (Trending, News, Sports, Fun, Entertainment...) that mimic traditional newspaper sections.

No matter where you turn, if you're connected to the Internet, you don't have to search very long to find stories of violence, crime, war, illness, and injustice (to name a few of many). In fact, staying informed can quickly become tiring with the onslaught of negative news that seems to dominate the media, events we often have no ability to individually control or change.

This sense of exhaustion or of feeling overwhelmed with all that is simultaneously happening in the world to the point where you find it hard to be shocked by negative news stories or to feel empathy toward those impacted is referred to as **compassion fatigue**, a condition you may have experienced before – or are experiencing now.

The world is on fire. Our empathy is being stretched thin. The convenience of our technology keeps us plugged into the latest stories everywhere we go. It's no surprise if you're feeling overwhelmed.

It's not just you

Defining compassion fatigue

You may be wondering what compassion fatigue is. The commonly accepted definition by psychologist C. Figley is, **"a state of exhaustion and dysfunction biologically, psychologically, and socially as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress and all it invokes."** It can be an actual diagnosis, which is referred to as "secondary trauma stress." The term was created to "describe the phenomenon of stress resulting from exposure to a traumatized individual rather than from exposure to the trauma itself."

Historically, this phrase has been used to describe the emotional exhaustion of nurses and doctors, who interact with the sick and dying on a daily basis. Healthcare professionals are exposed to localized tragedy every day; the term compassion fatigue refers to the consequent toll on their mental health (Cocker and Joss).

Many studies have been conducted to examine the causes and effects of compassion fatigue on medical staff, such as Katherine Upton's "Investigation into compassion fatigue and self-compassion in acute medical care hospital nurses," which I use as a reference for most of my research into compassion fatigue in the medical field. This study considers the short- and long-term effects of compassion fatigue, and what can be done to combat it.

Symptoms of compassion fatigue as investigated in many of these studies can be both physical and emotional: increased blood pressure, weight gain, fatigue; cynicism, anxiety, irritability, and apathy (Upton). While not everyone in the medical field feels compassion fatigue, the likelihood of healthcare workers experiencing it is higher given the nature of their job and its responsibilities, which is why a large body of research exists around compassion fatigue in this specific group.

Re-defining compassion fatigue

But what about the rest of us? The definition of compassion fatigue shifts once we move beyond a medical standpoint. You don't need a diagnosis to experience compassion fatigue, and it isn't a permanent state of being.

Even if you don't tick every box on that list of physical and mental symptoms, even if you might not be formally diagnosed with secondary trauma disorder, even if you're not in a

profession that is prone to it, it's likely that you have experienced or are experiencing compassion fatigue. Beyond that list of symptoms that can be used for a diagnosis, **I define compassion fatigue – the kind that impacts people like me, (I assume) you, your next-door neighbor – as a mental burnout caused by overexposure to tragic or upsetting news that can lead to apathy, exhaustion, and/or feeling overwhelmed.**

In simplest terms: so much is happening everywhere all the time that dedicating a specific emotional response to every news story is nearly impossible, and this is only exacerbated by the existence of our news technology, which enables us to tune in all day, every day.

Are we asking to hear bad news?

For those of us who don't work in the medical field, we may develop compassion fatigue as a result of an expectation – either societal or personal – to be informed of and to care about current events and politics. We may feel as though we are responsible for paying attention so that we can, for instance, make informed voting decisions or discuss world news with our friends and family.

Fulfilling this responsibility can be difficult when it feels like all that we see is bad news. Shootings, deaths, injustices, and illnesses are reported almost every day, and while it can become exhausting to hear about tragedy after tragedy, there is evidence that suggests that we as consumers engage more with negative than with positive stories. Referred to as **negativity bias, this assumes that, for viewers, "negative tone is a defining feature of news; good news, in contrast, is nearly synonymous with the absence of news"** (Soroka, et al). Although this is not true for everyone, research into negativity bias suggests that most people tend to unintentionally fall into this preference.

Why negativity bias matters

One possible explanation for this "widespread preference for negative information" is the fact that it tends to warn people of danger that might threaten them in some way. Therefore, consumers pay closer attention to these stories so that they can prepare for disaster. "It can be much riskier," points out Amina Khan, author of "Why does so much news seem negative," which summarizes key points of research into this bias, "to ignore negative information (a storm is coming) than good news (a dog rescued a boy from a tree)."

However, negativity bias is not caused by journalists conspiring to make us all unhappy with upsetting stories. Rather, the news functions in response to the content audiences are most likely to engage with (Khan). As a result, news outlets will publish more negative stories because they know that their audience is likelier to click on those articles. But this doesn't mean that the media is solely responsible for our compassion fatigue. Part of the problem is the ubiquity of technology and the constant access it gives us to the news.

So technology is the problem?

In a way, yes. But it's not entirely that simple.

How we get news

"We have never been more aware of the appalling events that occur around the world every day," proclaims the tagline for Elisa Gabbert's "Is compassion fatigue inevitable in an age of 24-hour news?" Judging by the fact that "65% of adults now use social networking sites," which is "a nearly tenfold jump in the past decade," and that "much of the public's news consumption occurs on these digital platforms," we can see how information has become increasingly accessible with recent technology. This is also shown in a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center, which found that "about two-thirds of Americans feel worn out by the amount of news there is, while far fewer say they like the amount of news they are getting" (Gottfried).

Across generational lines, this seems to remain true. I interviewed three people in a small investigation of my own, **one Baby Boomer (Marie, 56), one Millennial (Kate, 25) and one Gen Z (Jane, 19)**. I was interested in examining the ways different age groups interact with news technology, and if the concept of compassion fatigue was something they saw in their own lives, either in themselves or in their peers.

The word "overwhelmed" came up in every conversation independently. Despite each person having unique interactions with news technology in terms of medium and how often they use it**, all three voiced that 1) they notice that negative events are most often reported and 2) that this stream of negative news quickly becomes tiring.**

My initial theory was that older generations engaged with news less, and therefore were less likely to experience compassion fatigue in comparison to younger generations. When I spoke to Marie, I found that she engages with news media in a very deliberate way. She reads the

paper in the morning, checks social media at lunchtime, occasionally turns on the local news in the evening. The time she spends reading or watching the news is purposefully allotted, "unless something catastrophic happens," she said. "I'm not constantly checking. All this instant news is not good for people."

Kate and Jane, conversely, both said that they engage with the news every time they pick up their phones – that is, very often. They find news on their timelines in their friends' and peers' posts, comments, and retweets, whether they log on intending to catch up on current events or not.

However, while Kate gets headline notifications sent to her home screen and a daily e-newsletter called *Morning Brew*, Jane doesn't have news apps installed on her phone, nor does she follow news accounts on social media. All of the information she reads is either from seeing what her friends are posting, or from checking the Trending section on Twitter. In comparison to Marie, both Jane and Kate demonstrated that they are more likely to engage with news throughout their day, whether deliberately or not.

"I can only take so much"

Although all three of the women I interviewed interact with news in different ways, I found many similarities in their discussions of the ways the immediacy, constancy, and negativity of the news affects them. While all claimed that they are less likely to pay close attention to events that don't impact them personally, each voiced that they still feel an obligation to stay informed regardless.

"I can't watch the news for too long or I get really sad. It's draining to watch even for ten minutes," Jane explained.

"To a certain extent, it's too much, and it's all negative. It can get exhausting," Kate pointed out.

"I can only take so much," Marie said. "I try to keep up, but it feels like every time I pick up my phone there's a new shooting or something, and it gets to be too much. I have to step away a lot, especially when there's not much I can do."

At first, I thought that because older generations interact with news differently than younger, they would be less likely to experience compassion fatigue. This did not seem to be the case here, as all three of them voiced that they felt overwhelmed regardless of how often they checked for updates. Although, it is important to note that we had these conversations in March

2020, during the COVID-19 outbreak in which most Americans likely consumed more news than usual because of how the pandemic directly impacted them.

A new and challenging phenomenon

Draining. Too much. Exhausting. Overwhelming. These are fitting descriptions of our current news climate, no matter how you choose to stay informed. While this is by no means a new phenomenon, it has become more common in recent years.

In *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death,* Susan Moeller argues that "Americans seem to have an appetite for only one crisis at a time" (11). When her book was published in 1999, news outreach was limited to newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts. Because of this, televised news was presented in "staccato bursts, hyped and wired to feed your addiction in 15-second briefs" (10). Even in the late 90s, the standard of news consumption was designed to inform viewers of many stories in a short amount of time, similar to our experiences today – except now, it feels nonstop.

The notable change is that of accessibility. The news of the early 2000s had to be accessed in a certain place (in front of a TV, near a radio, somewhere you're able to unfold a newspaper). However, a cell phone is a pocket-sized, portable deliverer of information. As Alexandra Pattillo puts it in "Too much bad news can make you sick," "The world has always been stressful, but experiencing acute events occurring thousands of miles away is a new and challenging phenomenon." We use our phones for everything, and even in our innocent social media browsing we find that current events pervade our conversations. Discussing the news isn't innately harmful, but it can become taxing if having access to large amounts of bad news causes you to feel overwhelmed or fatigued.

How this can affect you

The cost of caring

Most of us can't have it both ways – we can't be up to speed about everything while also avoiding compassion fatigue. The only way to keep up is to continue to pay attention, no matter the cost. But that's the problem: there *are* costs, both mental and physical.

Individuals may react differently to an overload of negative information. A common response is anxiety. "Every time we experience or hear about a traumatic event, we go into stress

mode...**our physiology is triggered to release stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline**," explains Susanne Babbel, a trauma recovery psychotherapist (Pattillo). These hormones can impact both the mind and the body, and the more stressful events we see, the likelier we are to notice these symptoms.

An abundance of negative news like the kind that exists in our media can cause us to feel stressed and lead to compassion fatigue. A 1997 study conducted by Psychology Today sought to test how different kinds of stories can elicit a variety of emotional responses by showing one group a collection of positive stories, one group neutral stories, and another an assortment of negative ones. **The results showed that "those who watched the negative news bulletin reported being significantly more anxious and sadder" than individuals in the other groups**, and that they were "more likely to catastrophize [to think about a worry so persistently that you begin to make it worse than it is in reality] their worry" (Davey). Due to the prevalence of negativity bias, this means that news consumers are more likely to experience anxiety, sadness, and/or to catastrophize.

The physical effects of compassion fatigue...

Compassion fatigue can cause stress that has adverse effects on one's physical health. When we consistently experience stress from any source, "our adrenal glands can become fatigued, [which] can lead to [tiredness], lack of restful sleep, anxiety and depression," among other symptoms. While acute stress is not usually a life-threatening condition on its own, "the long-term effects of stressors can damage health," particularly in older or previously unhealthy people.

Stress can manifest in many different signs and symptoms, but you might notice "headaches, muscle tension or pain, stomach problems, and sleep issues" (Pattillo). **Stress-inducing news can trigger the limbic system, the areas of your brain responsible for dealing with memory and emotion.**

Constant stressors can also cause your adrenal glands to **produce more cortisol**, which increases blood pressure and heart rate. This can eventually "deregulate your immune system and inhibit the release of growth hormones" so that your body feels as though it is "in a state of constant stress." You might want to avoid this for the simple reason that you don't like being anxious, **but it can also lead to chronic stress**, which has been linked with "impaired digestion; lack of cell, hair, or bone growth; nervousness; and susceptibility to infections" (Dobelli).

Excessive production of cortisol and other stress-induced hormones have been linked to more serious health issues such as rheumatoid arthritis and cardiovascular diseases (Heid).

...and the mental effects

While anxiety is a common response to compassion fatigue, many also experience apathy. Although anxiety and apathy might seem like complete opposites, some people experience both at different times.

Apathy, explained by psychologist Leon Seltzer as "an attitude of indifference, unconcern, unresponsiveness, and dispassion," in the context of compassion fatigue is **the idea that a person will stop caring about tragedies and disasters because they see so many in quick succession**. For instance, with the high rate of gun violence that occurs in America – "more mass shootings than days in the year" in 2019 (Silverstein) – you might think that the response to this would be stress, if not outrage.

But because the American population has become accustomed to seeing mass shootings reported, "the US media and public seem to have collectively decided that mass murder [has] become so commonplace that it [is] beyond elimination and [can] only be ignored" (Najjar). Apathy generally arrives after people grow exhausted of constant stress and adopt an attitude of unconcern so that they can continue functioning without ceaseless anxiety.

A similar concept is **disaster fatigue, which is marked by a lack of concern or "diminished sense of urgency about [a] crisis at hand."** This is most often shown in lower numbers of "potential donors or volunteers to address the problem" when a disaster is frequently in the news or covered for an extended period of time (Pattillo).

When crises and impending disasters seem to be all the news is comprised of, it makes sense if you want to shut it all out. Compassion fatigue can lead people to feel apathetic: if crises are happening all over the world, out of our control, what can *we* do to fix them? Why bother paying attention when we can't personally fix everything?

Why news addiction is possible

Often, it's the people who continue to pay attention despite anxiety or apathy who show symptoms of news addiction. Despite the fact that **current events-induced stress is commonly reported in people of all ages** and that "more than half of Americans say the news causes them stress...**one in ten adults checks the news every hour**, and **20% of Americans report**

‘constantly’ monitoring their social media feeds.” To the degree that social media keeps us updated, it’s not a far stretch to assume that constant monitoring of social media feeds leads to “exposure to the latest news headlines” (Heid), whether we seek them out or happen upon them in our mindless Facebook browsing.

News, according to Rolf Dobelli in “News is bad for you,” can likewise function like a drug. In his words, “as stories develop, we want to know how they continue.” The same way you feel the need to binge-watch your favorite TV show, you might feel compelled to check your social media feed more often, or to keep the news on as a constant background noise to make sure you’re not missing out on anything or to find updates about an existing narrative (Dobelli). This compulsion is indicative of news addiction, the feeling that if you’re not watching or listening to updates at all times, you’re disregarding crucial information.

Another contributor to the addictive nature of news is the fact that TV broadcasts are usually dramatized, from the intense music that signals the start of the program to the way hosts utilize theatrics, knowing when the right time to pause is, teasing what’s up next after the commercial break. These strategies make us more likely to watch because they follow the attention-catching format of the episodic television shows that we so often become invested in.

Similarly, “news shows are designed to create worry and generally offer no solutions so we get hooked, waiting for an answer or a good outcome” that might never arrive (Kimmel). **News addiction can happen for stories that don’t affect you**, particularly if they’re intriguing or exaggerated; **or for the ones that do**, if you’re searching for information about how to prepare for an event such as a natural disaster or pandemic.

We’re not doomed. Here’s what you can do.

A society under this constant stress doesn’t seem like a positive place to be. As we spend more time on the Internet, we spend more time immersed in the news, whether we intend to or not. With the likelihood of negative news assuming a large part of the ‘front page’ of your chosen medium, this stress is more likely to impact all of us than ever.

We can’t stop bad things from happening. We can’t go out and singlehandedly end wars, or heal illnesses, or solve political problems. So what *can* we do?

Know when to step away.

On his weekly Netflix show *Patriot Act*, comedian Hasan Minhaj blends comedy with news; each episode covers a recent topic, complete with research, interviews, and a lot of jokes. But despite the show's comedic nature, it can still become overwhelming to tune in every week and learn about subjects that we might not even know are happening, like the harmful impacts of fast fashion on the environment, the Indian elections, or how problematic cruises are.

In the last episode of 2019 ("How America Is Causing Global Obesity"), Minhaj discussed compassion fatigue and what we can do to help ourselves:

> "This is why we're all going crazy. Don't you feel this? Look, all these issues matter. But we can't possibly care about all of them all the time. There's even a word for it...compassion fatigue. It's like we have 50 tabs open in our mental browsers. And we're about to crash. Something's got to change.
> So this is what I'm pitching: for 2020, give yourself a break. Just pick a couple things to not care about, for your sanity. I'm not saying shut down your browser. Just close a couple tabs.
> It's 2020 – we gotta focus. Now, I know it's weird, hearing this from the show that tells you to care about something new every week. And we're not going to stop doing that, but I also understand if you got to take a breather. That's why, after you're done with this episode, you have every right to close a tab in your brain. Especially if it helps you double down on the issues that really matter to you."

This advice to "close some tabs" is an effective way to stay updated without cutting yourself off completely. When you become overwhelmed, it can be easy to want to go cold turkey, delete the news app from your phone, skip over the nightly broadcast while you're browsing TV channels. But you don't have to completely ignore everything for the sake of your sanity.

Engage in self-compassion

Closing some of those tabs in your head and briefly stepping away from the news, especially when it has become upsetting or overwhelming, is one way to engage in **self-compassion**, which Katherine Upton believes to be an effective solution in combatting compassion fatigue.

Upton defines self-compassion as "compassion directed inward, relating to oneself as the object of concern and care at a time of personal suffering." Essentially, **rather than dedicating your compassion to an external source, such as a tragedy or disaster, turn that compassion toward yourself** when you recognize that your emotional capacity is being overexerted.

Self-compassion looks different for everyone. Some psychologists recommend meditation or mindful thinking. Others say you should take five minutes to do something that brings you joy, or to talk with a loved one. Whatever you do to relax after a stressful week might be your most effective method of self-compassion.

Studies have shown that self-compassion is "associated with fewer psychological symptoms, such as mood and anxiety disorders, and associated with positive psychological characteristics, such as emotional intelligence, life satisfaction and wellbeing**." Upton's study discovered a negative correlation between self-compassion and compassion fatigue**, meaning that the observed nurses who spent time focusing on self-compassion were less likely to experience symptoms of compassion fatigue.

Limit your consumption

If, for any reason, you can't step away from the news (or if you have and found it ineffective because you had to start paying attention again) instead of fully removing yourself from all news content, it might be helpful to **limit your daily amount of consumption**. Here are some things you can try:

- Turn off headline notifications on your phone, and only open the news app at a certain time.
- Turn on the news channel for half an hour, then flip to something else. You can stay informed without either cutting yourself off completely or paying nonstop attention.
- Limit how much time you spend on social media, especially if the people you follow tend to discuss current events.

Look for good news

It's out there, even if you have to take an active role in finding it. Check out these daily compilations of recent happy stories if you need a break from the negative news you're more likely to see in the regular headlines:

- https://www.today.com/news/good-news

- https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/
- https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/good-news

We shouldn't feel condemned to compassion fatigue. **Instead, we can change the way we interact with the technology that brings us news and take an active role in how we consume it** by knowing when it's time to, as Hasan Minhaj puts it, close some of our tabs and seek out more positive news.

Compassion fatigue is not inevitable

It would be an impossible feat for any one person to hope to stay informed of everything, everywhere, all the time, and to respond with a proportionate amount of outrage or sadness or happiness. Our constant access to news technology lets us think that maybe we can. It's this mentality that leads to compassion fatigue, to anxiety and apathy, because we simply don't have the capacity for that.

Does this mean compassion is a finite resource? I don't think so. In "Can You Run Out of Empathy?" C. Daryl Cameron reasons that "empathy isn't a non-renewable resource like oil...[it's] like wind or solar power, renewable and sustainable." By this argument, **we can't run out of compassion, but it can become depleted or eroded**. If we make efforts to renew our compassion, such as seeking out positive news or taking breaks when we feel overwhelmed, we will be able to recharge it.

As Cameron puts it, "We make active choices to push empathy to the side, and this is what seems to account for the supposed limits of empathy." If we understand how to make active choices to allow our exhausted senses of compassion to heal, we come closer to resisting the damage caused by negative news that constantly demands our empathy.

If you are not notified of the good things happening in your neighborhood, in your city, in your country, in our world, seek them out. **We are not doomed to be victims of compassion fatigue**, and the first changes start within ourselves.

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