

DOOMSCROLLING

We've all done it: Gotten into bed, fully intending to go straight to sleep, before deciding to check our phones one last time, and becoming lost in the seemingly endless carousel of depressing information doing the rounds on social media.

In other words, we've all been victims of doomscrolling.

What is doomscrolling?

According to Merriam-Webster, "Doomscrolling and doomsurfing are new terms referring to the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing." It is by no means a brand new phenomenon, but it appears to have become increasingly prevalent during the pandemic, when depressing news stories are in more abundant supply than ever before.

But why do so many of us engage in a behavior that so clearly has a negative impact on our mood and wider emotional wellbeing? Dr. Paul L. Hokemeyer, an addictions specialist and author of *Fragile Power: Why Having Everything Is Never Enough*, believes that doomscrolling includes many of the same hallmarks as other forms of digital addiction.

"It seems illogical on that people would consume massive amounts of negative media to help them deal with feeling overloaded by all the negativity swirling in the world, but such is the nature of an addictive disorder," he says. "And doomscrolling is very much an addictive disorder. It comes into being, not through logic but through primal drives that originate in the most primitive part of our brain known as our limbic system."

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"A person who doomscrolls found at some point in the trajectory of their disorder that searching online for information on disturbing events gave them comfort," Hokemeyer continues. "It gave them as sense of control over their lives and re-engaged their intellect. But while they thought they were being soothed by facts, what they were really doing was hyperactivating their emotional reactivity. In short order, the process of doomscrolling overtook them and they got lost in the cycle of angst, momentary relief from the angst and then a deeper more intense sense of angst from being out of control in an unsafe and catastrophic and dangerous world."

By contrast, psychiatrist Dr. Drew Ramsey sees a potential value in doomscrolling — with some important caveats.

"Doomscrolling allows us to test and confirm our anxiety," he says. "We have spent so much time in pandemic tamping down our fears and trying to function. As we scroll through it confirms our fears and also exposes us. I see it as an anxiety, terror, and sadness workout. I doomscroll and see these awful things, but it doesn't destroy me and gives us the experience of containing and coping."

How do I stop doomscrolling?

There are ways to break out of these negative habits, and it starts with acknowledging those existing patterns of behavior and being cognizant of their connection to your feelings of hopelessness.

"Like other behavioral addictions, doomscrolling is characterized by unsuccessful attempts to quit, relapse back into the behavior after attempts to abstain are made and a sense of being controlled by the behavior," says Hokemeyer. "Relief comes from recognizing the emotional triggers that precedes doomscrolling and identifying the ritualistic behaviors surrounding their compulsive media use. Successful recovery depends on creating reparative interventions at both points of in this addictive cycle."

In other words, people must recognize when they are falling into those depths of despair, and cultivate healthier ways of coping. Hokemeyer recommends "checking their cognitive distortions, ideally with another human being," as well as engaging in some sort of physical exercise or mindful technique, like counting from one to ten as many times as needed to regain their emotional equilibrium.

"They also must identify the rituals surrounding their use and actively alter them," he says. This can mean literally removing the temptation to doomscroll: "So in the beginning of their recovery process, the person might have to give their mobile devices to a trusted person to keep them from engaging with them, limit their online use to an hour a day, or physically move their computer to an inconvenient part of their home."

Similarly, Ramsey advises mindful moderation when it comes to managing our screentime. "I make sure and dose my doomscrolling just like my other treatments for keeping my mental fitness up," he says. "I engage in it daily for a set amount of time. I don't let it interrupt my sleep (my phone goes to bed before I do). I make sure that it serves its purpose, meaning I am more informed and more functional in my life."

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