
Coping with Media-Induced Stress

In today's world the media is omnipresent. Exposure to news happens from the first cup of coffee until the late-night TV shows. Stories of violence, terrorism, natural disasters and more find their way into our lives at the push of a button or the click of a mouse. Combine that with human nature's drive to protect and provide for each other, and you have the perfect ingredients for a debilitating case of Media-Induced Stress.

News is Everywhere...All the Time

While there is debate about how many more traumatic incidents occur in the present versus the past, it is undeniable that the coverage of aftermath has escalated exponentially. It's hard to escape the non-stop coverage of tragic events. As a culture we are so "plugged-in" that according to a 2016 Statista study the average American spends 12+ hours per day engaged in the media in some way. Sources like TV, Radio, Mobile Devices, and Online sources (laptops and desktops) make it possible to follow events without stopping. With media engagement this high, it is understandable that a buildup of negativity and stress is inevitable. Learning to UNPLUG can be a step in the right direction to bring down our stress levels.

Tragedy is Everywhere...Or is It?

Hurricanes, tornadoes, terror attacks, train or plane crashes. The news makes it seem like these events happen everywhere, every day. The truth is that our media coverage is now global, not just local. Events across the globe are brought right to our front doors. However, although reports make us feel like these events are happening in our own lives, the truth is that much of what we see has a miniscule chance of happening to us directly. Taking time to assess the reality of the situation as it directly affects our lives can give us a more peaceful perspective.

Bad News Takes Its Toll

Empathy and fear are strong emotions that come out in force during disasters. Here are some signs to watch for after a traumatic event:

- Inability to "unplug" from media reports,
- Feelings of anxiety, depression, fear, anger,
- Feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty relaxing,
- Increased heart rate, blood pressure, sleeplessness, headaches, or stomach problems,
- Overeating, undereating, drinking alcohol or smoking (more than normal).

A Strategy for Tragedy

There are many things outside our control that we can't change. But what about those things within our control? Taking action when and where we can helps give us a better sense of stability and peace in times of turmoil. Here are some steps to help:

Avoid news or heavy-topic programs before bed – they can lead to disrupted or inadequate sleep.

Limit media consumption in times of hyped-up tragedy. Being informed is OK, being obsessed is not.

Talk with friends or family about feelings and issues. Engaging in real-world discussion often helps bring our focus back to what is real, immediate, and important.

Write it down. Getting thoughts out of our mind and onto paper helps us assess their validity while cleansing our thought process.

Try meditation techniques to quiet the mind. Sitting quietly, focused breathing, intentional thinking, and getting in touch with Nature are all activities that can help lower blood pressure and heart rate.

Take positive action. In times of tragedy the urge to help can be therapeutic. Find a local charity or organization that you can support in some way.

Engage your mind and body in other centering activities. Listen to or play music. Play with your children. Cook a healthy meal. Walk the dog. Channel the energy that would typically go toward stress and anxiety toward something positive and productive instead.

Realizing that we are not alone is a big step in battling media-induced trauma. PAS is available anytime, anywhere. PAS counselors are able to offer individual assistance in coping with stress and trauma.

In addition, disaster trauma is such a prominent issue that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has also set up a free support line for anyone in need. The Disaster Distress Helpline can be reached at (800) 985-5990 or on the web at www.samhsa.gov/findhelp.