MAX PARADOX

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Self-Help with a Sense of Humor ;)

How to Stop Living on Bad News



We have a problem. Relax. We can solve it—and have a laugh along the way.

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INTRO

It is 7:08 a.m. You have been awake for approximately four minutes, and already civilization is experiencing several emergencies. Somewhere, something is collapsing. Someone important has said something alarming. A headline informs you that a thing you had never heard of yesterday may now affect your finances, your health, your job, your democracy, your breakfast, or possibly all five. You open one article because you would like to be "informed." Twelve minutes later you are reading comments written by a man named PatriotWolf1947 who appears to have solved international relations from his bathroom.

Excellent. The day has begun.

You put the phone down. You make coffee. While the coffee is brewing, you check whether anything else has happened during the forty-seven seconds since your last inspection. Apparently yes. Something is "BREAKING." Something else is "DEVELOPING." A third event is described as "WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW," which is a bold claim because you did not know it existed until a rectangle in your hand shouted at you. By 7:30, you have consumed more crisis than most humans in history encountered before lunch, and you have not yet located your socks.

This is not stupidity. It is not weakness. It is not evidence that you secretly enjoy being miserable. Bad news is extremely good at getting attention, and modern technology has become extremely good at delivering attention-grabbing material repeatedly, instantly, and with the subtlety of someone firing a starter pistol inside your kitchen.

Your brain notices possible threats because noticing threats has generally been useful for human survival. A strange sound in the bushes deserved attention long before anyone invented the push notification. The problem is that your nervous system did not receive a software update explaining that the bushes are now global, open twenty-four hours a day, and funded partly by your inability to stop looking at them.

So you check.

You check because something important might have happened. You check because not knowing feels irresponsible. You check because everyone is talking about it. You check because the previous thing frightened you and, in a magnificent piece of human logic, you hope the next frightening thing will somehow make you feel better.

It rarely does.

Instead, you enter the familiar loop. Headline. Concern. Another headline. More concern. Search for reassurance. Find three additional reasons to worry. Read comments for clarification. Discover that strangers have apparently divided themselves into two groups: people certain the world ends Tuesday and people furious that anyone would wait until Tuesday. You close the app feeling worse than before, but also strangely unfinished.

Maybe one more update will settle things.

This is the trap at the center of living on bad news: information starts masquerading as control. If you know enough, perhaps you can relax. If you read enough perspectives, perhaps uncertainty will disappear. If you monitor the situation closely enough, perhaps you will be emotionally prepared for whatever comes next.

Unfortunately, the world has declined to provide a final page saying, “That’s everything. Nothing else will happen. You may now go make pasta.”

There is always another update.

And because there is always another update, the goal quietly changes. You are no longer checking the news to learn something useful. You are checking because checking has become the response to anxiety created partly by previous checking. The fire alarm has started pressing its own test button.

You may recognize the smaller ways this spills into ordinary life. You are watching a movie, but part of your attention is waiting for the phone. You are having dinner, and someone mentions a political event, an economic problem, a war, a crime, a new disease, an election, an environmental disaster, or something a celebrity has done for reasons that apparently require a twelve-person panel discussion. You feel the urge to look it up immediately. Five minutes later, dinner is still on the table, but mentally you are testifying before Congress.

Or perhaps you decide to take a break from the news.

A serious break.

No more doomscrolling tonight.

Then you open social media, where the news has dressed casually and is pretending not to be the news.

Now the crisis comes with dance videos.

Avoiding bad news completely is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. Important things happen. Some developments genuinely affect decisions you need to make. Responsible citizenship does require knowing more than the

current price of coffee and whether your favorite show has been renewed. The goal of this book is not to turn you into a peaceful woodland creature who learns about major world events three years later from a confused hiker.

The goal is to help you become informed without being continuously invaded.

There is a difference between knowing what is happening and emotionally living inside everything that is happening. There is a difference between checking the news and standing guard over the entire planet. There is a difference between useful awareness and treating every headline as if headquarters has personally requested your immediate psychological involvement.

Headquarters has made no such request.

Over the course of this book, you will learn how to decide what information actually deserves your attention, how to reduce compulsive checking without feeling irresponsibly disconnected, how to recognize when “staying informed” has turned into anxiety management, and how to build limits that survive contact with real life. You will learn what to do with breaking-news urges, upsetting stories, uncertainty, conversations with people who seem professionally alarmed, and those evenings when you accidentally read one disturbing headline and your brain immediately produces a twelve-part documentary called Everything Is Going Terribly.

The aim is not ignorance. It is proportion.

You should be able to learn that something bad happened without donating the rest of your afternoon to it unless there is genuinely something you need to do. You should be able to care about serious issues without carrying all of them simultaneously in your nervous system like an overloaded

grocery bag whose bottom is beginning to look suspicious. You should be able to say, “Yes, this matters,” and also, “No, I do not need seventeen updates before bed.”

That may sound obvious.

So does “stop checking your phone.”

Civilization continues to struggle.

The practical shift begins when you stop asking, “How do I make the news less bad?” You cannot. News organizations will not consult your stress level before publishing tomorrow. Politicians will continue speaking. Markets will move. Weather will happen aggressively in several places at once. The internet will find fresh reasons for people to type in capital letters.

A better question is: “How much access does all of this get to me?”

That is something you can change.

You can choose when information enters your day. You can distinguish information that requires action from information that merely produces agitation. You can stop using endless updates as a substitute for certainty. You can create enough distance to think clearly again without becoming uninformed, careless, or the person at lunch who says, “Wait, there was an election?”

Most importantly, you can reclaim ordinary moments from the feeling that somewhere, something terrible is happening and you should probably be reading about it.

Because somewhere, something terrible probably is happening.

Somewhere, something wonderful is happening too.

And somewhere very close to you, your coffee is getting cold while you read a live blog that has not contained genuinely new information for twenty-three minutes.

We should probably start there.

Chapter 1 - Your Brain Has Mistaken the News for a Fire Alarm

You are brushing your teeth when the notification appears.

“MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS EXPECTED.”

Expected where? Concerning what? By whom? Apparently these details are available only after you tap, which you do while still holding the toothbrush because adulthood has reached a point where international events are routinely investigated with mint foam on your chin.

The article is serious. You read it. Then you read another because the first article mentions something you do not fully understand. That article contains a link to yesterday’s development, so you open that too. Soon you have six browser tabs, a rapidly cooling cup of coffee, and a working knowledge of a situation occurring four thousand miles away that you can neither influence nor accurately explain.

Your heart rate, however, is participating enthusiastically.

This is one of the first things to understand about news anxiety: your brain does not calmly classify every piece of information according to practical relevance. It does not receive a headline and say, “Interesting. Low immediate personal impact. File under General Awareness and continue brushing.”

That would be useful.

Instead, threatening information is designed by nature to get priority. For most of human history, this made excellent sense. If someone shouted that there was a fire, a predator, an invading group, or Cousin Greg doing something

experimental with mushrooms, immediate attention was valuable.

Your ancestors survived partly because they were bad at saying, “I’ll look into that later.”

The modern problem is that your threat-detection system now has a high-speed internet connection.

A headline about war, economic instability, crime, disease, artificial intelligence, climate, elections, layoffs, shortages, cyberattacks, or some new thing that may destroy society before Thursday can create a genuine stress response even when no immediate action is required from you. Your brain detects uncertainty plus possible danger and decides that increased attention would be prudent.

So you pay attention.

Then you keep paying attention because the story is unresolved.

This matters because the human mind likes completed information. “Building collapsed; here is what happened; situation resolved” is psychologically easier than “Officials are investigating; more details expected.”

Modern news is full of the second kind.

The story is developing.

Results are pending.

Markets are reacting.

Officials are concerned.

Experts disagree.

Negotiations continue.

More information will follow.