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What's a permacrisis, and its impact on our mental health?

There seems to have been nothing but bad news for the last few years, with constant reports of viruses, wars, and political misbehaving. Lurching from one crisis to another has now got its own new name 'permacrisis', but how does this never-ending stream of negative news affect us?

Collins Dictionary declared permacrisis as the 2022 word of the year. It defines this as: 'living through a period of war, inflation, and political instability,' and: 'an extended period of instability and insecurity.'

Over the last few years the UK, and the world, has gone from Brexit to COVID and numerous lockdowns; to conflict in Ukraine, the cost of living/[fuel crisis](#), strikes and protests, and then three prime ministers in just three months over 2022. These are played out constantly on 24-hour news channels, are topics for discussion on the family-friendly daytime TV favourites, and are even carried around with us in our mobile phones giving us access to endless social media and alerts

The state of the world feels endlessly gloomy, and impossible to escape from the constant negativity about national and global events. This can increase people's levels of anxiety, which can have serious impact on not our mental and physical health. The World Health Organization (WHO) found the COVID pandemic alone triggered a 25% increase in the occurrence of anxiety and depression worldwide¹. Research published in Sage Journals found that during the UK's first lockdown week in March 2020, an unprecedented 99% of online users accessed news at least once a day. However, after that initial steep surge, our demand for news fell with many, especially women and younger people, choosing to avoid it as much as possible².

How does a permacrisis affect us?

When we hear negative news, our bodies may react by releasing our stress hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline says Dr Marianne Trent, clinical psychologist and founder of Good Thinking Psychological Services: "This primes us to be able to react to save ourselves with fight, flight or appease. If those strategies aren't available to us, we might respond with dissociation too. When we get used to hearing pessimistic information it can also prime us to have less optimistic expectations for events."

Constant bad news can also trigger anxiety, which can be caused by overusing our imagination. "Bad news only encourages this over-thinking," says Counselling Directory member [Keri Hartwright](#): "It highlights people's fears and can set someone off on a worry circuit. The news is repeated so regularly throughout the day, on a variety of channels, it can be hard to escape."

How do we live with a permacrisis?

The Sage study, also highlighted research which found that shunning daily broadcasts and updates had a slight positive effect on mental well-being. But to strike the right balance between positive and negative news, it is helpful to remind yourself it is OK to focus on your own life and the things that you can control. Trent says: "By choosing not to 'doom scroll' you are not saying you don't care about negative events which might be happening."

Trent suggests that if you feel you have to check news sites, set a timer for a fixed period, such as seven minutes, and only use this time when you have already completed some tasks from your day's job list.

Can we protect children from the permacrisis news?

Hartwright says children only need to know information that is relevant to their level of knowledge. She says: "Programmes like Newsround are a good way for them to be informed, that is appropriate but not too scary. Not sharing news or keeping things from children can result in more distress. Especially if they can sense that their parent or parents are concerned about something."

If you need to share some difficult news, Hartwright says do it in a factual, simple way that invites questions from the child. "Talking something through, however difficult, will often help to reduce their worries and possibly improve tricky behaviour if you have noticed it. Once you have opened up the discussion, be prepared for questions that may arise at all manner of different times."

Take a break and look for positive news

Ultimately, humans don't live in a vacuum, and being aware of current affairs is good for forming and maintaining connections with people, particularly after experiencing social isolation through lockdowns.

But, says Trent: "If you find that you are regularly becoming emotionally derailed by the content you see online then you might find it helpful to have a mindful disconnect from news sites. "This can be incredibly empowering, and many people find that after a day or so they realise that they are feeling brighter and not missing the activity. The last few years have thrown up challenges unlike those most of us have experienced before and it can help to remember there are positive stories out there. These are highlighted on many news sites, such as [Positive News](#) or [the Happy Newspaper](#). But always remember, everything in moderation.

Further reading

1. [World Health Organization: COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.](#)
2. [Sage Journals: The up-down-up pandemic news experience: A mixed-method approach to its negative and positive effects on psychological.](#)

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