

Too Much Bad News: a Media/Information Fast

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense.

—Gertrude Stein

Take a moment to think about how much information you process each day. We are bombarded with information all the time, be it through web searches, the seemingly inescapable buzzing and beeping of text messages and cell phones, bottomless email inboxes, or the world's ubiquitous televisions. With the development of new technology has come a new list of pathologies. For instance, social network site addiction has been discussed in recent literature,¹ as have Internet addiction,² Internet sex addiction,³ and Internet gaming disorder.⁴

Healthy surroundings include not only our physical environment, but our emotional context as well. One way to enhance health is simply to take periods of time away from information and, more specifically, away from negative information. What would happen if you simply “pulled the plug” on all the media sources in your life, even if just for a short time? (If you are feeling uncomfortable when considering doing this, it is worth reflecting on why that discomfort is arising.)

A media/information fast involves phasing out one or all forms of media for a designated period of time. It can be done with a group of friends or colleagues to provide additional support. While it has not been extensively studied to date, many people find that this approach reduces stress, makes them more efficient, and allows them to focus better. This may be especially important as people are forced to shelter at home and are bombarded by negative political and pandemic-related information on a regular basis.

It involves 5 steps, which you can easily discuss with patients during a Whole Health encounter:

1. Keep a media journal.

It works just like a food diary or a symptom diary. Determine how long you spend on media during the course of one typical day. You may want to compare weekend days and weekdays.

2. Determine how long your fast will be.

Start gently; some people find it quite difficult to be “unplugged” even for 30 minutes. Start by taking a break for one quarter of the time you logged when you followed step 1, and then build up gradually.

3. Determine what you will be eliminating during the fasts.

You are encouraged to eliminate all of the following for your chosen period of time, along with anything else you think would be helpful to remove:

- Any source of “news,” including radio, television, newspapers, etc.
- Internet
- Television
- Radio
- Movies (screen, DVD, online, etc.)
- Music (Opinions vary more on this one; there is a difference between listening to relaxing music and listening to a radio station frequently interrupted by advertisements.)
- Books (Again, it depends on the content. Magazines are probably least optimal. Assess whether or not reading is for enjoyment, escapism, another way of getting information, or serves some other purpose.)

4. Take mindful awareness moments.

As you do the fast, periodically reflect on the experience. Consider the following:

- How do you feel right at this moment? Is being away from sources of information stressful, relaxing, or some combination of the two? Some people find that they experience multiple emotions during a fast.
- What is your relationship to information, and why do you think your relationship is like that? Does it empower you? Distract you? Do you ever experience attention fragmentation, when your attention is pulled in so many directions that it is not possible to complete any one given task?
- How is your focus during the fast? Do you notice anything different, for better or worse?

5. Consider the next steps once your fast is completed.

- Is it possible to gather information from fewer sources, or to designate a time limit for how much time you spend with various media each day? Would that be helpful?
- What would happen if you read and responded to email at just one designated time each day?

After you are finished, try to resist telling everyone about your fast on Facebook!

Author(s)

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References

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