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The Centre for Studies on Human Stress is dedicated to improving the physical and mental health of individuals by empowering them with scientifically grounded information about the effects of stress on the brain and body



The media and stress

Editorial

Marie-France Marin, Ph.D.

Sonia Lupien, Ph.D., Director of the Centre for Studies on Human Stress

Dear readers,

It is with great pleasure that we present you with the Mammoth Magazine's newest issue on stress and the media.

But where did we get this idea from? It is difficult to ignore the fact that we're living in a very unique time in life. For a year now, we have had to adapt our daily life by changing several habits. Forget entering a shop without wearing a mask and disinfecting our hands – much less having a party at home and welcoming our guests with a hug. If anything, many of us now have a bigger bubble than before, though careful of people who do not live under the same roof as us and who would try to get too close.

The media has a key role in keeping us informed. Every day, the media provides us with an abundance of information. Thanks to the media, we can learn more about the virus, its dangerousness and the behaviours to adopt to protect ourselves from it. In and of itself, we're fortunate to live through a pandemic at a time where the media is omnipresent. In the same vein, we're lucky (in a

way) to have technology at our disposal to be able to communicate with our loved ones – it's a way to stay connected, at least partially. However, as there are always two sides to a coin...can constant exposure to mostly negative news also have negative effects? And what about journalists who have to cover these difficult events? Do the media use their platform to scare us or to influence our beliefs and behaviours? These questions motivated our choice to dedicate an issue of the Mammoth Magazine to the subject of stress associated with media.

We put together several texts that will inform you on the subject. First, Audrey-Ann Journault and Laurence Dumont have put their artistic talents to work to present you with a short comic strip to remind you how the brain reacts to a threat. In parallel, they explain how the brain reacts to a threat perceived in the media (for example, through your screen). Afterward, Sandrine Charbonneau and Rebecca Cernik give us a historical overview of the media over time. Charlotte Longpré wrote an article on the impact of negative and positive news on our

mood, memory and stress. You'll see that few studies have been done on good news! The latter is the subject of the next article that discusses constructive journalism. In this text, Maryse Arcand and Alexe Bilodeau-Houle detail their interview with Mr. Laurent Imbault, who is at the origin of Quebec's first good news media source. Thereafter, Clémence Peyrot, Félix Duplessis-Marcotte and Laurence Dumont offer us a completely different and under-explored point of view...namely, the perspective of

journalists. Do these individuals who have to cover highly emotional events, even sometimes traumatic, come out alright? Their text presents scientific information on the subject and the point of view of three journalists interviewed for the occasion. The following two articles, co-written by Félix Duplessis-Marcotte and Raphaël Lapointe, explain how the messages conveyed by the media can contribute to the development of our fears, influence our perceptions and in some cases, even

change our behaviours. Finally, Justine Fortin discusses the role of social media and technology in our ability to stay connected during the pandemic.

We enjoyed exploring these subjects for you. We're convinced that you'll learn a lot from these interesting articles. We wish you a good read. 📖

Mission Brain

Audrey-Ann Journault, *Doctoral student in psychology, Centre for Studies on Human Stress, University of Montreal*

Laurence Dumont, Ph.D., *post-doctoral fellow at the Centre for Studies on Human Stress, University of Montreal*

Our brain detects threats on a full-time basis. Whether the threat is imminent, distant, real, imagined, absolute or relative...our brain processes it all the same way! Reading bad news in the media rarely puts our life at risk but the brain still instructs our body to produce a stress response. If we don't use the hormones and energy that our stress response elicits, they'll stay in our body's circulation and will even go up to affect our brain. This can lead to negative effects on mental and physical health.



VS



The media: from yesterday to today

Sandrine Charbonneau, Master's student in psychology, Centre for Studies on Human Stress, University of Montreal
Rebecca Cernik, Master's student in biomedical sciences, Centre for Studies on Human Stress, University of Montreal



In today's society, the media are omnipresent. Unless we live on a desert island far from civilization and without a Wi-Fi network, we are constantly bombarded with information. The media are deeply rooted in our daily lives, mainly because they respond to an essential human need: to be informed and understand the world. This is why many people turn on their television every morning to listen to the news, read the newspapers or check their Facebook feed.

The beginning of media history

For several decades, researchers have been trying to trace the history of different media. It is difficult to identify an exact start date as the history of media is a vast domain that overlaps with communication, politics and marketing. However, historians are unanimous on one thing, namely that the media has greatly evolved since its creation.

The arrival of digital technology seems to have brought about the most significant changes in media history. Before the 1960s, individuals were mainly informed through traditional media such as print, radio and television. News production required a long series of steps and news was shared with the public only several days later. With the creation of the

computer and the Internet, information processing was greatly accelerated. This change completely revolutionized traditional media and their creation process. Now, radio and television report events instantly and continuously. The public is informed up-to-the-minute! Print media can also publish news quickly thanks to word processing software and image banks on the Internet.

The arrival of social networks

Moreover, as technology is a field in constant progression, the world of media is in a state of continuous metamorphosis. As computers become increasingly powerful and sophisticated, the media becomes more efficient as information

is published more easily and quickly. This high-speed information sharing has exacerbated a long-standing human need to feel connected to others. Thus, in the 2000s, social networks were created to allow individuals to stay in touch with their friends and expand their social network. Easy to use, these platforms allow individuals to maintain friendships through online interactions and are gaining instant and growing popularity. In 2017, a survey amongst the Canadian population revealed that 84% of Canadians have a Facebook profile and 79% of users visit the platform each day.

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Beyond the information

The arrival of social networks marks a real turning point in media history since now, anyone can publish content. Therefore, it is no longer an act reserved for journalists. The media has become a participatory platform in which the average person can add, share and comment information.

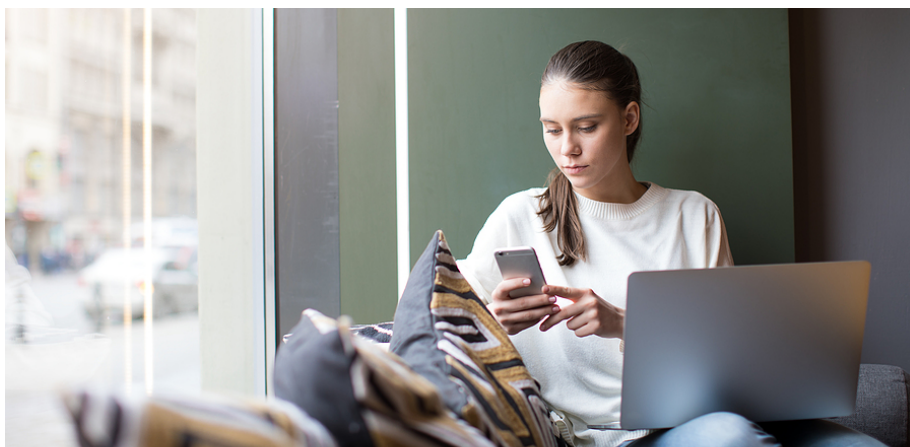
As the success of a social network depends on the number of users on the platform, today's media are closely linked to the domains of economics and marketing. From data shared by users (pages liked, videos shared, public personalities followed, etc.), companies can now build a consumer profile and adapt advertisements according to individual preferences. That's why if you decide to do a spontaneous search one night to plan your post-pandemic trip to Bora-Bora, you'll be sure to see travel agency ads, discounts for activities and even swimsuit promotions when scrolling through your news feed the next day! In short, in today's era, the media are no longer used solely to inform the population but also to influence it.

Staying informed...but at what cost?

In recent years, researchers have conducted studies that show that the media can influence people. Here are a few examples:

In 2008, researchers discovered that the frequency of a topic covered in the media can impact the perception of the level of importance of that topic. Specifically, they looked at the relationship between media exposure of certain diseases (how much certain diseases made the headlines) and the perception of the severity of these diseases (how dangerous these diseases are perceived to be). Results show that young adults tended to perceive diseases that appear more frequently in the media as more serious. Conversely, diseases that received less media attention were

In particular, one study showed that consuming several types of media simultaneously is associated with a higher number of anxiety and depressive symptoms.



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perceived as less severe, when they could be just as serious in reality. Therefore, this study suggests that information presented in the media can affect our perceptions.

Furthermore, in 2013, researchers at McGill University proposed the idea that the media can play a role in the public's opinion on mental health. They explored how the media treats this issue by retrospectively analyzing the content of articles in major Canadian newspapers that dealt with the theme of mental health. They compared the different themes discussed in newspaper articles from 2005 to 2010. Results showed that in 40% of articles, the themes discussed were danger, violence and crime. Only 19% of articles included a discussion of treatment for mental illness, and 18% addressed recovery and rehabilitation themes. In other words, the information presented in the media concerning mental health

seems to direct public attention towards some aspects, at the expense of others. Consequently, the authors propose to vary the sources of information and consult different resources to obtain a more accurate and nuanced portrait of mental illness.

Finally, in 2010, researchers wanted to further explore the role of the media in young people's lives. The study found that youth used multiple types of media simultaneously for about 30% of their media consumption time. This concept is called media multitasking. Other researchers then questioned the effects of this phenomenon on well-being. In particular, one study showed that consuming several types of media simultaneously is associated with a higher number of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Therefore, it may be useful to pay attention to the number of media sources consumed day-to-day.

It's not the end; it's just the beginning

The media has greatly evolved over the last few decades. In the past, people used to have to get up in the morning to get their newspaper, whereas today, everything is available on electronic devices with information accessible at just a few clicks. The most striking part of the history of media is that it is constantly evolving. Imagine what will be possible 50 years from now! However, we must not forget the other side of the coin: the media can inform and influence us simultaneously. So, the next time you consume media, remember both sides of the coin! 🐘

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Constructive journalism: a preferred alternative?

Charlotte Longpré, Master's student in psychology, Centre for Studies on Human Stress, University of Montreal

Are you the kind of person who reads the paper while drinking your coffee every morning? Listen to the news on the evening newscast? Or watch the news on your phone in the metro while coming home from work?

Media in all its forms are omnipresent in our current society. In 2018 alone, there were 18.6 million newspapers in circulation every day! On a daily basis, we are exposed to news stories about facts and important events. But have you ever noticed that the majority of the news is negative? American researchers analyzed the content of the New York Times between 1945 and 2005 and found that the tone used in the news has become increasingly negative over the years. This negative trend also seems to be perceived by the public as statistics have shown that 77% of Americans consider news media as negative and 84% find them depressing. To counteract the presence of negative news, a new journalistic movement called constructive journalism has emerged to promote positive news. This form of journalism aims to integrate various principles of positive psychology into the media to produce and convey more positive and engaging news to the population. To date, researchers have more so studied the effects of negative news and have shown that they can have repercussions for the population.



Given these effects and the emergence of constructive journalism, more and more researchers are studying positive news. This article summarizes what is currently known about negative and positive news and their impact on emotions, stress and memory.

Regarding emotions, an initial team of researchers showed that when participants read negative news, their negative emotions (e.g. fear) increased while their positive emotions (e.g. joy) decreased. Similar results were found when participants watched the news daily on television. Researchers found a

decrease in joy and an increase in agitation after watching the news. On another note, recent studies in constructive journalism have shown that positive news has the opposite effect on people's emotions: reading positive news increases positive emotions. Similar research with adolescents has shown that exposure to constructive news, which is positive or offers a potential solution to the reported event, decreased adolescents' negative emotions. In short, it is therefore completely normal that reading positive news makes you smile!

Researchers became interested in the link between news and stress as the media covers increasingly more events worldwide. The first studies focused on media coverage of events such as the World Trade Center or Boston marathon attacks. Studies have shown that constant exposure to news about tragic events increases people's perceived stress. Also, prolonged exposure to these events through the media can prolong stress symptoms and is associated with more disorders related to chronic stress, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Considering these results, researchers wanted to verify the impact of the media on stress hormones. As explained earlier in this magazine, any threat detection by the brain leads to the secretion of stress hormones. Would it then be possible that the brain considers negative news as a threat? A study in 2008 tested the hypothesis. The researchers measured stress hormone levels before and after reading neutral and negative news and found no difference in stress hormone levels. However, a study conducted a few years ago by our research team showed that women who read negative news were more reactive to a subsequent stressor. Therefore, the women produced more stress hormones when faced with



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Similar research with adolescents has shown that exposure to constructive news, which is positive or offers a potential solution to the reported event, decreased adolescents' negative emotions.

a stressful situation after reading negative news. Within the same study, a similar effect was observed for the memory of women exposed to negative news. We realized that the women who read the negative news remembered a greater number of news segments compared to women who read the neutral news and men. The study of memory in relation to the media and stress is relevant because stress hormones, when produced, can travel up to the brain and lodge themselves in regions involved with memory. If the brain detects a news media segment as threatening, there's a good chance that we'll remember it more. This result may be explained by the fact that the women detected the negative news as threatening and remembered them more thereafter...thanks to stress hormones! Knowing this, you may wonder if positive news can counteract the effects of negative news on stress and memory. We asked ourselves the same question and are currently conducting a



study on the subject, so we'll know more soon!

In light of these findings, the scientific literature tells us that news has varying impacts on emotions, stress and memory. Although the influence of constructive journalism is still little studied, positive news seems to generate positive emotions in readers. Of course, other studies on the subject are necessary to have a better understanding of how news affects people.

Nevertheless, constructive journalism seems to be a preferred alternative, if only to be exposed to better initiatives on a daily basis and to feel a smile on our face. The more we're interested in reading constructive and positive news, the more present they'll be in the media.

So now you know that whenever you're in front of the news, whether it be over coffee in the morning or on your phone in the metro, what you read can affect you. In knowing this, why not choose

more media that offers more constructive news? It will make you smile... 🐾

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News that cheers you up!

Maryse Arcand, Master's student in biomedical sciences, University of Montreal

Alexe Bilodeau-Houle, Doctoral student in psychology, University of Quebec in Montreal



Every day, we are bombarded with information, whether from the Internet, social networks or the media, and sometimes without even being aware of it. Quite often, the news shared with us is negative, where positive news is rather rare. Surely, exposure to so much negative news can affect our spirits, as you have probably experienced since the beginning of the pandemic. Fortunately, we have good news for you; there isn't only bad news in the world! GlobalGoodness, an interactive online platform, has made it its mission to share good news. To learn more about this initiative, we spoke with Laurent Imbault, the founder of GlobalGoodness.

GlobalGoodness publishes at least one positive news segment a day on a wide variety of subjects, such as science and technology, business, the environment and more.

While visiting his mother several years ago, she confided in him that she saw no hope in the world. Disturbed by his mother's words, he began to reflect: "From that moment on, I began paying more attention to the news in the media. I quickly realized that her views of the world had been tainted by the negativity of news media. When you listen to the news, you quickly realize that there is a lot of anxiety-provoking

news. As a result, there is nothing there that comforts the human being in that we're going to survive and that we're deliberately good people. I said to myself, "well, what can I do with this"". With the help of his wife, he founded GlobalGoodness, Quebec's first positive news media.

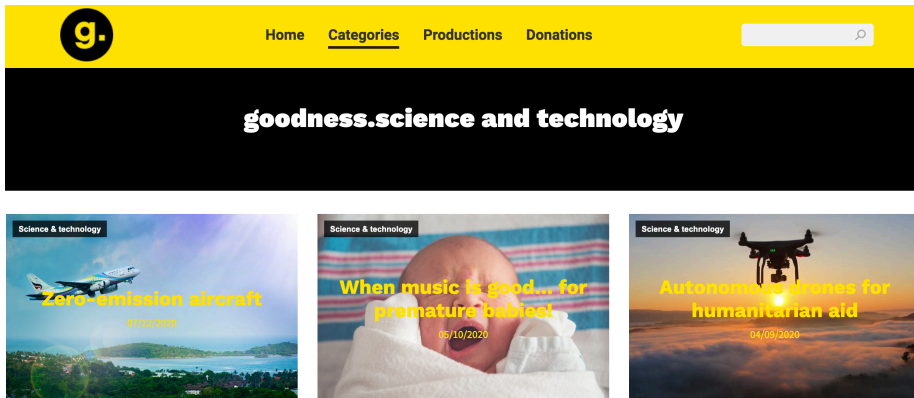
For 12 years, GlobalGoodness has been dedicated to spreading positive news from around the world. In believing that it was rather difficult to find good news, we asked him how journalists manage to do it. Mr. Imbault tells us that they subscribe to various news feeds from around the world.

To our great surprise, he tells us that there is a lot of positive news everywhere! Indeed, GlobalGoodness publishes at least one positive news segment a day on a wide variety of subjects, such as science and technology, business, the environment and more. He also mentions that GlobalGoodness not only spreads good news, but also constructive news. But what is constructive news? Mr. Imbault



Laurent Imbault, founder of GlobalGoodness

explains that it's important to remember how news is treated. Constructive news can deal with negative situations, but it always provides solutions. Therefore, the goal of constructive journalism is to show that solutions exist and to empower and make people want to act. To help us understand, Mr. Imbault gave us an example: "We met a man, a carpenter by trade, who was helping individuals suffering from homelessness. He made little wooden houses on wheels for homeless people. This way, regardless of the temperature in winter, the wooden house acts as an insulator and conserves the body's heat. This allows homeless people to have a sleeping environment with a slightly more comfortable temperature. The idea is not just to talk about homelessness but rather to talk about solutions. It's



The goal of constructive journalism is to show that solutions exist and to empower and make people want to act.

comforting to know that many people are working to make the world a better place. It's important to keep that in mind for every problem, there are solutions and that's what we want to put forward". The hope here is that reading the articles on the platform will be inspiring and perhaps influence others to take concrete action on various issues.

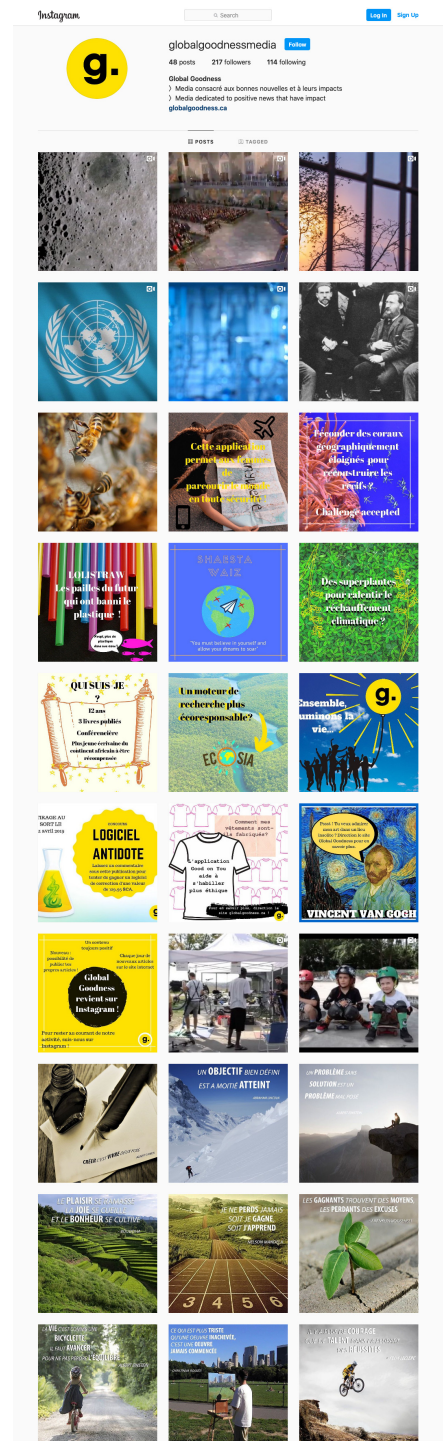
All the news shared on the platform is accessible free of charge. GlobalGoodness generates no income and is financed by Mr. Imbault. He explains that, in the beginning, GlobalGoodness was not created to make money. For Mr. Imbault, an artist and actor by profession, GlobalGoodness is an artistic work rather than a business model. With GlobalGoodness, he creates a product of beauty, of harmony: "It felt like I was giving someone a glass of water who hadn't drunk in a long time". Indeed, it's a relief to know that there is positive in the world! To support him in his project, Mr. Imbault benefited from certain *pro bono* services and some donations. Also, the search for positive news relies mainly on journalism students doing an internship at GlobalGoodness. When asked about the platform's visibility, Mr. Imbault answers that there are 500 to 600 visits per day from 140

countries such as Canada, France, and Brazil. He explains that having a large reach is a significant challenge as it is costly (advertising requires money!). For Mr. Imbault, GlobalGoodness will be his legacy, a positive news media that distributes hope and love. "I continue to believe that the work I do has a positive influence and makes a difference. It may not be much, but if I've changed something even a little bit, that's what it'll be" he says.

Mr. Imbault leaves us with an important realization. The media does not share enough positive news, but we must also ask ourselves about what kind of news we share. He explains that with social networks, we are all news carriers and information broadcasters. We need to be aware of what we share on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and the impact it can have. If we only share bad news, we are participating in the spread of negative information!

There is a lot of positive in the world! Will you be someone who shares the good news? Remember that even during the pandemic, GlobalGoodness finds at least one positive news segment every day! It might do you some good to go check it out! <https://globalgoodness.ca/en/>

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GlobalGoodness - Instagram

Traumatic exposure amongst field journalists: the current reality

Clémence Peyrot, *Doctoral student in biomedical sciences, University of Montreal*

Félix Duplessis-Marcotte, *Doctoral student in psychology, University of Quebec in Montreal*

Laurence Dumont, *Post-doctoral fellow at the Centre for Studies on Human Stress, University of Quebec in Montreal*



The significant tragedies of our society, such as the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the attacks on the Grand Mosque in Quebec City, the Lac-Mégantic rail accident, as well as events such as murders, car accidents and fires, are traumatic events for the victims and their loved ones. But what about the journalists who cover these events? How do they experience exposure to such situations? Do they experience intense stress or emotional turmoil? Can their mental health be affected by repeated exposure to traumatic events, even if they aren't directly affected by these events? After all, behind every journalist is an individual like you and me, who is sensitive to extreme events.

This article will describe what a traumatic event is, how this exposure can alter mental health, and what recommendations are suggested to prevent the appearance of a mental health disorder, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, in journalists. You will also find testimonials of a news director and two Quebec journalists who agreed

to share their journalism experiences in Quebec.

- Mr. Louis-Éric Allard has been a news director for 14 years at the La Tribune newspaper in Sherbrooke.
- Mr. Tommy Brochu has been a journalist for 3 years at the La Tribune newspaper in Sherbrooke. He is a general journalist and covers various subjects, including

diverse facts, municipal affairs and art.

- Mr. Alexandre Duval has been a journalist for Radio-Canada in Quebec City for about 7 years. He has covered daily news for several years and is now responsible for longer-term investigative files.



Traumatic events: what are they?

Exposure to traumatic events is part of the daily life of field journalists. These are events in which you or another person are exposed to death or the threat of death, or serious injury, or physical and/or sexual violence. They are unpredictable, threatening to life itself or to physical or mental integrity and generate feelings of loss of control when faced with the situation. These events usually generate an intense stress response with the release of stress hormones (such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol). These hormones generate various physical manifestations such as increased heart rate, breathing and dilated pupils, with the ultimate goal of mobilizing energy to flee or fight the threat. Although this response is completely adaptive, it can be extremely intense in some individuals and lead to the development of a mental health disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder.

When trauma exposure leads to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder

In Canada, 76% of individuals will be exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetime. Though it is estimated that 9.2% of the Canadian population will develop post-traumatic stress disorder in their lifetime. A post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis is made by a qualified health professional following the identification of several



According to current studies, 86% to 100% of field journalists will be exposed to traumatic events, the most recurrent being fires, car accidents, murders and natural disasters

specific criteria defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

The first criterion indicates that post-traumatic stress disorder can develop following direct or indirect exposure as a witness to a traumatic event. Some people may also develop post-traumatic stress disorder within the context of their profession, where they are repeatedly and persistently exposed to shocking details of traumatic events. This is particularly the case for field journalists.

The other criteria correspond to specific categories of symptoms that must persist for more than a month after the event. These symptoms are grouped into four main categories: re-experiencing symptoms (e.g. nightmares, intrusive memories), avoidance symptoms (we avoid what reminds us of the event), alterations in mood and cognition (e.g. guilt, detachment) and symptoms of hyperreactivity (e.g. exaggerated startle response, difficulty concentrating). Following a traumatic event, it is perfectly normal to remember the event, have difficulty sleeping, or feel more agitated and irritable. These effects usually last several weeks but will diminish over time. Moreover, most individuals who are exposed to a traumatic event will not develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Though, in the proportion of people who will develop PTSD, the symptoms that appear in the days following the traumatic event do not subside and daily life is profoundly disrupted. Post-traumatic stress disorder is also frequently associated with other mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety. But what about field journalists who investigate tragic events on a daily basis?



Traumatic events amongst journalists and, more specifically, amongst field journalists

According to current studies, 86% to 100% of field journalists will be exposed to traumatic events, the most recurrent being fires, car accidents, murders and natural disasters. Events associated with death or injury to a child, car accidents and murders are those perceived as the most stressful by journalists.

Beginning in the 2000s, research on the impact of exposure to these traumatic situations on field journalists' mental health is fairly recent. Most of the scientific works show that the main symptoms experienced by journalists who have been exposed to a traumatic event are repetitive, involuntary and intrusive memories (in the category of re-experiencing symptoms, as per mentioned above). However, there is no precise data on the number of journalists exposed to a traumatic event and who have developed post-traumatic stress disorder in Quebec.

The three journalists we interviewed have experienced traumatic events but did not feel that they were affected by it at the time. Though in thinking back,



Most of the scientific works show that the main symptoms experienced by journalists who have been exposed to a traumatic event are repetitive, involuntary and intrusive memories.

they realize the seriousness of the event.

Mr. Brochu, a journalist with La Tribune, testifies that he has covered tragic events that could be traumatic. For example, he intervened in a family tragedy in Windsor. He reported interviewing friends of the victim who were in pain. He states that "everyone

breaks down during the interview. As a journalist, it's impossible to remain insensitive to that". Following the event, he questioned his intervention method but also his love for the job. In fact, while writing on the subject, Mr. Bronchu knows that his article will be read and asks himself: "Did I serve the public interest today? Did my article pay tribute to the victim or did it sound more like sensationalism?". He describes that the most difficult thing to deal with is what comes with the tragic event. For example, he says that hearing comments about the victim makes him feel like he knew them. He says that he did not experience it as traumatic, although he does think about it from time to time.

For Mr. Duval, a journalist at Radio-Canada, he was among the first journalists to intervene in the Grand Mosque attack in Quebec City in 2017. He explains that there was a lot of uncertainty about the level of risk he was in and what was really going on. But one thing was clear, it was a serious and tragic event. He was so focused on his role as a journalist and under the effect of stress and high adrenaline levels, that the human tragedy he was experiencing did not affect him at the time. "In the first 24 to



36 hours, I had a job to do for the public. When the adrenaline fell, 48 hours later, and I watched the news at home, that's when I collapsed and really experienced the emotional charge of the event". Having experienced similar events, some of his colleagues also report having the same feelings because there was no room for their own emotion in the situation. According to Mr. Duval, although there was a lot of emotion in the situation itself, the ability to detach oneself allows one to be less sensationalist, where detachment allows oneself to show emotion without exacerbating it.

As for Mr. Allard, news director at La Tribune, he remembers the journalistic coverage by his crew of the train derailment that caused the death of 47 people at Lac-Mégantic in 2013. The journalist dedicated to this event decided to move to the site for a while because he had to be there daily. "People needed to confide in someone," he says. He also reports that "the journalists on site wanted to relieve them, to pay tribute, to give them an outlet. But this event, just like September 11th, upset not only the media, but a whole society and brought about thoughts that we might not have had". Following this event, many discussions about journalists' mental health have emerged, including exposure to traumatic events and how we can help them.



What factors should we act on to help field journalists face traumatic events?

To mitigate the impact of exposure to a traumatic event to prevent the development of post-traumatic stress disorder, it is essential to act on factors qualified as protective factors. Firstly, it is strongly advised to train and prepare any individual (such as journalists) who will be exposed to one or more traumatic events in their professional career. To do so, these people can follow training courses on stress management, how to react to traumatic events and about mental health. For example, this translates to including training sessions on journalistic

coverage in hostile terrain, where journalists are trained to detect different possible sources of danger in their environment and evaluate whether they are at risk of putting themselves in danger. It is also important that journalists have access to psychological follow-up before and after exposure to a traumatic event. This follow-up would accompany journalists at greater risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and identify possible post-traumatic psychological distress. Work experience also helps us learn how to manage our emotions. To this end, Mr. Duval describes, for example, that during the first few years, he found it difficult to not be able to express what he was thinking personally and having to keep his distance to remain objective. However, over the years, he finds it to be a relief. The journalistic distance allows him to not feel the need to be sensitive and reactive to each new element. As for Mr. Brochu, he reports that "new journalists are told that the first murders are the most difficult to cover, but with experience, they'll toughen up". He also mentioned that "his colleagues who cover difficult events have developed a shell over time".

Finally, social support, whether through colleagues, the workplace or family, is a protective factor against the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. In this regard, Mr. Brochu mentions that the director and colleagues' doors are always





open and he can “vent” when needed. He also reports that there is a lot of support amongst journalists, which is helpful. In Quebec, journalists and their families benefit from a hotline provided by the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec. This hotline offers journalists the opportunity to be heard, to exchange and share experiences as needed. Some companies have also set up their own assistance service for employees and their family members, as is the case with the La Tribune newspaper.

Conclusion

To better understand the impact of exposure to a traumatic event on journalists, particularly in Quebec, it is necessary to develop more scientific studies on the subject. Thus, it will not only be possible to quantify the extent of the exposure to traumatic events in field journalists but also to measure the potential impact on their mental health. Raising journalists' awareness of mental health and the different protective factors that can be acted upon to prevent the impact of exposure to a traumatic event

is essential. Listening and psychological assistance programs are available in Quebec for journalists. These listening and social support approaches contribute to preserving the mental health of journalists, who play a central role in our society.

We would like to remind you that we have devoted an entire issue (number 12) to the subject of post-traumatic stress disorder. Do not hesitate to refer back to the spring 2012 issue! 🐾

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Fear of the unknown

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“Decapitated teacher near Paris: a characterized Islamist terrorist attack”, one can read in the La Presse headlines and in several newspapers and news channels around the world (October 16th, 2020).

“The sword killer of old Quebec struggling with a mental health problem”, reports the Journal de Quebec (November 1st, 2020)

“New peak of deaths in 24 hours around the world”, announces the Journal de Montreal with regards to COVID-19 (January 6th, 2020).

Three major headlines. Three topics. One thing connecting them: fear. This emotion makes us shiver, gives us the cold sweats and accelerates our breathing. Fear is a powerful adaptive motivator when faced with an undesirable situation. Fear can also be acquired without the person having been directly confronted with the threat initiating the fear. For example, our parents teach us to fear strangers. As we are told that

this stranger could take us away, we fear them and run away. These ill-intended strangers do exist. If ever we were to meet a stranger, our parents may come to save our lives. But what happens when a warning is not accurate? A recent study showed that fear learning through observation or verbal instruction results in a very inflexible behaviour change. Once a certain stimulus is mistakenly learned to be threatening (e.g. spider), it is difficult to correct the developed adaptive behaviours (e.g. yelling, hitting, running away). Contrary to what we might think, it is very easy to develop maladaptive fears. Before explaining how the media can contribute to the development of fears in society, let me take a step back to explain why our brain prioritizes processing information that is perceived as threatening.

Negative bias

For most people, the dissatisfaction associated with losing \$20 is greater than the satisfaction of finding \$20. This

is what we call loss aversion: the fear of losing surpasses the joy of winning. This cognitive bias is one among many that contribute to the asymmetry of positive and negative information processing. From an evolutionary point of view, it is adaptive to devote more attention to threatening information. In the worst case, ignoring a positive stimulus could deprive a person of pleasure, whereas ignoring a negative stimulus could put the person's life in danger. Clearly, the good does good, but the bad does worse. In other words, our brain is programmed to prioritize negative information, such as fear, for our own good.

The mass media are not unaware of our collective bias towards fear and negative information. Moreover, as our news consumption represents an important source of income, mass medias need to stand out to capture our attention. Thus, every day, we are bombarded with news and shocking images at a level that we have never seen before. Pierre Péladeau succeeding in creating “the largest French

daily newspaper in America” by following the recipe of the three S’s (in French): Sang (blood), Sexe (sex), Sports (sports). This recipe was inspired by the success of this type of sensationalist model in the United States. Therefore, not all news is considered important to report in the media. This was previously referred to as the “man-bites-dog” criterion in assessing whether a news story is worth telling. Said differently, the rare, frightening and shocking event attracts the public, like a man biting a dog. However, this duality between corporate profitability and media dogma of reporting news objectively has real consequences. Among other things, they can distort reality and induce societal ill-adapted fears through social learning.

Media, what should we be afraid of?

Our negativity bias makes us particularly interested in unusual events and what scares us in the news reported by the media. The media themselves are incentivized and advantaged to provide us with more of this content. But why should we care? It’s a win-win for everyone, isn’t it? No. The recurring association of a neutral (initially) stimulus

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with aversive emotions teaches us to be afraid of what was previously harmless and unknown. To protect ourselves, this fear learning changes our behaviours and attitudes towards this unknown stimulus. For example, let’s take one of my greatest fascinations: sharks.

I have never seen sharks with my own eyes. Yet, I belong to the 51% of the population who is terrified of them. Why? In 1975, the release of the film Jaws aroused the fascination and fear of the

general public for a bloody threat that was little understood at the time. After the release of the film, the media coverage of shark incidents was described as a media frenzy exploiting this new widespread fear. The media was arguably hungrier than the sharks, as the risk of dying from a shark attack is one in 3,748,067. In fact, it is riskier to die on a bicycle, in a car or simply by falling on the ground. However, like the other 51% of people who are terrified of sharks, this statistic hardly managed to convince me that it was safe to dip my toes in the ocean. After all, the only sharks I’ve ever seen in my life were on television and they were eating a dozen toes for breakfast.

As with sharks, there are many threats that we cannot learn to fear on our own. Therefore, we must take the path of learning by observation or by instruction. Thus, the media has a much greater power than simply reporting the news: teaching the population what they should be afraid of. We saw this in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the media played a crucial role in teaching us to be afraid of the virus without us having to catch it ourselves. Though, what happens when our media negativity bias teaches us to be afraid of inoffensive threats? Let’s take mental health problems, for example.

As mental health problems are difficult to perceive, we tend to underestimate their presence within our entourage. Thus, many people learn about and are exposed to mental illness through mass media. Therefore, a group of American



researchers took interest in the representation of people with mental health problems in the media. They randomly selected 300 articles from various newspapers mentioning "mental illness" for analysis. The theme most frequently associated with mental illness was dangerousness. This finding was later replicated in Canada. Also, articles about the accomplishments of people with a mental health disorder were two times less common than those that were accusatory and/or frightening. However, studies agree that a minority of people suffering from mental illness may be violent. In fact, these individuals are more often victims of violence than they are persecutors. It has been shown that the fear propagated by media coverage contributes to the stigma and pessimism that the public feels about the recovery of people with mental health disorders. In addition, this fear reduces the willingness of citizens to fund programs to help these individuals. Once again, fear trumps reality, but this time at the expense of people with mental health problems.

Unfortunately, it's the same scenario for several minorities, such as Muslims. Following the tragedy of September 11th, 2001, the FBI noted a 1600% increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes compared to the year 2000. Yet, it is estimated that less than one percent of Muslims in the world are involved with any military affiliation, whether it be American, French or Islamist. With the mediatization of the "war against terrorism" and discovering of a new "threat", the rate of anti-Muslim hate crimes has remained five times higher than in the year 2000, and this even several years later. Another study found that the amount of time spent watching



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the news on issues concerning the Muslim community correlated with having stigmatizing ideas against this minority. The solution: fear extinction through exposure. Indeed, researchers have found that interacting directly with Muslim individuals contributes to maintaining positive attitudes towards the Muslim community. It should be noted that this solution is not only reserved for breaking the anti-Muslim movement. It also applies to all situations where the media exposes us to the unknown, as is the case for many minorities and cultures that we encounter less regularly.

individuals? Of course not. Nor can the public be judged in this way by unintentionally demanding this kind of content. However, our bias towards negative information and fear in the media unintentionally leads to societal discord that contributes to the stigmatization of many minorities. As fear is an emotion that mobilizes attitudinal and behavioural change, it must be used judiciously. Thus, we must ask the following question: it is possible for the media to voluntarily use fear to encourage desirable behaviours in society? My colleague, Raphaël Lapointe, will answer this question in the following article on fear appeals.

Does this unintentional tendency of the media to exploit and confirm the public's fears make them bloodthirsty

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Fear appeals: an effective strategy to promote the adoption of behaviours?

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We have seen that the presence of certain information in the media can, unintentionally, lead us to develop certain fears and even affect our beliefs and behaviours. However, it is possible, even popular, to voluntarily use fear to shape people's behaviour by using a strategy called fear appeals. Fear appeals are persuasive messages designed to frighten people by describing the negative consequences of not following the recommendations. As you can imagine, the goal is to get people to move away from a risky behaviour in order to adopt a better one: "don't drive while intoxicated, you're putting your life and that of others in danger, it's better to have a designated driver or to take a taxi". This strategy is used frequently in public health messages, in awareness campaigns and in advertisements.

Do we use fear appeals in Quebec? Yes, we do! Mainly present in the media, we can see them and/or hear them on television, radio, posters, etc. Think of the different awareness campaigns from the Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ), where among others, we see a

young girl being run over by a motorist driving at an excessive speed. Also, think of the shocking publicity of the CSST (now CNESST), where a worker gets stuck in a conveyor belt and ends up with his arm crushed up to his shoulder. These are two examples among many others. The idea here is that we don't need to run a little girl over with our car to understand that we need to adopt good driving behaviours. We don't need to have our arm crushed in a conveyor belt to understand that there are certain security behaviours to adopt at work. Using fear in an advertisement is strong enough to change people's behaviour; at least, that's the principle behind this type of message.

Is it an effective strategy to use fear in the media to change people's risk behaviours? Intuitively, one would think so...but it's a bit more complicated than that. You see, fear appeals influence a

person's behaviour through the interaction of four elements; the first two are associated with the threat conveyed by the message and the last two are associated with the adoption of the recommended behaviour. To better grasp this, let's put ourselves in the shoes of an individual exposed to a message using fear appeals. The first element is the perceived **severity** of a threat: what are the serious negative consequences that could result from my current risk behaviour? The second element is the perceived **susceptibility** of the threat: how likely is it that I will suffer from serious negative consequences associated with my bad risk behaviour? The third element is the **effectiveness of the response**: is there a new behaviour that I can develop to prevent the negative consequences conveyed in the message? The fourth and last element is **self-efficacy**: do I think I can do this new behaviour?

Fear appeals are persuasive messages designed to frighten people by describing the negative consequences of not following the recommendations.

Now back to the juicy question: do fear appeals produce the desired effect? In the scientific community, the consensus is that they are more effective in people who have a strong sense of self-efficacy related to the behaviour they want to adopt: if they believe they're capable of doing so, they'll change their behaviour in the desired direction. Conversely, when fear appeals are used in a population with a weak sense of self-efficacy, the impact of these messages on the targeted behaviours is controversial: some experts claim that they have slight positive effects, while others argue that they're not useful. Some even report that the opposite of what is desired occurs: for individuals with a weak sense of self-efficacy, fear appeals could increase the risk behaviour targeted by these messages. Why can fear appeals be inadequate, and even counterproductive, for people with a weak sense of self-efficacy? It may be because these individuals react defensively to the message using fear.

Let's imagine a fictitious case: Jean-Paul has been a smoker for almost 30 years. One day, while getting out of the metro car, he notices a new poster. On the poster, we see a person's disfigured face. He notices that it says "throat and mouth cancer: tobacco leaves marks". Let's think back to the four elements associated with fear appeals. Jean-Paul knows that throat and mouth cancers are negative consequences associated with his tobacco use behaviour (**severity**). He also knows that smoking increases the



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risk of developing these types of cancer (**susceptibility**). It is also clear to him that in order to reduce these threats, the behaviour to adopt would be to quit smoking (**effectiveness of the response**). However, Jean-Paul doesn't feel like he's able to quit smoking: he has tried several times, without success (**self-efficacy**). So, with a weak sense of self-efficacy, he might react defensively to this poster, ignoring, denying and rejecting the possible dangers associated with tobacco use. Jean-Paul may even smoke more cigarettes than normal to cope with the stress and dissonance experienced when confronted with the fact that he still continues to smoke, even if he knows that it is not good for his health.

In sum, what's important to remember about fear appeals is that they only work well when they target a population who have a strong sense of self-efficacy about the behaviour they should adopt. Otherwise, it is difficult to say whether this strategy can be beneficial.

Fear appeals and COVID-19: the right solution?

Much of the information about the current health situation is transmitted through the media. They have an essential role in keeping us informed about the evolution of the guidelines and directives issued by public health authorities. Through these messages, people are asked to adopt and/or modify their behaviours to reduce transmission of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Have fear appeals been used in Quebec to try to change people's behaviours concerning COVID-19? Yes, although very little. This was done through two advertisements that were aired on television and online in September 2020. In the first ad, a man explains how he caught COVID-19 and suffered greatly, where he had serious respiratory problems. The man in question needed a tracheotomy, which now prevents him from working as a general contractor. We also see that the man was hospitalized for 45 days, including 10 days in a coma. In the current health situation, is the use of messages that only use fear appeals



the recommended strategy? Several experts say no. The idea here is that the images and messages presented in this type of communication could exacerbate the fear and stress that already exists because of the current situation. Thus, the use of fear appeals during a pandemic could create a public mistrust in public health authorities, a skepticism about the content of the messages and a refusal to adopt the recommended behaviours.

Health authorities should favour messages that inform and explain, and not those that frighten. The goal is to keep the population informed by explaining each recommended measure's rationale as much as possible. As previously mentioned, the health authorities and Quebec government have made very little use of advertisement using fear appeals. One only has to look at the rest of the messages and communications diffused to Quebecers to realize that they are mostly focused on informative and explicative aspects: we ask you to wash your hands, here is how to do it



For individuals with a weak sense of self-efficacy, fear appeals could increase the risk behaviour targeted by these messages.

and here is why you are being asked to do it. We ask you to wear a face mask, here is how to wear one properly and here is why you are being asked to do

it. So, it seems that, for the most part, Quebec has succeeded in avoiding the trap of using fear appeals in these already trying times.

We have seen that fear appeals are used through the media to try to change risk behaviours in the population, which can be effective under certain conditions. Moreover, it is best to avoid this strategy in certain contexts, such as our current situation. The idea here is not to condemn the use of fear appeals. What we would like for you to remember is that we should use them parsimoniously. With all this in mind, awareness of the media's impact in our daily lives is almost scary, isn't it? 🐼



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Staying connected in a pandemic: is it stressful?

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Pandemic, COVID, confinement... words we still hear from our family, friends, colleagues, even in 2021. We thought that by screaming "Happy New Year!" to our loved ones through our computer screens that the ravages of the pandemic would fly away at the same rate we emptied our champagne glasses. We thought that staying connected via social media would allow us to maintain proximity in our social relationships and feel better during this difficult time, but is this really the case?

Impact of the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has confined billions of people to their homes and made physical distancing a new way of life. As part of this new normalcy, governments have attempted to respond to the prolonged exposure to stress caused by the pandemic. Among others, the international directives of the World Health Organization (WHO) continue to call on people to stay virtually connected to one another to reduce some of their stress. Therefore, people turn towards social and traditional media as a primary source of support in relation to the pandemic. But

is being connected truly good for us? Evidence suggests that the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed associated with better mental health outcomes, presumably by fostering closeness and support in relationships. However, the use of social and traditional media can also be associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, especially if they are used to seek out and disseminate sensationalist information. Both sides of the coin will be discussed in the present article.

Positive sides of the coin

In a way, using social media can promote closeness in relationships, serving as a great tool to maintain our connection with others despite the distance. It is important to understand that humans are social beings who need to have social contact to promote their own well-being, quality of life, and also their mental health. In stressful and difficult times, like in a pandemic, social beings need even more support and connections with their entourage. The need for social connectedness differs from person to person, but

always take three areas into account: structural (the extent of our social network, marital status), functional (the perception of having access to social support, level of solitude) and quality (the positive and negative value attributed to each social relationship). We all need to ensure that we are fulfilled in each of these three areas, even during a pandemic. Or else, it could generate a source of stress that is detrimental to our proper functioning.

Yes, you're right; the pandemic cuts off the physical aspect of human contact such as hugs, handshakes, or simply the proximity of human warmth. Can we achieve the same comfort from a distance? Social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) and different software programs (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Teams) allow us to stay in touch with our loved ones during the pandemic and rest assured, this can greatly reduce our stress and is comparable to face-to-face relationships. For example, a study showed that there is a positive impact of staying connected with our loved ones by social media during the pandemic, as people have adapted

their means of communication to maintain their social relationships despite the distance. The results of the study also show that staying connected with our loved ones increases life satisfaction and positive emotions, both of which are indicators of our overall well-being. Therefore, it is understandable that social media isn't necessarily a source of stress for people who use them to stay in touch with their loved ones. So, during the pandemic, it is possible to meet our social needs, as we did before.

The other side of the coin

Exposure to negative information related to COVID-19, such as mortality rates or negative experiences, is associated with increased stress symptoms. Though the intention to catch up with loved ones via social media is positive, it can sometimes indirectly expose people to continuously hearing negative stories or experiences. For certain people who are more sensitive to the stress experienced during the pandemic, hearing too much about the negative experiences of loved ones can contribute to an increased risk of developing anxious, depressive and post-traumatic symptoms. In fact, a team of researchers sought to understand



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the impact of using social media during the pandemic on mental health. Results of the study suggest that stress related to disasters experienced by loved ones

during the pandemic can be a risk factor that amplifies the harmful impact of social media on depression. In addition, excessive exposure to hardships related to COVID-19 on social media can trigger a negative effect. In turn, this can contribute to mental health problems.



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Stress levels caused by the pandemic can hinder an individual's ability to provide effective support to their loved ones, which can then impact the mental health benefits of social support. Of course, it is more difficult to help our loved ones when we are not at our best selves. A final aspect to consider during the pandemic is the importance of physical contact, but this time, in the long-term. Earlier, it was demonstrated that human beings have adaptive strategies that allow them to respond to their social needs at a distance in emergency situations. Conversely, in the long-term, limited physical connections within social media could lead, for some people, to what some researchers call touch hunger (missing physical touch). Touch hunger occurs when a person has very little or no

physical contact with others, which is associated with stress and other negative mental health consequences. Therefore, it is important to understand that being connected on social media or by our computer screen is a good short-term solution, but in the long-term. It will never replace the physical contact that proximity brings us and for some individuals, can have an impact on perceived stress.

Thus, we see a paradox related to social connectivity during the pandemic: stay connected...but at a distance!! Stay connected...but not too much!!

Solutions?

It is inconceivable to give up social relationships as they greatly influence our sense of well-being and mental health. However, staying overly connected with our loved ones can also expose us to a source of stress through their negative experiences. A good way to gauge the amount of social connectedness needed is to simply listen to yourself. Yes, yes, that little inner voice that warns us that we're starting to feel lonely, that we need to chat, that we need to check-in. Listen to your inner voice; it's a good indicator! In these cases, it is suggested that you connect using your favourite social media with those who make you feel better and try to discuss positive aspects as much as possible. Take care to laugh, smile and share; it really does feel good. On the other hand, when your inner voice screams to you that it's enough, that



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you have too much on your shoulders, that it's becoming a bit too negative, that stress is slowly resurfacing, listen to it! It's harder to listen to that little voice in these moments, but try to disconnect from social media to return to an activity that soothes you.

To conclude, I'll leave you with a sentence that restores the paradox: stay connected... but listen to yourself! 🐘

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NEXT ISSUE OF THE MAMMOTH MAGAZINE



Next issue: When your stress becomes my stress ...
The last article of this issue mentions that it can be difficult to help others when we're not feeling good. We have always received many questions asking whether the stress of others can impact our own stress, and now particularly since the beginning of the pandemic. Is this the case for the average person? And what about professionals who work to help others (e.g., therapist, teachers, nurses, etc.)? The next issue will deal with this topic. Stay tuned!

MAMMOTH MAGAZINE

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