



COVID-19

DEALING WITH INFORMATION OVERLOAD

During quarantine, and as we emerge from isolation, reliable information to the public around what is being recommended, or even regulated, by governments has become essential. Yet it can feel as if we are being constantly bombarded by an overwhelming amount of news around the pandemic. 'Push' services and instant messages on our mobile phones continually updating news feeds can increase this sense of overload. Given that many people constantly have their phones to hand, it can contribute to the pressurised feeling that we're 'always on'.¹

How information overload can affect us

Constant news coverage can make people feel uneasy and even panicked. The 2020 Cigna COVID-19 Global Impact Study found that one in eight people think life will not be the same after the pandemic, increasing to one in four in Spain, a country that was especially hard hit. Meanwhile, Asian countries, with the exception of Singapore, are more optimistic about the future.²

Feeling continually anxious or stressed, as people have been during recent months, can manifest itself physically, and result in chest tightness, heart palpitations, and insomnia. Long-term stress is also a known risk factor for several physical and mental diseases, such as depression, anxiety, endocrine disorders, and hypertension.³

Limiting the negative impact

To reduce anxiety caused by information overload around COVID-19, the following actions are suggested⁴:

- **Limit media.** Not receiving enough information during a public health emergency can also have a negative impact on our well-being.⁵ The key is to achieve balance by limit watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media, to only a few times a day.
- **Check in with others.** Talking about your concerns and feelings with those you trust can help you to put things into perspective.
- **Check in on well-being.**
 - o Take time to relax by taking deep breaths, stretching, or by doing a hobby you enjoy.
 - o Look to follow a healthy, balanced diet, and incorporate some activity into each day.
 - o Prioritise getting a good night's sleep by taking the time to wind down properly before bed, and keeping to regular sleep and wake times.
 - o Be aware if using unhealthy coping strategies like drinking too much alcohol, and if necessary take steps to limit this.



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The spread of misinformation

Misinformation is added noise that can distract from the facts, and contribute to unnecessary information overload. There has been a global increase in the spread of misinformation generally over recent years, and the COVID-19 public health crisis is unfortunately no exception.⁶ The common quest for information on the virus, accompanied by fear in the general population, and the increase in use of social media, creates a perfect storm for the rapid spread of misinformation. Numerous myths and conspiracy theories have proliferated across social sites. Two of the most widespread stories are that 5G masts are responsible for the COVID-19 symptoms, and that the virus was created in a laboratory, which have gained traction despite the complete lack of credible information to support these claims.^{6,7}

How misinformation about COVID-19 is harmful

It is a troubling fact that over the last few months, credible sources of information – posts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Center of Disease Control (CDC) – have reached only several hundred thousand engagements, whereas some hoax and conspiracy theory sites have reached over 52 million.⁶ Worryingly, a recent UK study found that people who follow conspiracy beliefs relating to COVID-19 are less likely to adhere to public health guidance on social distancing.⁷ These type of myths can also fuel racism and xenophobia, which have the potential to harm communities.⁸



Arguably there is a shared responsibility to limit the dissemination of misinformation in order to support the common fight against COVID-19.



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There is currently a global race to produce a vaccine to diminish the massive impact of COVID-19. However there is a concern that the anti-vaccine movement may spread misinformation around any newly developed vaccine or drown out official, reliable recommendations. This anti-science sentiment may undermine efforts to vaccinate enough people to create the desired herd immunity, required to greatly reduce the spread or even eradicate the disease.⁹

Before you press share...¹⁰

The following summarises what should be considered before sharing information on social media. These tips can also help you to focus on reliable information and avoid an overload of mixed messaging. Don't trust or pass on until you are certain the information passes the following criteria:



SHARE checklist

Source: ensure the information comes from an established health or government source.

Headline: the headline can be misleading; always read the full text.

Analyse: check the facts, if something sounds unbelievable, it probably is. Use online independent fact-checking services if in doubt.

Retouched: consider whether the image or video look as though it has been edited, or show an unrelated place or event.

Error: look out for bad grammar and spelling; official sources will have gone through a due editing process.

Arguably there is a shared responsibility to limit the dissemination of misinformation in order to support the common fight against COVID-19. This can be achieved through assessing information on COVID-19 before sharing it further.

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