- Information overload

CHALLENGE

Stay Informed (Without Getting Overwhelmed)

Mindful ways to deal with a tsunami of bad news

BY STEPHANIE DOLGOFF

It's not just you: There's a lot of mind-meltingly awful news out there, and it's coming faster and with more fury than ever before. No matter whom you voted for, it's difficult to hear about people losing their livelihoods en masse, people being stripped of constitutional rights, measles and other viral outbreaks, dire predictions about the economy, war, climate change, and so on. These devastating events are being sprayed at us with fire-hose speed and force, and there's no hiding from them—even if you try not to watch or read too much.

"I think we will look back at June 29, 2007, as the day everything changed," says Don Grant, Ph.D., a media psychologist and National Advisor for Healthy Device Management at Newport Healthcare. That was when the first iPhone was released, placing the Internet in the palms of our hands. The 24-hour news cycle was already in full swing, and soon social media—with algorithms favoring discord—shined more negative news into our faces and allowed us to share it with our near and dear even while buying veggie chips at Costco.

And because there is so much media and only so many eyeballs, we see more and more scary, salacious headlines, says Grant, often as *Breaking News!!!* "Think about it: For adults over a certain age, breaking news used to be a president being assassinated, an airplane crash, or a zombie apocalypse," he says. Now everything is "breaking," with breaking commentary on the breaking news, which gets rebutted two minutes later ("This just in!").

"We have a survival brain,"

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says Grant, "and without knowing it, when we see things that feel urgent, we pause and gird ourselves, and stress hormones flood our brains." Chronic stress can lead to inflammation in the body, numerous chronic illnesses, depression and anxiety, and many other health woes. Plus, it just feels terrible.

WELLNESS



COLIN BEAGLEY.

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But going to the other extreme—sticking your fingers in your ears and shouting "Lalalalalala!"—doesn't work either. Not only does it feel wrong to ignore the suffering of so many, but even if you are not directly affected the news will find you. "Total news avoidance is not the right solution," says Bryan McLaughlin, Ph.D., an associate professor of media communications at Texas Tech University who researches problematic news consumption. "There's important information in the news, and it's good for people to be informed citizens."

A better, if more nuanced, option is to find a balance between sticking your head in the sand and hoovering news straight into your cerebral cortex 24/7. "A big issue is your relationship to the news," says McLaughlin, and there are ways to improve that. Here are a few levers to pull to help yourself stay in the know without constantly being upset and panicky.

Start With Your Body

When your brain is engaged with an article, a video, or an app, you might not even be aware that you're feeling dysregulated. "If you feel your heart rate become elevated or your stomach turn, that's an indication that your body is processing what you're reading or hearing as if it's happening now, to you," says McLaughlin. This is what he refers to as "narrative transportation," meaning that when you're really sucked in by, say, the plot of a movie, it feels to your body as if you're *in* the movie, running from the villain or being blown up by a bomb. Other signs include shallow breathing, hunched shoulders, and being startled when interrupted. "If you feel that way, it's probably time to turn off the TV or put down your phone," McLaughlin says.

Sticking to the bare facts, says Grant, is another way to help yourself stay outside what you're consuming. The news generators, of course, want you to be emotionally involved so you'll keep watching, reading, or scrolling. Consciously seek out the need-to-know tidbits, says Grant, "and try not to get too sucked into the gritty details." Perhaps read or watch one story or segment on a topic rather than several that analyze it from all angles, and avoid commentary and opinion. Or read an article or listen to a podcast and skip the disturbing videos. And when your body feels as if the stress is ramping up, it's time to step away. "If it's causing an issue, you can come back to it later," Grant says. "The news will always be there."

Put Your News in a Cage

Part of the problem is that these days, rather than waiting for us to seek it out, the news finds us. Grab back some control by setting news boundaries:

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First, nix notifications on all your subscriptions and apps—that way you'll get information when you're ready for it rather than being pinged and dinged by poison news darts all day long. If you've got an app-happy thumb, move problematic apps (news orgs or social media) to your last phone screen to put some friction between you and the urge to check, or remove them so you'll need to go to a source's website instead. "See how it feels after a week," suggests Grant. "Does it help?"

Then set a schedule, McLaughlin says—whatever fits with your life. "Maybe you only check it at the beginning and the end of the day, or after you've done a meditation and had a cup of tea," he suggests. "When there are preset times you can check the news, it's not a daily struggle, and it gets integrated into your life so you'll think about it less." Grant suggests having a no-phones-at-the-table policy. "And consider getting rid of the media you don't need to be informed, as well as the people on social media who activate you—block or mute them and see if it helps. It's all going to be there tomorrow."

Practice Mindfulness

In mindfulness meditation, you work on observing your thoughts and emotions calmly and without judgment, thereby learning to be less reactive to them. When consuming the news, mindfulness can be the difference between, say, observing the emotions of someone losing their home to a wildfire and feeling as if you are experiencing the event yourself. "That's not to say that it doesn't concern you—we may have concerns about people in disasters because they are real and happening, but you don't need to perceive it as if it's happening to *you, now*," says McLaughlin. "It doesn't mean you shouldn't care, but you don't have to carry the trauma as if it's yours when it's not." At those moments, he says, take a breath and tell yourself, *This is what my mind is doing; it's not happening to me right now*.

Do Something

McLaughlin and Grant both emphasize that taking some kind of action, however small, might help you feel less like a victim of the news and more like someone with agency. "The stoic philosophers say, 'Don't worry about what is going to happen to you—worry about who you are,'" says McLaughlin. You can't wish or worry bad news away, but you can "focus on mental health and resilience and be capable of dealing with hardships and frustrations better."

Many of us think being hyperaware will help us be prepared for whatever happens, but in fact all that media exposure can make you feel worse, not better. "Anxiety usually comes from

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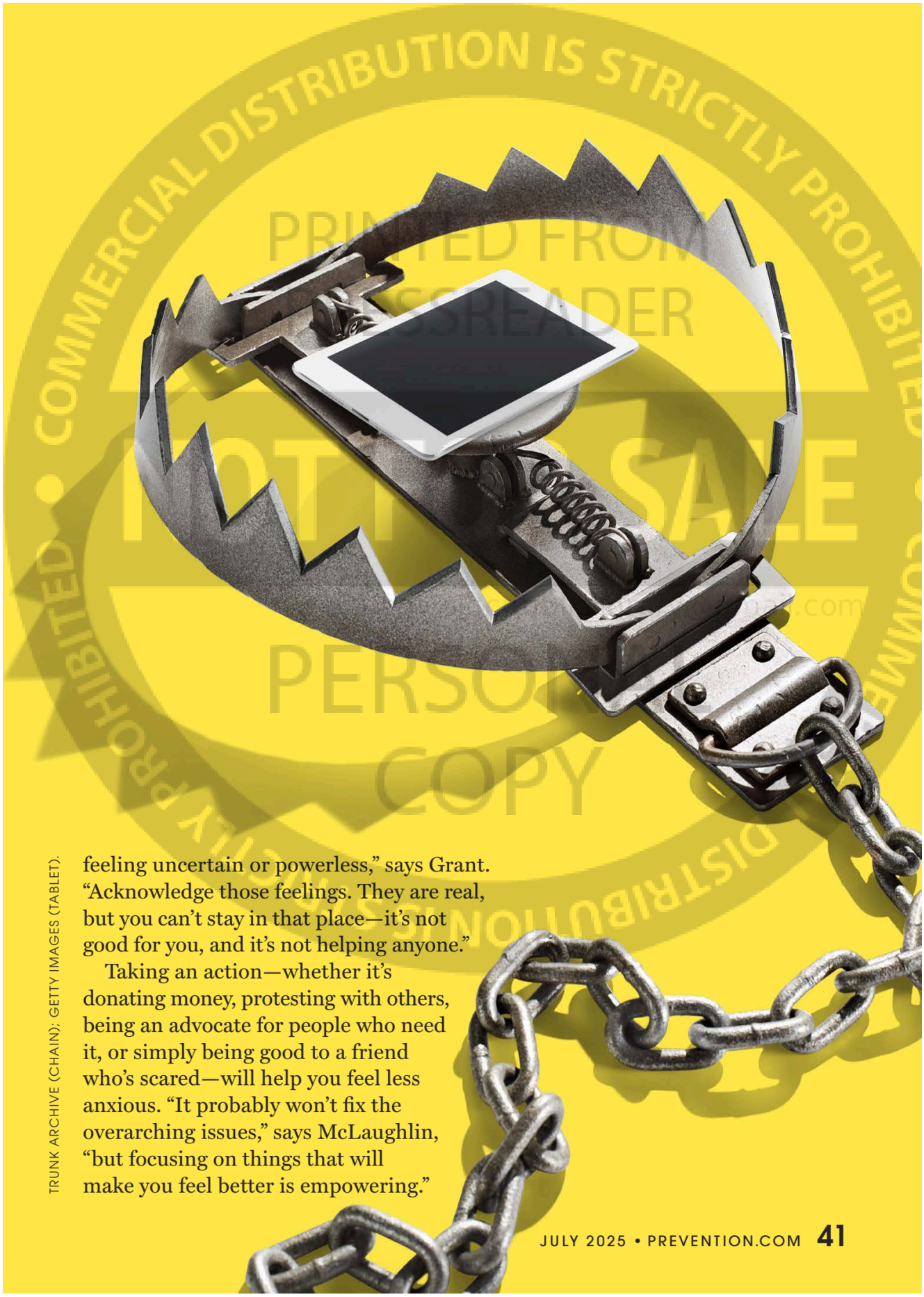

feeling uncertain or powerless," says Grant. "Acknowledge those feelings. They are real, but you can't stay in that place—it's not good for you, and it's not helping anyone."

Taking an action—whether it's donating money, protesting with others, being an advocate for people who need it, or simply being good to a friend who's scared—will help you feel less anxious. "It probably won't fix the overarching issues," says McLaughlin, "but focusing on things that will make you feel better is empowering."

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