

# COVID-19: An update since our last note

Living in and adapting to a fluid environment seems to be the new normal. This week’s focus is on how to avoid falling into the trap of doomscrolling and to focus on the positive instead.

As human beings, we are wired to give preference to negative news. During a crisis, it is important to remain informed about the pandemic and in touch with loved ones without falling into the trap of doomscrolling or information overload.

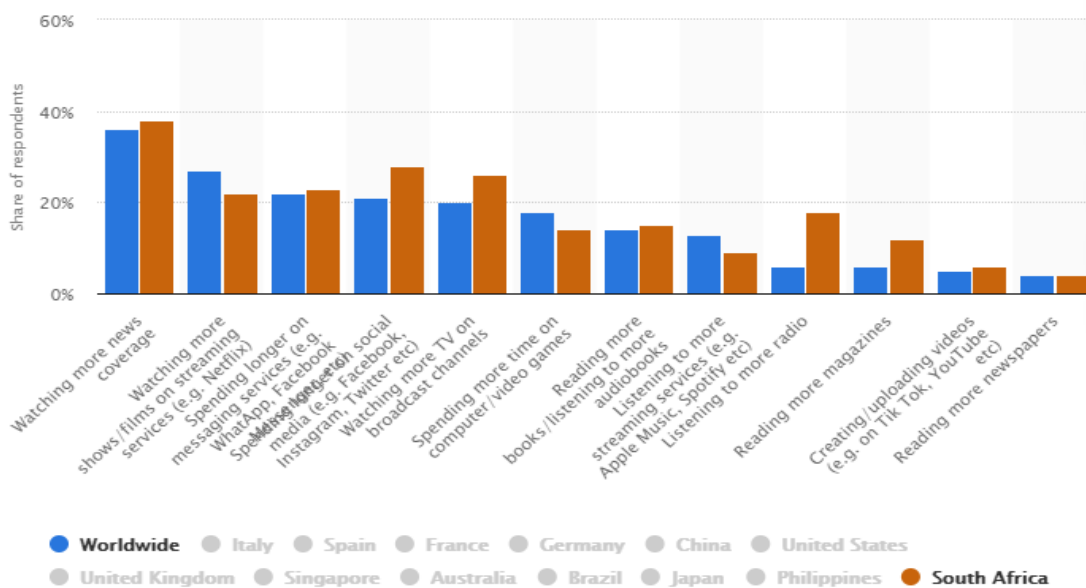
## What is doomscrolling and why are most of us doing it?

As the number of COVID-19 infections in South Africa rises and the pandemic becomes personal, we find that most types of media have become more intense over the past few months. We often find ourselves scrolling relentlessly through streams of negative news for hours in pursuit of something positive. Regular scrolling about the rising death toll, infection rates and negative impact of the virus, can soon leave us in a state of despair and anxiety. Doomscrolling, or doomsurfing, refers to the act of continuous scrolling or surfing through bad news, even when it is depressing, demoralising, distressing, or painful. Despite being an old phenomenon, experts agree that it has certainly gained a fresh spike given the current crisis. Psychologists show that this stems from negativity bias – the tendency for humans to give more weight to negative experiences over neutral or positive experiences. We feel the need to collect information during a crisis because our brain is wired to pay specific attention to potentially dangerous situations.

## Doomscrolling leads to anxiety and depression

To find a solution to the threat that we experience, we begin to search for information to feel more in control. Instead of increasing our sense of control, negative news confirms our fears, raises our stress levels and creates a feeling of helplessness. Psychologists warn that in the short term, doomscrolling can lead to a vicious cycle of negativity, irritability, anxiety, and sadness and may even begin to change your perspective on the real world. In the long term, the effects include chronic anxiety, depression, stress, and pessimism. Statista shows that media consumption due to the coronavirus outbreak has increased globally with news consumption rising worldwide by 36% and 38% of South Africans watching more news coverage due to the coronavirus outbreak.

## Media consumption due to the coronavirus outbreak



Source: Statista

### **Not all media consumption is bad for your health**

The lockdown means that time we would normally have spent on other physical social activities and chit-chat which would provide distraction, is now spent on increased media consumption. A recent Consulta survey showed that 22% of South African households are planning to spend more on mobile, cellular or internet services, in order to work from home, stream movies or simply remain connected to the world. Human beings are social beings, social distancing and remaining in one place is not natural for us. We try to do the next best thing, which is to connect with the world through all sorts of social media. While doomscrolling may be toxic to our health, a healthy balance of social media in the form of staying in touch with loved ones and relatives (not following their sometimes-negative rants) and staying informed about the pandemic, is important.

### **How to stay informed without doomscrolling**

While easier said than done, kicking the habit of doomscrolling while still staying informed, requires an active and a concerted effort. Experts have suggested various solutions such as setting timers or scheduling certain times through the day to check the news, turning off notifications on your phone, blocking or muting people who publish negative content, or avoiding inflammatory sources that trigger emotions. Stick to one or two credible sources of information updates to receive your daily dose of information about the pandemic. For other reading, try to visit sites which you find positive and uplifting or solution driven. Once you have freed up some time from doomscrolling, you can spend time on other activities.

### **Controlling what we can in the face of anxiety**

We can control what we consume, so be intentional about absorbing positive and constructive rather than negative news. Remember to focus on what you can control. The pandemic is challenging our need for social connection. Now more than ever, we must ensure that our emotions do not impact our sense of judgment.

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