

5 Strategies for Watching the News When You're Depressed

By Therese J. Borchard

Associate Editor



It doesn't take much these days to arrive at a panicked state. Not if you stay abreast of news headlines.

Nine years ago, when I had my first mental health breakdown, I realized that my psyche was way too fragile to absorb detailed updates about the turmoil in Gaza or the whereabouts of bin Laden. I didn't want to be completely ignorant of what was going on around the world, but I needed to find a way to inform myself of the big-picture stuff without losing my heart in minutiae.

I needed a strategy, because as a highly-sensitive person (as diagnosed by Elaine Aron's book, *The Highly Sensitive Person*) and a person prone to panic and depression, processing all the negativity could certainly bring me down, not just for an hour or two, but for months or even years. I dare say the news has the potential to land me in the hospital again. So I'm careful and strategic.

1. Love thyself and let thee be ignorant.

If I'm fighting loud death thoughts, which I have been doing off and on for six years, I don't watch or read the news. I can't. I am trying too hard as it is to soften and change the neural passageways in my brain that take me to despair. I can't deepen those grooves with more heartbreak.

Yes, I feel like an ignorant American who knows more about Princess Kate's firm postpartum tummy than I do about why we are in a silent kind of war that no one talks about. But I am trying to

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/04/02/5-strategies-for-watching-the-news-when-youre-depressed/>

get better at the Golden Rule, which is to love your neighbor as yourself. Read those last two words again. If I am already burning with a fever of 102, the kind thing to do for myself is not put me in front of a warm fire.

2. Know your triggers. I'm getting better at recognizing which stories, specifically, are going to take me down fast, but this has taken some practice: anything involving euthanasia, abortion, rape, or suicide. For example, I avoided all conversations about Brittany Maynard, the beautiful 29-year-old with terminal brain cancer who moved to Oregon with her husband so that she could end her own life by taking a medication prescribed to her from her doctor. Her story triggers too many thoughts about how I should have the right to die, too, because I have a debilitating chronic illness that I will fight the rest of my life. I can't go there because it takes me to a place of bitterness and desolation, not hope.

3. Design a safe news place and time. The other day I sat inside an Amtrak train station watching a video on what to do if a terrorist is on the train. The radical was hiding in the café car with a suspicious backpack. I started looking around the room to see who had a mustache like his and a backpack. I could feel my heart begin to race and my palms sweat, so I got up and waited outside. An airport terminal or Amtrak waiting room is *not* a good place to digest the news. Neither is any of the five days prior to my period or an hour before bed. I usually have to wait for a slow, quiet Sunday when I am not too stressed about work or the kids to carefully start paging through headlines. I will stack the newspapers or magazines on my desk and wait for such a moment. If the pile gets too high, and its mere presence stresses me out, I toss the batch into the recycle bin and repeat step one.

4. Plan for news bombs. Of course, you can't always avoid headlines if you interact with human beings during your day. Although you can walk away from the water-cooler discussion about Russia, the seed has been planted, and by the time you make it back to your cubicle, you could have already made a list of canned goods that you need to stock up on in order to survive the impending nuclear war.

I have a few visualization techniques ready to use whenever my "net" (brain) accidentally catches something. One of them is to envision these crises like bubbles floating through the air right past me. As long as I don't reach out to touch one, it won't pop. It will continue floating by. Another visualization is to imagine myself as a water wall. The surge of panic is the water that falls over me, but that does not touch or affect who I am. The third is to imagine I am in a room full of padding, like a gymnastics studio. I can bounce into the walls, but I am protected by all sorts of padding.

5. Create a desensitization process. The visualizations are helpful for emergency headlines, when I'm hit by some story unexpectedly and react in panic. However, it's also helpful to have a <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/04/02/5-strategies-for-watching-the-news-when-youre-depressed/>

desensitization process in place for those Sunday afternoons you've just spent two hours reading up on the mess in Syria and start hyperventilating.

I start with some deep breathing exercises. The practice of deep breathing stimulates our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), responsible for activities that occur when our body is at rest. It functions in opposite to the sympathetic nervous system, which stimulates activities associated with the flight-or-fight response. I like to think of the PNS as the calm sister and the sympathetic nervous system as the non-sympathetic crazy sister on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Then I repeat some mantras: "I am okay"; "All is good"; "May I be at peace." I may say some prayers for the victims of certain tragedies, or offer them loving kindness: "May they be safe. May they be happy. May they be at peace."

Finally, I will close my eyes and listen to ocean waves (downloaded to my phone), imagining me at the shore, walking among seashells of all different shapes and sizes. I will try to tune out everything but the sound of crashing waves. No Syria, Russia, or Gaza. Just water, wind, and gravity.

Join "The Highly Sensitive Person" Group on Project Beyond Blue, the new depression community.

Originally posted on [Sanity Break](#) at Everyday Health.

Last reviewed: By John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on 28 Mar 2015
Published on PsychCentral.com. All rights reserved.

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/04/02/5-strategies-for-watching-the-news-when-youre-depressed/>