

Overwhelmed by Bad News? Hit the Pause Button

Yener Balan, MD, Kaiser Permanente Northern California executive director of Behavioral Health, offers insight on how to maintain your mental health, talk to children, and support colleagues during times of unrelenting bad news.

Just about every 5 minutes since the beginning of January, another round of frightening coronavirus news is released, often sensationalized, about the dangers of its spread around the globe.

Hospitalizations, travel bans, school closures, shortages, the economy, and on and on. Bad news browsing can be addictive, raising heart rates and stealing sleep.

Hit the Pause Button

“It’s important to recognize the moment between the stimulus — bad news — and the response — coping habits — and to pause and check in with yourself,” Dr. Balan said. “People need to stop for a half second and say, ‘Do I need to eat that entire bag of potato chips, which I normally don’t do, or drink more than I normally do?’”

Dr. Balan said many people are drawn to bad news, because it offers a short dopamine high that quickly fades. The next round of news gives another high and crash, creating a cycle of addiction that soon may have you losing sleep, changing your eating and drinking patterns, and responding differently to stress.

“If I usually respond with a laugh when my colleague gives me a hard time about my funny hat, but now I am suddenly angry, that is a warning sign,” Dr. Balan said. “If you notice these kinds of changes, you are going to benefit if you take a few minutes and ask yourself, ‘Wait, how did I get here?’ You can also talk to a professional.”

Talking (or Not) to Children

What to say to children about bad news such as natural disasters or pandemics depends on their age, Dr. Balan said.

“Be mindful of what they can tolerate, what they can understand, and what ability they have of controlling the anxiety you may be inadvertently putting on them,” Dr. Balan said. “The idea is not to burden them with things they cannot control.”

For younger kids, reminding them to eat right, wash their hands, and go to bed on time in most cases is better than explaining the worst-case-scenario horrors of the coronavirus.

Stress at Work

Dr. Balan said employers and employees have a responsibility to look out for each other, especially if their work is impacted by the pandemic or other emergencies. People in the health care field, for example, may experience anxiety, fear, longer work hours, a barrage of changing strategies, and uncertainty, such as cancelled meetings or conferences.

“If you notice someone in your office who is experiencing all or some of these things, at the very least you should say, ‘Hey, you’ve been working 12 hours every day here, take tomorrow off and we’ll help you get the work done,’” Dr. Balan said.

In general, maintaining mental health during times that may seem apocalyptic requires an intentional awareness of how you are feeling and how you have changed, Dr. Balan said.

“Don’t default from anything other than who you are,” Dr. Balan said. “If you are not as nice as you used to be or if you’re losing or gaining weight, that’s a warning sign. The sooner you are mindful of your choices and patterns, you will have a better chance of staying healthy.”

Northern California Kaiser Permanente members can access mental health care [here](#). Kaiser Permanente employees can also get care through the [Employee Assistance Program](#).