

Doomscrolling – threat to Mental Health and Well-being: A Review

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Abstract

In the early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global threat to health and social stability were in the headlines of the news agenda. 24/7 news coverage was dominated by reports from collapsing hospitals and closed down cities, grave government officials announcing drastic counter-pandemic measures, shifting predictions for a vaccination timeline, and statistics of infected, hospitalized, and deceased in various countries around the globe. COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of our lives. One such effect is doom scrolling/doom surfing which is the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening or depressing, practice researchers found has boomed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a myriad of reasons as to why endlessly looking for bad news feels so strangely fulfilling—a way of feeling in control in a world that feels so out of control all the time, the sense of safety in knowledge or curiosity of the human mind. Studies have shown that doom scrolling has negative impact on mental health, triggering, and worsening one’s mental and neurological health. . It also has impact on physical health, and increase in cases of cervical spondylosis, and posture related issues and joint arthritis. The habit also is not an easy one to break, but thankfully human brain quickly can divert their minds. Generation of awareness and adoption of digital hygiene strategies will contribute toward better affective regulation, mental well-being, healthy use of technology minimizes the experience of anxiety, fear apprehension hopelessness, and intolerance of uncertainty.

Keywords: COVID-19, Doomscrolling, Doomsurfing, negative news, newsfeed, social media

“I would get a lot more sleep if I did not insist on reading the entire internet every night before bed.”

INTRODUCTION

Doomscrolling or doom surfing are new words used to describe the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing, says Merriam-Webster in its blog.^[1]

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This fancy word is affecting all of us irrespective of age, gender, caste, class, religion, and national boundaries. Knowingly or unknowingly doom scrolling has entered into our lives and its affects and can be easily seen.

Well, to make it clearer, the activity of doom scrolling is spending a lot of time looking at your phone or computer and reading bad or negative news stories.

Doomscrolling is the obsessive intake of bad news, even when it creates anxiety and worry. Despite knowing how it makes you feel, you just cannot seem to stop yourself from consuming this toxic information.

During a catastrophe, when uncertainty and misinformation lurks, people incline toward reading news and articles seeking clarifications and answers to their incessant queries. They continuously scroll, and read article one after the other to gather more information, unable to turn away from their screens, which adds to their depression.^[1] Awareness about the present

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situation helps people to foresee the condition in near future which aids their planning and preparation for whatever distress that may arise. However, overfeeding one with disheartening news such as of COVID-19 results in elevated levels of anxiety among people.^[1]

Ken Yeager, PhD, a psychiatrist at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, notes that our brain loves such stuff. “We are all hardwired to see the negative and be drawn to the negative, because it can harm us physically,” He, further, cites evolution as the reason for why humans seek out such negatives – for example “if one’s ancestors learned all about how an ancient creature could injure them and they could avoid that fate.” He also adds it helps us survive.

However, in modern times, most people do not realize that they are even doing this, Thea Gallagher, PsyD, clinic director at the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perlman School of Medicine, tells *Health*. “People have a question, they want an answer, and assume getting it will make them feel better, hence keep on scrolling and scrolling. Many think that will be helpful, but they end up feeling worse afterward.”

To that point, doom scrolling can really challenge the way you see the world, Yeager says. People are drawn to doom scrolling because they feel like they have a sense of being able to control any of that bad news, however, doom scrolling does not create control but only makes the things miserable. The overall impact doom scrolling has on people can vary, but typically, it can make you feel extra anxious, depressed, and isolated.^[2]

Doomscrolling is a particular concept, characterized by compulsive browsing on social media newsfeeds with an obsessive focus on negative and timely news. In simple words, it is called as “Negative Newsfeed Binging.”

It starts when users of social media want to stay up-to-date with the latest news – specifically negative news. Over time, however, it turns into compulsive online scrolling for negative information. Pamela Rutledge, director of the California-based Media Psychology Research Center, puts it as, doomscrolling – “really just describes the compulsive need to try and gets answers when we are afraid.” After all, we do have to assess whether new information constitutes a threat. “We are biologically driven to attend to that.”^[3]

The act of doom scrolling can be attributed to the natural negativity bias people have when consuming information. *Negativity bias is the idea that negative events have a larger impact on one’s mental well-being than good ones.*

There have been numerous studies done on doomscrolling. Clinical psychologist Dr. Carla Marie Manly suggested that for some people, doomscrolling can be addictive, because we are all looking for ways to feel safe during uncertain times. Experts also say that doomscrolling can disrupt sleep patterns, lower attentiveness, and cause overeating.^[4]

HISTORY

The practice of doom scrolling can be compared to an older phenomenon from the 1970’s called the mean world syndrome: “The belief that the world is a more dangerous place to live in than it actually is as a result of long-term exposure to violence-related content on television”. Studies shows that seeing upsetting news leads people to seek out more information on the topic, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

Dictionary meaning of doom is death, destruction, or some other terrible fate. In common parlance, the word doom connotes darkness and evil, referring to one’s fate. In the early days of the Internet, surfing was a common verb used in reference to browsing the Internet; similarly, the word scrolling refers to sliding through text, images, etc.^[5]

The word “Doomscrolling” first appeared in a Twitter post back in 2018. The person who had used it did not have many followers; the tweet was only retweeted by two people, but gained popularity in COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the people who had retweeted was Quartz’s Global Finance Economics reporter, Karen K. Ho. Ho has been identified by Merriam Webster as the person who helped initially popularize the word with her retweet. Since then, Ho has been reusing the word frequently in her tweets.

On the other hand, the word “doomsurfing” was first used by New York Times columnist Kevin Roose in an article published on March 24, 2020, instantly gaining popularity.^[6]

Doomscrolling

Doomscrolling took a storm in 2020 during COVID-19 pandemic. Many people are finding themselves reading continuously bad news about COVID-19 without the ability to stop or step back, the Merriam-Webster blog says.

With reference to COVID-19, the Merriam Webster dictionary website in 2020 declared doomscrolling a “word to watch” for a future formal entry.^[1]

While doomscrolling existed – in practice, if not in name – before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Merriam-Webster points out that it is really taken hold lately. There is no shortage of bad news in the media to “doomscroll.” It is not just about the virus, though: People can doom scroll through news about racial injustice, the George Floyd Protests, 2020 US presidential election, 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Basically, if the news is bad or depressing, you doom scroll it.^[1]

As per the company – Google Trends Newsletter, in 2021, “doomscrolling was searched more than ever globally.”

IT’S RELEVANCE TO THE PRESENT SCENARIO

Internet has reached every nook and corner of the society and most of the individuals are there on it, surfing one or the other social networking site for many things. Hence, it is right to say that at least once in a day a person encounters negative

news and the chances of becoming its victim are taking a steep rising toll.

There is nothing quite like stumbling across a terrible news story online and wanting to absorb every aspect of it for seemingly no good reason. Some people do it because they are bored, some as an escape from reality and others because they are genuinely curious.

THE DANGER IN DANGER – A STUDY ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ON PEOPLE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT^[7]

A study published by Preshita Neha Tudu in IJDRR attempts to find the factors resulting in increased risk of anxiety and stress due to nation-wide lockdown imposed to reduce the transmission of coronavirus outbreak.

The study found that the lockdown during coronavirus outbreak led to boredom, financial loss, and intimate terrorism which resulted in an elevated risk of anxiety and stress. The study also revealed that risk of anxiety and stress further increased during the lockdown due to the moderating role of the media and doomscrolling.

DOOMSCROLLING IT'S AFFECTING YOUR SLEEP HEALTH^[8]

Sharon Goldman in an online article cites the behavior of doomscrolling can seriously disrupt sleep and overall health. This constant barrage of bad news can lead to difficulty falling asleep and eventually insomnia. Poor sleep can provoke symptoms of depression in some individuals. Chronic sleep problems can exacerbate depression, leading to a negative cycle between depression and sleep that can be challenging to break. The author also emphasizes that doomscrolling can increase levels of cortisol and adrenaline, which are stress hormones. Research has shown that chronic levels of elevated stress hormones are associated with many physical health issues, including heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.

DOOMSCROLLING LINKED TO POOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH, STUDY FINDS^[9]

Cassidy Caitlin in an online article refers to the study done and published in the journal Health Communication, found 16.5% of about 1100 people surveyed showed signs of “severely problematic” news consumption, leading to greater levels of stress, anxiety, and poor health.

About 27.3% of those surveyed reported “moderately problematic” levels of news consumption, 27.5% were minimally impacted, and 28.7% experienced no problems.

Of those with severely problematic consumption levels, 74% reported experiencing mental health problems and 61%

reported physical problems compared to 8% and 6.1% of all other study participants.

57% RISE IN INDIANS STAYING UP LATE “DOOMSCROLLING” ON SOCIAL MEDIA: STUDY^[10]

An article published in March 2022, on a survey done in Chennai by Wakefit.co, which is a research and innovation-driven home and sleep solutions company said that the use of electronic devices at night and stressful work culture has also impacted sleep patterns.

The report detailed that 59% of India goes to bed past the ideal bedtime of 11 Pm, and social media browsing is the major factor keeping the late-night owls up, with 36% of respondents blaming digital devices for their sleeplessness.

According to the data, one in four Indians thinks that they have insomnia. Moreover, there has been an increase in late-night social media browsing which has increased by 57% this year as compared to pre-pandemic years.

DOOMSCROLLING: KNOW ITS HEALTH EFFECTS AND WAYS TO KEEP IT IN CHECK^[11]

Dr Fabian Almeida, Consultant Psychiatrist, Fortis Hospital, Kalyan in an published article in Indian Express on May 4, 2022, said that “The doomscrolling habit has had a negative impact on mental health, triggering and worsening anxiety, stress, depression, panic, and rapidly impacting one’s mental and neurological health that is triggered by being glued to the screen.”

Dr Almeida noted beyond mental health, doomscrolling also affects physical being in a major manner. “This is because, with a constant neck flexion position, the cases of Cervical Spondylosis have increased”. Furthermore, constant sitting has given rise to posture-related issues and joint arthritis. Diseases such as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, obesity, and vision issues have increased substantially in the past 2 years as statistics have revealed; increased exposure to radiofrequency waves have increased the incidence of brain tumor as well.

To conclude, most of us spent portion of our time 2020 doomscrolling and few may continue to do so. If you have been consumed by doomscrolling, do not feel bad, and you are certainly not alone. It is human nature to pay attention to new information, especially when we think that the information might help us respond to danger and ultimately help survival.

However, the truth is, in today’s times, doomscrolling is not just unhealthy, it can lead to missed deadlines, incomplete tasks, and cost you valuable time that should be spent with friends and family.

The habit also is not an easy one to break, especially if you have a mobile device and are used to consuming news throughout the day through apps or favorite websites.

However, thankfully, there are things you can do to quickly replace this toxic habit with one that will add value to your life, and improve your mind set.

SIMPLE TIPS CAN BE USED TO AVOID/STOP DOOMSCROLLING

1. Turn off news and social media app information
2. Set a timer before starting to scroll
3. Track your screen time usage
4. Try and read positive newsfeeds
5. Try and spend more time with your family and friends
6. Get into some hobby
7. Exercise
8. Practice meditation
9. Still if cannot stop your urge toward doom scrolling, do not shy to seek help.

Finally, monitor how well the strategies are working for you and do not be afraid to try different approaches. Always remember some trial and error is normal as people figure out which set of strategies will help them.

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