

Why Monitoring your Media Consumption during COVID-19 is Important

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As self-isolation has extended from weeks to months, there has been a surge in information about the importance of combatting loneliness coupled with a surge in virtual meet-ups (e.g., online exercise classes, happy hours), streaming entertainment content, virtual religious services, and even virtual meditation retreats. For those who are working from home, their days are filled with online meetings, conference calls, and seemingly endless screen time. The time people are spending in front of screens has increased substantially. Although this technology provides means of connection and entertainment, it can impact our wellbeing - depending on what we spend our time viewing and doing. A [recent brief](#) published by the Lerner Center addressed the issue of screen time related eye strain and eye fatigue in relation to the increase in the amount of time people are spending engaged with digital screens.¹ Research conducted prior to COVID-19 found higher rates of mental health problems association with spending more time engaged with media.^{2,3}

Awareness of Screen Time and Media Usage Patterns

Boredom and loneliness can be a major driving force behind our desire to have the television running in the background. However, it is important to note how this content is affecting you. What we consume on our screens affects our mental state.^{3,4}

Watching the news for extended periods of time has the potential to agitate individuals and is associated with increased anxiety.⁵ Most news outlets are businesses, so their content is designed to maximize viewer engagement with their product. Research shows that they rely on fear, outrage, and anger to keep people engaged with their news media platforms.^{6,7} The fact is, you don't need this much news to stay informed. Much of the content during a 1-hr news program is punditry (opinions, debates) rather than actual news. You can stay relatively informed by tuning in to the news once in the morning and once in the evening for about 10 minutes at a time.

In addition to the news, the types of movies and shows we watch or listen to can shape our mood as well. Content that is violent, loud, and fearful affects us both physiologically and psychologically. When we watch content that makes us angry or scared our breathing tends to become rapid and shallow and our muscles become tense - this in turn signals the stress response in our minds as well as our bodies. During a period where we are already anxious and on edge, this added stress response is not good for our health.

Recommendations

It can be helpful to take an inventory of how much time you are spending with various types of media and to note how you feel before and after engaging with them. You might think of it as similar to keeping a dietary record which allows you to reflect on what you are consuming and how it makes you feel. The next time you watch something that makes you angry or scared, notice how your breathing, heart rate, and muscles respond.

Maintaining a record of how you are spending your time engaged with television, online, and on digital devices (phones, tablets) can provide insight. Try recording the amount of time you spend engaged with various media for a day, including notes about how you felt before and after. If you notice that you felt more anxious or irritated after going on social media or watching the news, then you can make informed choices about how you spend your time engaged with these platforms and devices in the future.

Monitoring the amount of time you spend engaged with screens and managing the type of content you are consuming is important for both physical and mental well-being. It is an opportunity for you to adjust the way you are spending your time as a strategy to protect your health during an uncertain period where we have so little control.

References

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