

# News Overload!

## Media Mash and Mental Health

There's an old saying in media circles that "if it bleeds, it leads." The translation: bad news sells. Unfortunately, bad news increases stress, so the more we reduce its impact on our mental health, the better. Although most people prefer good news, bad news demands attention because knowing what to fear or avoid is more important to survival. We are "hard wired" to pay attention to it. We have little control over the amount and timing of bad news — and its cousin, "fear," news. Fear news (news that we should worry about—economics, social concerns, climate change, foreign relations) is stressful too, and can influence behavior, possibly causing you to act in ways that you might not originally considered.

News coverage on TV, the internet, PDAs, radio, email, newspapers, and mobile phones inundates us with huge amounts of data. We face news overload. This media mash - trivia, speculation, opinion, gossip, inaccurate facts, and fear mongering is what's available, in spite of the fact that people desire accurate, current news, along with well-informed opinions.

Most people would happily skip media mash. Unfortunately, news sources are fighting for ratings; they will include media mash as long as we watch it. We must get control of repetitive, sensationalist news and replace it with broad, in-depth, quality news coverage. This will allow us to avoid stress by hearing news presented in a factual, non-alarmist format and by eliminating wasted time spent on repetitive sensationalism.

How do we gain control of news sources? Speak up! Write—don't email—news sources that offer inaccurate, fear-based, or trivial news and complain. Media outlets use a formula to determine viewer opinions: *A phone call is worth a hundred voices. One letter is worth a thousand voices!* Then, stop watching! Complain in the same way to news' sponsors. If sponsors receive enough complaints, they will pressure news sources to make changes. They don't need to conduct expensive research.

Demand that each news outlet specialize in one kind of news. Right now, each news source covers all kinds of news and repeats each item over and over endlessly. Because of this, we can't avoid news that doesn't interest us, or is basically trash. There is a place for gossip, fear news, etc., but it shouldn't be on every news outlet. If each news outlet has its own specialization, it will be quick and easy to choose news we want to hear and avoid exposure to stressful news.

The news sources that choose to specialize in "serious" news need to increase in-depth reporting, as opposed to shallow sound bites that give little information. They should eliminate "spin," the slanting of information to capture the listener's attention, and replace it with facts, research, and expert opinion, supplemented by eyewitness interviews. These sources could choose to specialize in world news or news from one country.

Each individual needs to take control of his or her own news sources. Refuse to watch, read, or listen to news that is stressful. Plan on using a news aggregator. A news aggregator is a software program that automatically finds news on the internet and stores it for you to review. The news may be headlines, summaries, excerpts, full text articles, links, or images. It is quick and easy to review, delete, and sort news, and saves having to visit multiple websites. You control the quality and relevance of the news.

It's a tough assignment, but if we all work together to pressure news sources and their sponsors to change the way news is reported, we will be able to choose news we want to hear and the format in which we receive it. One of the most powerful ways to do this is with your channel changer and an assertive letter writing campaign.

