Connected to the world: Surviving the 24/7 news cycle

Information. We live in a 24-hour news cycle: your online news feed and your "all-news" radio or TV stations are happy to keep you informed about the latest things *that may be deadly.* Even if you don't pull up the news, your preferred home page may be streaming a banner of events in your region, your country, and across the world. Then there are the notifications: buzzing, ringing, chiming, and pop-ups to let you know about messages received, tweets followed, and alerts from other social media connections. And that's just your personal life—add school and things get even busier!

We are so connected to anyone, anything, anywhere and anytime, but is all of this helping us, as Oprah would say, "to live our best lives"?

Recent research suggests there are some pitfalls to our constant connectedness:

- There is now the "phantom" phenomenon: someone reaches for their mobile *as they believe they just received a new message.* There is no message.
- Self-reports indicate increased anxiety and stress in adults, young adults, and increasingly teens.
- Smartphone and mobile users report they cannot see themselves leaving home without their devices.

It may be worthwhile to consider the effects on your personal, school, and family relationships. If you see yourself in the three points below, keep reading! There are ways to balance the pressure of being connected and *feeling* connected.

Just a sec, I just have to read/reply/like/post/share – We've all said something similar when running late to keep a commitment with classmates, friends, or family. In the moment, you may have experienced the situation as urgent: senses on full alert, tunnel vision, increased breathing rate, feeling flushed. It's just an e-mail, but by treating it as urgent, we initiate physical, emotional, and neurochemical cues similar to the *flight or fight response*. If you're escaping danger, this response is very handy. But, looking at the past day, week, or month, how often were you alerted to truly urgent situations requiring immediate and full attention?

Breaking news - The first headline, banner, alert, or pop-up to inform us of situations of interest or stories we've been following is helpful. However, whatever the medium, repeated receipt of the same information can be unhelpful and can actually make us feel overwhelmed and irritable. Constantly viewing media commentary and coverage, especially visual imagery, of a natural disaster or a catastrophic event can actually have a secondary or vicarious traumatizing effect. It's good to keep informed but overexposure to sensational events can leave you with a skewed world view.

Can you pay attention? We are now accustomed to claiming we're multitasking when caught out for a lapse of attention. As we dart to each new stimulus, it's easy to become very distracted and lose focus. Losing focus during a group meeting or lecture might be embarrassing; when cycling or driving, such distractions can and do lead to worse. In social situations, if you're interacting more with your device than your companions, you may be jeopardizing how connected you feel to your friends and vice versa.

For most of us, it's not realistic to log off completely and even if we could, we probably wouldn't want to anyway. But there are ways to get the right amount of connectedness in our 24/7 world.

Use these strategies to handle the 24/7 news cycle gracefully:

- **Decide how to get involved –** Choose for yourself when and how often to attend to alerts and e-mails. Use your calendar to make appointments for reading e-mail, checking Facebook, etc. This will be hard at first but may leave you feeling more refreshed at the end of the day.
- **Use your settings to prioritize messages –** Setting up rules can help you identify which messages you need to review. Using rules lets you prioritize e-mails from your instructor and deprioritize the ones from the friend always sending questionable jokes.

- **Allow yourself disconnected time –** Decide whether that is time spent in the company of significant others or by yourself. The important thing is giving yourself a period of time to focus on your thoughts or with the person you are with.
- **Try an e-diet or an e-fast –** By yourself or with a friend, agree to not connect to your social media outlets for a set period of time. Feeling really adventurous? Go old school for a week and use your phone only for phoning people.
- **Explore something new—**Whether online or in the world, find out about something that interests you.