

# Resources during times of uncertainty



Every individual is unique, but it's been said that we have far more in common with each other than things that divide us. Uncertainty can increase tension and emotions, there are ways to move forward and put your mental health first.

Expert guidance to help you and your family during this time.



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# How to avoid doomscrolling

Staying informed in the digital age has never been easier. However, the ease of access to information can sometimes have a downside, leading to a phenomenon known as "doomscrolling." Studies show that it can significantly impact mental health and overall wellbeing.

## What is doomscrolling?

Also known as doomsurfing, doomscrolling refers to the compulsive tendency to continue absorbing negative news despite the adverse effects. The term gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period characterized by a surge in distressing news about the virus, economic instability and social unrest. The constant exposure to such content can create a cycle of anxiety and stress, as individuals find it challenging to disconnect from the newsfeed.

People tend to doomscroll due to a combination of psychological inclinations and the design of digital platforms. Negativity bias makes individuals more attentive to negative information, an evolutionary trait meant to enhance survival.

During times of uncertainty, unrest and crisis, the urge to stay informed to mitigate anxiety can lead to compulsive consumption of distressing news. Social media algorithms exacerbate this behavior by prioritizing sensational and emotionally charged content.

Research shows certain groups are more prone to doomscrolling:

- Younger people aged 18-29
- Men are slightly more likely than women
- People who closely follow or participate in politics

Understanding these tendencies and demographic patterns can inform strategies to mitigate the negative impact of excessive exposure to bad news.

## Impacts on mental health

The constant exposure to distressing information can create a cycle of negativity, where individuals feel increasingly overwhelmed and powerless. Doomscrolling can lead to:

- **Increased anxiety and stress.** The brain perceives a relentless stream of bad news as a constant threat, triggering the body's stress response and making it difficult to relax.
- **Depression.** Repeatedly focusing on negative content can contribute to feelings of hopelessness and sadness, potentially leading to or exacerbating depression.

- **Sleep disruption.** Consuming distressing information, especially before bedtime, can interfere with sleep patterns. Additionally, the blue light emitted by mobile phones or computer screens further disrupts sleep.
- **Reduced productivity.** Spending excessive time doomscrolling can distract from work and daily responsibilities, leading to decreased productivity and increased feelings of frustration and inadequacy.
- **Social isolation.** Individuals who doomscroll may withdraw from real-life social interactions to consume online content, leading to isolation.

## How to avoid doomscrolling

Take these steps to give yourself distance, help create healthier patterns and reduce the urge to scroll.

- **Set time limits.** Allocate specific times for checking news and social media. Use apps or built-in features on your devices to limit screen time and remind you to take breaks.
- **Curate your feed.** Follow accounts and sources that provide balanced and positive news. Unfollow or mute sources that consistently share negative content. Choose a few reliable news sources and check them at designated times. This approach helps you stay informed without becoming overwhelmed by the constant influx of information.
- **Practice mindfulness.** Engage in mindfulness practices such as meditation, deep breathing or yoga to keep you grounded and less likely to participate in doomscrolling.
- **Engage in offline activities.** Focus on hobbies and activities that don't involve screens. During times of crisis, spending time in nature can provide a healthy distraction. Find other sources of relaxation, such as reading and physical activity.
- **Connect with others.** Make an effort to connect with friends and family in person as much as possible. Real-life interactions can offer support and a sense of community, counteracting feelings of isolation.
- **Seek professional help.** If doomscrolling is significantly impacting your mental health, consider speaking to a therapist or other mental health professional. These experts can provide effective strategies to manage anxiety and stress.

Remember that while it is important to keep up with current events and be an informed citizen, as you read or listen to news and media reports, notice how your body reacts. Paying conscious attention to increased anxiety, agitation or stress can help motivate you to step away from information that is impacting you most.



## Tips for controlling anger

Anger is a natural emotion that everyone experiences from time to time. However, uncontrolled anger can lead to serious problems in personal and professional relationships and impact mental health and overall wellbeing. Managing anger is crucial for leading a balanced and fulfilling life.

### Importance of controlling anger

Uncontrolled anger can damage relationships with family, friends and co-workers. Learning to manage anger can help you communicate more effectively and maintain healthier relationships.

Additionally, anger can cloud judgment and lead to impulsive decisions that you might regret later. Controlling anger helps you think more clearly and make better choices.

Research studies show chronic anger has been linked to various health issues, including:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Weakened immune system
- Depression
- Anxiety

Managing anger can contribute to better physical health and overall emotional wellbeing.

### Tips for managing anger

The first step in controlling anger is recognizing the physical and emotional signs that you're becoming angry. These might include a racing heart, clenched fists or feeling hot. When you feel anger rising, practice these steps:

- **Take a break.** Step outside, go for a walk or find a quiet place to calm down.
- **Practice deep breathing.** Putting one hand on your chest and another on your belly and becoming conscious of your breathing can help calm your mind and body. Try taking slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth to help reduce tension.
- **Use relaxation techniques.** Meditation, yoga or listening to calming music can help manage anger. Explore relaxation techniques that work best for you.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity can help reduce stress and improve your mood. Regular exercise can be a great way to manage anger and improve overall health.
- **Communicate effectively.** Express your feelings in a non-confrontational way. Use "I" statements to describe your feelings and needs rather than blaming others. For example, "I get upset when..." instead of "You make me upset when..." Additionally, always take a moment to think before speaking. In situations when you become angry, it's good to count to 10 before saying words that you may regret.
- **Find solutions.** Instead of focusing on what made you angry, work on finding a solution to the problem. This proactive approach can help you feel more in control and less frustrated.

### Reach out for professional help

Sometimes, managing anger on your own can be challenging. If you find that anger interferes with your daily life, it might be time to seek professional help. Therapists and counselors can provide you with tools and strategies to manage anger more effectively.

## Communicating during an argument

Arguing can be a helpful tool. It can help both parties express their opinions and work toward a solution. However, arguments can only be productive when both parties are respectful in their disagreement, open to listening and willing to communicate effectively.

Here are a few tips for improving communication during an argument.

- **Try to understand the other person's perspective.** Take a moment to put yourself in the other person's shoes. What concerns would you have if you were them? How much would the topic affect you? Answering questions like these may offer insight into the other person's thoughts and feelings.
- **Stay on topic and address the root concern.** It can be easy to allow the conversation to derail into other topics, but staying on track is important. If you find you are moving away, gently guide the conversation back by using statements like, "Back to what we were discussing..." or, "Let's address this later and go back to the topic at hand."
- **Ask for clarification.** If what the other person has said is unclear, ask them to repeat it using different words or to explain further. Another approach is to repeat their point of view back to them to ensure you understand. Ask the other person to fill in any gaps you may have missed or misunderstood.
- **Ask what they would be willing to compromise on.** Compromising is one of the best ways to find common ground and to please all parties involved. Once you know where the other person stands, you can also offer your compromises. For example, you would like to spend time alone with your friends, but your partner feels left out. A suitable compromise might be for you to spend a few hours with your friends and for your partner to join you later in the evening.
- **Apologize and take responsibility when needed.** Recognizing when you are in the wrong is crucial for an argument to be productive. Apologize—preferably in the moment—anytime you say something you shouldn't have and take responsibility for your actions. For example, if your co-worker is angry with you for forgetting to reload the copier, apologize and promise to do better next time. Often, this will allow you to avoid the argument altogether.

While arguing may not be comfortable, conflict is inevitable and learning to navigate it in a healthy manner is vital for building strong, lasting relationships.

## Stress management

Everyone experiences some level of stress. Sometimes, it is small and manageable, but other times, it can feel difficult to control. Everybody reacts to stress differently and has their own ways of coping with it.

Stress can occur at any time and can happen at any life-changing event, such as weddings, graduations, changes in jobs, moving, etc. You might feel yourself getting stressed during certain times of the year, such as during the holidays, birthdays or at anniversaries of something traumatic.

There are many things you can do to reduce the intensity of stress or even eliminate it. Listed below are some techniques to try and reduce stress:

- Identify the source of stress and whether it is something that is short-term or long-term
- Look at what has worked for you before and assess if it might work again
- Keep breathing and take some slow, deep breaths to help you relax
- Engage in physical activity to alleviate some of the tension in your body
- Read a book or listen to some music
- Plan your day and try doing things when you have more time to focus on them
- Know your limitations and avoid taking on extra responsibility if you cannot accommodate it into your life
- Keep a stress journal for your thoughts and feelings
- Deal with difficult situations early to keep feelings of anxiety and worry from building up over time
- Pick and choose your battles carefully so you can spend your time and energy on something more constructive
- Focus on the positives and try acknowledging a few, good things about your day or overall life
- Use your support system and remember you have friends and family that can help when stressed

Sometimes when the stress is chronic, or if nothing seems to ease it, getting counseling can help. A mental health professional can help you make changes in your life to reduce or eliminate those stressors.

## Stress and the digestive system

Stress is an unavoidable aspect of life. However, it can profoundly affect various bodily systems, particularly the digestive system. Understanding the connection between stress and digestive health is crucial for managing and mitigating gastrointestinal issues that stress can worsen.

### The vagus nerve

Research has revealed that the brain and gut are in constant communication. The vagus nerve, the longest cranial nerve in the body, is pivotal in connecting the brain to the gastrointestinal tract. This nerve is part of the parasympathetic nervous system, often called the "rest and digest" system.

When the body is under stress, the activity of the vagus nerve is suppressed, which can lead to a host of digestive issues. This suppression can decrease digestive secretions and motility, contributing to various gastrointestinal conditions. Exposure to stress also results in alterations of the brain-gut interactions ("brain-gut axis"), ultimately leading to the development of a broad array of gastrointestinal disorders.

### Microbiome

Gut microbiota, gut microbiome or gut flora are the microorganisms, bacteria, archaea, fungi and viruses living in the digestive tract. It influences your overall wellbeing in a variety of ways. Some gut bacteria are more helpful than others.

A study in Nature Mental Health found distinct biological signatures in the microbiomes of people who are highly resilient in the face of stressful events. Researchers found the gut barrier absorbs nutrients and keeps toxins and pathogens from entering the bloodstream that cause inflammation. When there is inflammation, it acts as a stress signal to the brain that all is not well. While more research is required to pinpoint exact ways to improve the gut microbiome, trials showed results that a diet focused on vegetables and fruits is known to influence the microbiota and could reduce perceived stress.

### Stress-aggravated digestive conditions

These are some of the conditions that can develop or worsen with stress:

- **Peptic ulcers.** Stress has long been suspected of contributing to the development and aggravation of peptic ulcers. Although the primary causes of peptic ulcers are a bacterial infection (*H. pylori*) and the use of NSAIDs, stress can exacerbate the condition by increasing stomach acid production and reducing blood flow to the stomach lining.
- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).** IBS is a common disorder characterized by symptoms such as abdominal pain, bloating and altered bowel habits. Studies have shown that stress is a well-known trigger for IBS symptoms and can exacerbate the frequency and severity of IBS flare-ups.
- **Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).** GERD involves the backflow of stomach acids into the esophagus, causing heartburn and other symptoms. Studies have shown that stress can increase the production of stomach acid and relax the lower esophageal sphincter, worsening GERD symptoms.



- **Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).** Conditions such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis fall under IBD, which involves chronic inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract. Research indicates that stress can trigger or worsen IBD symptoms, potentially due to stress-induced changes in immune function and gut permeability.
- **Functional dyspepsia.** This condition is characterized by chronic or recurrent pain or discomfort in the upper abdomen. Stress is believed to affect gastric motility and sensitivity, leading to the symptoms.

## Managing stress for better digestive health

Managing stress is crucial for maintaining a healthy digestive system. Here are a few strategies:

- **Mindfulness and relaxation techniques.** Meditation, deep breathing and yoga can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, enhancing vagus nerve activity and promoting better digestion.
- **Regular exercise.** Physical activity can help regulate the stress response and improve overall gastrointestinal function.
- **Healthy diet.** Consuming a balanced diet rich in fiber, fruits and vegetables can support digestive health.
- **Vagus nerve stimulation.** Gargling with water, singing loudly and gentle or firm touch foot massages can stimulate the vagus nerve.
- **Professional support.** Seeking help from health care professionals, including psychologists and gastroenterologists, can provide targeted strategies to manage stress and its impact on the digestive system.

Source: National Library of Medicine

## Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is your body's reaction to stress and can occur even if there is no current threat. Occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. Many people worry about things such as health, money or family problems. But anxiety disorders involve more than temporary worry or fear.

If anxiety doesn't go away and begins to interfere with your life, it could affect your health. You could experience problems with sleeping or with your immune, digestive, cardiovascular and reproductive systems. You also may be at higher risk for developing a mental illness such as an anxiety disorder or depression. The symptoms can interfere with daily activities such as job performance, schoolwork and relationships.

### Generalized anxiety disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) usually involves a persistent feeling of anxiety or dread, which can interfere with daily life. It is not the same as occasionally worrying about things or experiencing anxiety due to stressful life events—people living with GAD experience frequent anxiety for months, if not years.

Symptoms of GAD include:

- Feeling restless, wound-up or on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Being irritable
- Having headaches, muscle aches, stomachaches or unexplained pains
- Difficulty controlling feelings of worry
- Having sleep problems, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep

### Panic disorder

People with panic disorder have frequent and unexpected panic attacks. Panic attacks are sudden periods of intense fear, discomfort or a sense of losing control even when there is no apparent danger or trigger. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop panic disorder.

During a panic attack, a person may experience:

- Pounding or racing heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or tingling
- Chest pain
- Feelings of impending doom
- Feelings of being out of control

People with panic disorder often worry about when the next attack will happen and actively try to prevent future attacks by avoiding places, situations or behaviors they associate with panic attacks. Panic attacks can occur as frequently as several times a day or as rarely as a few times a year.

## Social anxiety disorder

Social anxiety disorder is an intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. For people with social anxiety disorder, the fear of social situations may feel so intense that it seems beyond their control. For some people, this fear may get in the way of going to work, attending school or doing everyday things.

People with social anxiety disorder may experience:

- Blushing, sweating or trembling
- Pounding or racing heart
- Stomachaches
- Rigid body posture or speaking with an overly soft voice
- Difficulty making eye contact or being around people they don't know
- Feelings of self-consciousness or fear that people will judge them negatively

If you are struggling to cope, or the symptoms of your stress or anxiety won't go away, it may be time to talk to a professional. Talk therapy and medication are the two main treatments for anxiety, and many people benefit from a combination of the two.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health

## What is resilience?

Resilience refers to the ability to successfully adapt to stressors, maintaining psychological wellbeing in the face of adversity. It's the ability to "bounce back" from difficult experiences. Resilience is not a trait that people either have or don't have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in everyone.

Resilience is about being adaptable and flexible and recognizing strengths you might not have realized you had. Resilient people can adapt to stress, crises and trauma. Some people are born with a strong sense of resilience, while others may need to learn skills and develop it over time.

Resilience isn't about "toughing it out" or reacting to every setback with a smile. Resilient people still feel sad, angry or frustrated when faced with a setback. But they find ways to move forward to tackle challenges with creativity, hope and a positive attitude.

If you would like to become more resilient, these tips and information can help. Remember that resilience is a skill, like riding a bike. The more you practice, the better you'll be. Here are some ways to increase your resilience:

- **Maintain a sense of perspective.** Ask yourself, "How big is this problem really?" and "What do I need to do?" Remember not to blow things out of proportion or catastrophize, remind yourself of the good in your life and that things really will change.
- **Recognize that you have a choice in how you handle challenges.** You can't control what happens to you, but you can choose how you respond. You can choose to react to changes and problems with hope and a positive attitude.
- **Accept change.** Change and uncertainty are part of life. When you accept this, you'll be better able to react to change with flexibility.
- **Anticipate challenges.** Focus on the positive ways in which you can meet challenges rather than possible negative outcomes. This will help you feel more in control.
- **Learn how to calm yourself.** When you feel yourself reacting to a challenge with escalating stress and anxiety, take steps to calm yourself (deep breathing, replacing negative thoughts).
- **Overcome your fear.** All of us feel fear, especially when we're faced with a change. But fear can hold us back from new experiences and opportunities for growth. If you are faced with a challenge that feels scary or overwhelming, start with the simplest thing you can do that takes you in the direction you want to go. Ask yourself, "What's the smallest thing I can do to get started?" Once you've thought about it, do it.
- **Let go of your anger.** A difficult challenge can cause you to feel angry and upset. These feelings are normal, but they won't help you move forward. Work through your anger and try to let go of negative feelings by writing about them or talking with a trusted friend.
- **Take action.** Avoid dwelling on problems. Focus on solutions instead. Figure out what you can do and then do it, one step at a time.
- **Laugh.** Even when things seem to be falling apart around you, try to find time to smile and laugh. It's very healing, and it will help you forget your worries for a few moments. Rent a movie that makes you laugh or spend time with a friend with a good sense of humor.

Source: Department of State: [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)

## Dealing with uncertainty

It has been said that change is the only constant in life. Uncertainty is a natural part of life and something that almost everybody feels from time to time. Being uncertain or unsure does not mean you are lost; it simply means you are living your life. At times, uncertainty can be overwhelming. The trick is to stay aware of the uncertainty. Deal with life's curveballs one day at a time, handle what you can when you can, and trust that the rest will work itself out in time.

### Ways to cope

Dealing with it may be easier said than done, but there are a few ways to help yourself cope when things get challenging.

- **Acknowledge and accept.** Recognize that uncertainty is a natural part of life and try to accept it rather than fight against it. Be flexible, open to change and adaptable to new situations. Reframe your thinking by challenging negative thoughts and viewing them in a more positive or realistic light. Regularly remind yourself of things you are grateful for to foster a positive mindset.
- **Focus on things within your control.** Break tasks into manageable steps and focus on achieving small, actionable goals. Keep your living and working spaces orderly to create a sense of control.
- **Learn stress management techniques.** Taking a walk, going for a drive, talking with a friend, reading a book, listening to music, watching a movie or soaking in a bubble bath tend to offer stress relief for many people. Most of these techniques can even be put to use if you are limited on time. Engage in mindfulness and relaxation techniques by practicing being present in the moment without judgment. Use progressive muscle relaxation by tensing up your body and then slowly relaxing each muscle group.
- **Breathe.** When the uncertainty builds up, stop and breathe, regroup and find a perspective of clarity. Techniques like diaphragmatic breathing reduce anxiety.
  1. Sit or lie down.
  2. Slowly count to four while you breathe in through your nose. Hold your breath for a second.
  3. Count to four again while breathing out slowly through your mouth.
  4. Repeat a few times or as long as you'd like.
- **Seek support.** Admitting you cannot do it alone is not a weakness. Share your feelings with trusted friends or family to gain support and perspective. Reach out for professional assistance; a therapist or counselor can provide guidance and coping strategies.



## Additional resources

### Navigating times of uncertainty can be challenging

Access your portal with your group code: **northwestern**. Once there, locate the 'check my emotional fitness' button. It can assist in identifying challenging emotions.

Explore the SupportLinc portal to find additional tip sheets, flash courses, toolkits and other helpful information.

If you need further assistance, Care Advocates are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, at no cost to you. Call the number below for in-the-moment support, guidance and additional resources.



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