

IT MIGHT

BE TIME

FOR A

NEWS

DETOX

Your brain, your nerves, and
your scrolling finger need a break.
Here's what 30 days without a headline
could do for your mental health.

BY HEATHER MAYER IRVINE

I WOULDN'T SAY I'm obsessed with the news, but I knew I needed a time-out. Mass shootings, destruction in Ukraine, bomb cyclones, heat waves, Covid variants, flesh-eating bacteria, not to mention nihilistic politics and the blather surrounding the 2022 midterms—everything felt like it was coming to a(nother) boil late last year. I found myself doom-scrolling and hope-refreshing so much that it could make me less present for Real Life and all it contained: my job, my

family, my friends. I thought disconnecting from the news for a month would help drop my stress level, reduce my anxiety, and make me feel less distracted overall.

Researchers have been analyzing the effect of news consumption on mental health, and the results are . . . not great. One 2022 study found that regular exposure to the news through social media was associated with an increase in depression and PTSD. But the same study did offer hope: “Strategies to limit doomscrolling and engage in positive activities may offset the detrimental effect of engaging in these behaviors.”

I wanted to find out if I could go 30 days without news—to give myself that offset and see how I felt. In preparation for my experiment, I set my newsletters to immediately archive, logged out of Twitter, and told my husband I couldn’t join him for *Late Night with Seth Meyers* (which we just call “Seth” at this point). I’d long ago blocked news alerts on my phone (who needs that level of stress?), and without regular social interaction (I’m a parent of three young kids), no one usually asks me, “Did you see the news?”

I also contacted psychiatrist Ken Duckworth, M.D., to help me make sense of anything I might experience over the course of the month. Dr. Duckworth is the chief medical officer for the National Alliance on Mental Illness and author of the newly released *You Are Not Alone*, a tome of useful advice about navigating mental-health challenges.

And then, for 30 days last fall, I quit.

DAY 1

STRANGELY AND UNEXPECTEDLY, I felt worse. While my newfound blissful ignorance was freeing, I also felt guilty that I had no clue what was going on around me. Dr. Duckworth told me to go easy on myself. He said the mere fact that I worried about not being, in some capacity, in the know revealed a lot about me as a person and my desire to learn and be informed.

DAY 6

OKAY, AT THIS POINT I really did not like not knowing what was going on. No one had asked me, “Did you hear about [tragedy x]?” which I took to be a good

sign. But without knowledge of what was happening in the world, I felt at risk of inadvertently sending an email or text with a chipper message at an inappropriate time. Yes, I wanted to disconnect, but I felt so disconnected.

DAY 13

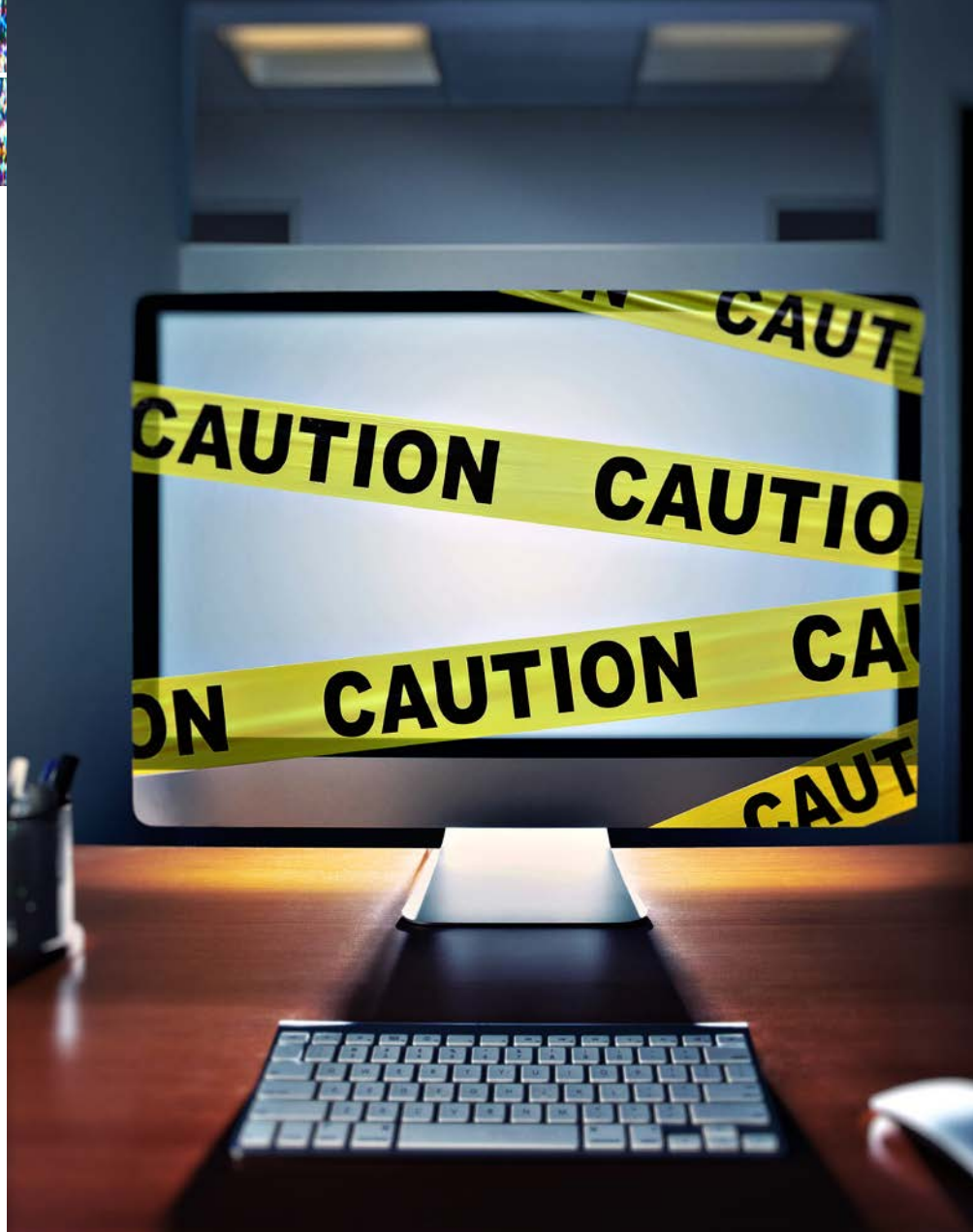
BLIPS OF THE NEWS (Kanye’s anti-Semitic tweets, Herschel Walker’s debate gaffes) slipped through to me via non-news channels. And almost halfway through this experiment, I wouldn’t say I felt less anxiety about not reading the news, at least consciously. In fact, not knowing what was going on—just hearing whispers without the full story—was starting to become stressful. Also, I missed Seth, along with the comforting routine of watching the show with my husband. Isn’t it a good thing to laugh at the news together?

DAY 23

I HAD TO QUICKLY swipe away Apple News headlines on my phone to avoid seeing them. It felt dishonest to try to sneak a peek. But my urge was understandable, Dr. Duckworth said. “The key is to have a good handle on what you can tolerate,” he told me about walking the line between informed and preoccupied. “You need to know yourself.”

Dr. Duckworth said, for example, that he no longer listens to the podcast *The Daily* and instead tunes in to more thoughtful pieces that explain the why behind the headlines. “I have a low dose of news intake, but it’s not zero,” he said. “I’m interested in how [our country] became so polarized and am less interested in the day-to-day infighting.”

That made sense to me: What kind of news you consume might be just as critical as how much.



“Know yourself. If you have a vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and despair, dose the news. Read it but don’t read all the stories about everything.”

DAY 24

WITH LESS THAN a week to go, I felt a compulsion to check the news like none I’d felt before. Maybe I was entering the most intense stage of some kind of pseudo-withdrawal. Maybe it was because I was almost finished and was itching for information. But honestly, as Election Day and my end date neared, I was getting sort of excited to see what I’d been missing.

DAY 27

THREE DAYS BEFORE my experiment was over, I felt, perhaps, lighter, but also newly naive. And I still wasn’t sure if the trade-off was worth it, overall, for my mental health.

DAY 30

I OPENED UP Twitter, and the first thing I saw? A shooting.

“There’s a lot of bad news out there,” Dr. Duckworth told me. “Know yourself. If you have a vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and despair, dose the news. Read it but don’t read all the stories about everything.” He had a point. It’s not about going without—it’s about understanding how much is good for you.

I THOUGHT I’D sleep better without the news. I slept (or didn’t sleep) about the

same. I thought I’d be more connected to my family. I missed Seth time with my husband. I thought I’d access some kind of higher and calmer plane of existence. I just felt out of the loop.

On Election Day, however, while watching the too-close-to-call races, I realized that my mental health may have been better off without access to all the predictions and punditry. The news itself isn’t the whole problem. It’s the news about the news, the Twitter-thread rabbit holes, the snake eating its tail.

The news itself I don’t have control over. The rest of my news fixation—that’s where Dr. Duckworth showed me I wasn’t helpless. I just have to find and manage my trouble spots. For some people, that might be vanquishing the constant page-refreshing of digital news sites by subscribing to (gasp!) an actual newspaper they can digest in a sitting or two. For others, it might mean setting boundaries around when they check their feeds (say, not before breakfast or after dinner). And for people like me, it means getting to the root cause.

Which is why my next cleanse will be a social-media one. ■

HEATHER MAYER IRVINE is a freelance journalist, a former food and nutrition editor for Runner’s World, and the author of The Runner’s World Vegetarian Cookbook.

BREAKING (THE) NEWS!

If you think you might benefit from a headline hiatus, here are a few ways to do it, according to psychiatrist Ken Duckworth, M.D.

1 SWITCH YOUR MEDIA HABITS

Do you devour twice-daily news-podcast roundups? Try listening instead to traditional news radio, which has a slower pace and offers needed context. Do you scan only the headlines and catastrophize without reading the articles? Click the headline that most interests you and read the whole thing—in multiple sittings, if necessary—to understand the full story.

2 SEPARATE SOCIAL FROM NEWS

Consider deleting your social accounts—for your health. One 2022 study found that after Facebook was made accessible to all college students, severe depression in those students increased by 7 percent and anxiety disorder increased by 20 percent. If you want to keep an account to “stay in touch with friends,” that’s fine. But just stick to that.

3 DO SOMETHING

If the news is stressing you out, you don’t have to just sit there and watch it all unfold, Dr. Duckworth explains. “You can select despair or you can select action.” To combat election-news stress, for example, canvas your neighborhood ahead of the vote or make monetary donations to the politicians you choose to support. “People don’t like to feel helpless,” Dr. Duckworth says.