

Protecting Your Mental Health

During Tragic Current Events

By LifeSpeak Inc. expert
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Humans are capable of the most beautiful acts of love and solidarity, but also of the most horrific acts of violence. Conflicts, wars, colonization, genocides, interpersonal violence, and abuse as well as natural disasters like earthquakes, pandemics, and floods have always been part of human history. The individual and collective trauma they produce is part of our histories as well as our individual and collective stories of resilience.

Something has, however, changed with the advent of information technologies and the Internet. The prevalence of smartphones, the breadth of reach, and the speed of the Internet and social media have globalized our lives in unprecedented ways. Today, we're exposed to the news and videos of events around the globe, at times, instantly, as they happen. Disasters and violence are often filmed and relayed without any filtering, with little regard to how this impacts the audience on the receiving end.

In addition, the tremendous outreach of social media across the planet has given a unique platform for negative influencers and disruptive political figures. Today, they can reach thousands, even millions of people, and thus influence and impact great numbers of audiences with misinformation and divisive, hateful, and even violent messages. In the coming years, the progress in Artificial Intelligence and deep fake technologies will bring even more sophistication, making it even harder for people to distinguish real from fake news and events, as well as those that come from humans vs machines.



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Impacts of exposure to hateful and violent content



We must not take the impacts of exposure to hateful and violent images and messages lightly. A recent systematic review of scientific literature conducted by the Canadian Practitioners Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) shows that exposure to hate online and in traditional media is associated with an increase in negative attitudes towards groups targeted by hate, a decrease in intergroup trust, and an increase of propagation and perpetration of hate online. Exposure to hate online is also associated with violent hateful behavior offline, higher depressive symptoms, and lower satisfaction with life for those targeted by it. Importantly, this study found that exposure to such hate affected us regardless of our attitudes toward these messages. But exactly what does this mean?

It means that exposure to violent images, regardless of whether we care, agree, or disagree with what is heard or viewed, will still affect us, more often than not, in a negative manner. It may indeed increase our feelings of anxiety, depression, and pessimism, and even lead to trauma and post-traumatic symptoms, even if we are not the target of violence or hate.

Acting responsibly towards hateful and violent content

So how can we act responsibly towards hateful and violent content? How can we avoid becoming vectors of violence? And most importantly, how can we protect ourselves from its deleterious effects?

HERE ARE A FEW HELPFUL TIPS:

- **Recognize the power you have over news platforms, the Internet, and social media.** These outlets gain money and expansion by feeding on your time, your clicks, and your attention. Do not give them more than they deserve. You may want to watch the Netflix documentary called the “Social Dilemma” if you’d like to learn more.
- **While you may want to stay informed, seek out information at specific times and in small doses.** For example, do not activate the notifications on your devices if you are busy with work or enjoying some leisure time, and avoid listening to the news right before bedtime.
- **Once you have seen or been exposed to difficult, hateful, or violent content related to a world event, there is no need to do so repetitively.** While you may think this has no impact, it actually does; your brain and body may react to it every time you hear or see it. You may either become desensitized to violence, which is more problematic than you think, or re-traumatize yourself incrementally with each exposure.



- **Know your limits and respect them.** Do not expose yourself to violent, crude, or horrific images as these may traumatize you. At times, avoidance is a great self-care strategy.
- **Remember, bad news attracts an audience, and larger audiences means more money or other privileges for those who relay the news.** So, don't fall into the trap, consult news outlets that do not provide sensationalist and polarized depictions of reality. Prefer outlets that offer nuanced depictions and both sides of the story.
- **Avoid content that nourishes the need in you to take revenge, as this only feeds the cycle of violence.** Remember, if not addressed, trauma feeds violence which feeds further trauma, and the vicious cycle goes on.
- **Do not relay violent news or information that does not come from credible sources,** and even if they do, do not relay hateful and violent content if you think it will hurt the people who will be exposed to it, or if you think it could be seen by young children.
- **Take care of yourself on a daily basis, especially in tough times.** Identify how you feel and express your feelings to someone you trust or call a helpline for extra support. Try to connect positively with others. Incorporate enjoyable self-care activities into your routine, such as a walk in nature, sports, reading, art, going to a show or to a museum, playing a board game, cooking, etc.
- **Mobilize your anger or distress into positive action and helping others.** For example, you can collect funds and goods, educate people around you, express solidarity for others, support or join the efforts of organizations that work for peace and human rights, etc.

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Approaching difficult conversations

In divisive times or times of crisis, we are often torn between our need to talk about what is going on and the apprehension of doing so. We fear we may get into arguments with loved ones or colleagues and affect the relationship for years to come. How can we break the silence in a constructive way?

HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS THAT MAY HELP YOU:

- **First, ask yourself: Do I really need to have this conversation?** Why do I want to have it (for example, to convince the other person, to seek help and support, to better understand what is going on)? Also, ask yourself if this is the right moment or the right person to have the conversation with. Your answers to these questions will guide you.
- **Be aware that in times of crisis, our emotions (fear, anger, hurt) become very salient and powerful.** In fact, they will dominate our thoughts and actions, and hamper our ability to think critically and rationally. So, remember, when you or the person or people you are conversing with are feeling very emotional, it is useless to try to have a rational discussion, to open up “hot” topics, or try to reason with or convince someone.
- **You both need to focus first on your emotions.** You have to take time to check on yourself and others on an emotional level and to become aware of your respective feelings, share your emotions, acknowledge how you are both feeling, and show your empathy. When we do that, more often than not, we discover that although we may have very different opinions, even opposing ones, everyone involved is actually suffering in the same ways and for the same deep reasons (for example, past trauma, feelings of injustice, fear of death, sadness from loss, stress, health issues, etc.).
- **Only after we have acknowledged one another’s feelings** and shared suffering, can a real, rational or open, and constructive dialogue be possible.

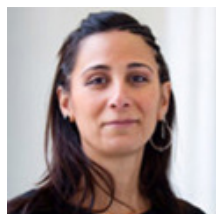


It's important to keep in mind that we tend to be more attracted to and prone to remember negative events rather than positive ones. Although at times the world may seem like an absurd place, take time every day to remember that peace is actually much more prevalent than war and conflict, and that love and laughter are everywhere around us: in the trees and nature surrounding us, the laughter of a young child, the smile of loved one or a friend, human artistic talents, etc. Be assured that every gesture you make to render this world a more peaceful place, no matter how small it may seem to you, is actually a little miracle for someone else.

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About the Author



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Dr. Ghayda Hassan is a clinical psychologist and professor of clinical psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and has several research, clinical and community-based, national and international affiliations. She is the director of the Canadian Practitioner Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (RPC-PREV; funded by PS Canada; <https://cpnprev.ca>). She is also a UNESCO co-chair in the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (UNESCO-PREV; <http://chaireunesco-prev.ca/fr/acceuil/>). She currently sits as the Chair of the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) or the GIFCT (Global Internet Forum for Countering Terrorism; <https://gifct.org>).

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Her systematic reviews, research, and clinical activities are centered around four main areas of clinical cultural psychology:

1. Social suffering, intercommunity relations, radicalization, and extremist violence;
2. Intervention in family violence & cultural diversity;
3. Identity, belonging and mental health of children and adolescents from ethnic/religious minorities;
4. Working with vulnerable immigrants and refugees.



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