

# ***What Is a Constant Cycle of Violent News Doing to Us?***

By **KATIE ROGERS** - JULY 15, 2016



National Guard soldiers were on duty on Friday at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York, where security was heightened after the attack in Nice, France. Credit Santiago Mejia/The New York Times

It has been a rough year.

By now, our violence is down to a pattern, and there is a choreography to our reactions.

A killer seeks out a nightclub, a church, an airport, a courthouse, a protest. Someone is shot on video, sometimes by the police, and marchers fill the streets. An attack is carried out in France, America, Turkey, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Tunisia, Nigeria, and then claimed and celebrated by a radical terror group.

Our phones vibrate with news alerts. The talking heads fill air over cable news captions that shout “breaking news” in red. Rumors and misinformation abound. The comments erupt on Twitter, Facebook and news sites.

Journalists create multimedia stories that focus on videos, photos and graphic accounts from victims and witnesses. The experts give interviews, and the latest tools of

immediacy are put to use. After the deadly terror attack in Nice, France, The Times invited [grief counselors to be interviewed on Facebook Live](#). Within days, attention had turned to a shooting in Baton Rouge that left three law enforcement officers dead.

### **So, what is this doing to us?**

It depends on the individual, but living in a digitally linked world where broadcasts of violence are instantaneous and almost commonplace means that many of us are becoming desensitized, Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychologist in Washington, said Friday.

“With the frequency of shootings and terror attacks there is a sense of anxiety that’s building in people,” she said, “a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness.”

Dr. Smith added: “There is a heightened alarm, but there can also be some desensitization that’s happening.”

The constant stream of news on social media can also be traumatic. A team of researchers at the University of Bradford in England told a British psychology conference last year that exposure to violent imagery on social media can cause symptoms that are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, [defined](#) as a persistent emotional reaction to a traumatic event that severely impairs one’s life.

In an [analysis](#) conducted by the Bradford researchers, 189 participants were shown images and provided with stories of violent events, including the Sept. 11 attacks, school shootings and suicide bombings.

The researchers’ analysis showed that 22 percent of those who participated were significantly affected by what they saw.

The study also found that people who view violent events more often were more affected than people who saw them less frequently, and that people who described themselves as extroverts with outgoing personalities were at a higher risk to be disturbed by the images.

### **What can we do about it?**

[The self-care advice hasn’t changed](#). It is natural to want to follow along with incremental updates on social media and in the news. But it’s important to know that this can heighten your anxiety.

Anne Marie Albano, a clinical psychologist and the director of the Columbia University Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders, said in an interview after the 2015 Paris attacks that it might be a good idea to limit your exposure to social media.

Designating times to plug into the news — checking Twitter in the morning over coffee, but not listening to the radio while driving your kids to school, for instance — can help you manage anxiety if you are feeling stressed.

“This will help you balance a realistic and credible threat with information that is sensationalized,” Dr. Albano said, “or a rush to report something or talk about something that doesn’t have the impact that you would think it has.”

**If you’re feeling anxiety about a possible attack, compare your fear with the facts.**

When you fear the worst, it’s hard to remember that, say, a flight or a train ride has extraordinarily high odds of being safe. But you have to try.

Humans are bad at assessing risk, Martin Seif, a psychologist who specializes in treating anxiety disorders and the fear of flying, said in an interview late last year.

“Every single anxiety-management technique is based on the premise that your reaction is out of proportion” to the likelihood of danger, Dr. Seif said.

**Also, remember to take a breath.**

A guide to dealing with terrorism released by the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) encourages closing your eyes and taking deep breaths to feel calmer.

Taking a walk or talking to a close friend can also help.

The guide also recommends avoiding alcohol and drugs, exercising regularly and eating healthy foods — basic self-care guidelines that help reduce stress.

Make sure you have a plan to contact your family if something happens, especially if cellular networks are overloaded or transportation is disrupted, but remember that you most likely will not need it, experts say.

If you have children, the [American Psychological Association](#) recommends asking them how they are feeling about the news. Keep in mind that it is possible for children to be influenced by news reports and the adult conversations around them.

**Lastly, keep your daily routine.**

Dr. Albano said that a primary worry in the field of psychology is people “going out of their way to be so safe that it shrinks their world.”

“Terrorists thrive on this kind of thing,” she added. “They want to see the population change their practices.”

Going out of your way to avoid interacting with strangers — by refusing to take mass transit, for example — can stoke fear and [anxiety in children](#), she said.

The best way to help children cope with acts of violence is to start by listening to them, Sean Rogers, a psychotherapist who works with children and teenagers, [told The Times on his Facebook Live appearance](#).

**”Listening is curative,” he said. “It is the basis of all therapies.”**

Madison Mills contributed reporting.