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# Life Lines

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## Doomscrolling, Perfectionism, and Mental Health: Finding Balance in a Digital World

For many people, their day starts and ends with a scroll, often with many pickups in between. They may grab their phone to scan the news headlines or social posts – a phenomenon that has become so common it has a name – doomscrolling. Even when social feeds are curated to avoid the news, another layer of pressure may emerge—endless polished images and status updates that can spark fears of not measuring up. Experts warn that both doomscrolling and digital-induced perfectionism can strain mental health, contributing to heightened anxiety, low mood, and sleep disruption. In this article, we'll explore the mental health risks associated with doomscrolling and offer strategies to help break the cycle.

### Doomscrolling

The term doomscrolling gained popularity during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic to describe how people compulsively consume bad news. In practice, doomscrolling means people feel that they have to keep reading negative headlines in order to stay informed. But by constantly scrolling a negative feed, worry and fear are often intensified.

Today's world can feel more than scary, with news headlines and social feeds filled with distressing images (e.g., global conflict, violence, natural disasters, financial concerns).

It's understandable that many feel anxious about the state of the world and want to keep up with developments. On social media, algorithms are designed to show users more of what they engage with, meaning that once someone pauses on or clicks negative stories, their feeds can quickly become filled with similar content, reinforcing the sense that bad news is everywhere.

For some, doomscrolling is driven by a need for certainty or control. During uncertain or rapidly changing situations, staying

informed can feel like a way to reduce anxiety or feel more prepared. Checking updates may bring brief relief, creating the sense that more information will make things more manageable or predictable. Over time, however, constant exposure to distressing news can have the opposite effect, increasing worry and emotional overload.

But spending long stretches scrolling through only depressing news offers no real benefit and can be harmful by reinforcing negative thoughts. Simply put, doomscrolling feeds a loop of fear—the more bad news one reads, the more upset one feels, and the more one feels compelled to scroll even more.

## Effects of Doomscrolling on Physical and Mental Health

The dangers of doomscrolling extend beyond mood, it also takes a physical toll. The stress of reading constant bad news can produce real physical symptoms, including headaches, muscle tension (especially in the neck and shoulders), nausea, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, and even elevated blood pressure.

Much of this is driven by chronic stress. Every upsetting headline spikes the body's "fight-or-flight" response and floods the brain with cortisol (the stress hormone). Over time, elevated cortisol can exhaust both mind and body and even lead to inflammation, chronic pain, high blood pressure, heart problems, and an increased risk for Type 2 diabetes, and other health problems. In addition, long periods of screen time can disrupt sleep patterns.

On the mental health side, doomscrolling is linked to worsening anxiety, sadness, and overall well-being. A 2023 research review of over 1,200 adults found that heavy doomscrolling was associated with significantly poorer life satisfaction and mental well-being. Studies have also found that people who doomscroll close to bedtime are more likely to have insomnia, anxiety, and shorter sleep duration. Even seeing something that makes you feel happy or excited can trigger a response that can disrupt your sleep.

Moreover, doomscrolling can distort one's sense of reality. When a stream of headlines offers conflicting or sensational information, people can become confused by the information. Frequent scrolling can also increase feelings of disconnection and isolation.

## Dangers of Doomscrolling for Children and Teenagers

Children and teenagers are especially vulnerable to doomscrolling. Their brains are still developing skills like attention, impulse control, and coping strategies. Habitually scanning a stream of bad news or viral sensational content can have outsized effects. When young people scroll, they risk the same kinds of cognitive fatigue and mood decline seen in adults. It can also train the brain for quick rewards and make it harder to focus on homework or play.

Doomscrolling can expose children to misinformation and potentially harmful content without the maturity to interpret it critically. A viral video or headline may influence a child's behaviour without giving space for discussion. Children may think "Everyone else is doing it, so I should too." Emotionally, a constant stream of frightening news can overload a young person's coping skills. Children—like adults—may begin to feel anxious, angry, or hopeless after hours of staring at negative posts.

Parents and caregivers should watch for signs such as moodiness, difficulty concentrating, or talk of scary world events. Encouraging youth to balance screen time with real-world activities is key to protecting their developing minds.

## The Broader Impact of Mindless Scrolling on Attention and the Brain

While doomscrolling focuses on consuming negative news, research shows that mindless scrolling of any kind—even neutral or entertaining content—can also affect mental functioning and attention. Social media platforms and news feeds are designed to deliver rapid, bite-sized updates that provide small bursts of novelty and reward. Each swipe introduces new information, creating a quick dopamine response in the brain that encourages continued scrolling.

Psychologists note that these repeated "quick reward" cycles can gradually train the brain to expect constant stimulation. Over time, this pattern may make sustained focus feel more difficult, as activities that require patience or deeper concentration—such as reading, problem-solving, or completing complex tasks—provide less immediate reward. This effect is not limited to children and teenagers; adults' attention spans may also be shaped by prolonged exposure to fast-paced digital content.

Mindless scrolling can also contribute to cognitive fatigue. Constantly processing new images, headlines, and updates requires the brain to repeatedly shift attention, which can leave people feeling mentally drained even when the content itself is not distressing. Individuals may notice increased distractibility, difficulty staying present, or a stronger urge to check their phones during moments of boredom or discomfort. Importantly, the issue isn't technology itself but how automatically and frequently it is used.

## Perfectionism and Social Media

Social media doesn't only feed doomscrolling. It also amplifies perfectionism. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are flooded with polished and unrealistic images of perfect lives. Studies have shown that viewing these idealized posts can heighten feelings of inadequacy and lead users to set unrealistically high standards for themselves. When we see influencers or connections with flawless photos and seemingly perfect lives or accomplishments, ordinary life can feel less than perfect by comparison.

This constant comparison fuels socially prescribed perfectionism—a sense that others expect us to be perfect. Recent research confirms that people who feel driven by external standards are more likely to spend time on social media and to experience low mood or depression. This sort of perfectionism puts people on a treadmill of never-ending—and often never-achievable—goals. The pressure to live a perfect life as presented on social media can lead to frustration, lowered self-esteem, and a distorted sense of reality and self-image. The mental burden of trying to meet unattainable online standards is recognized as a significant risk to mental well-being.

Constant comparison on social media can also contribute to fear of missing out (FOMO)—the feeling that others are living fuller, happier, or more successful lives while we are being left behind. Seeing curated posts of vacations, achievements, or social events can lead people to think, “Everyone else is doing more than I am,” or “I'm not where I should be.” Mental health experts note that FOMO can intensify self-doubt and reinforce beliefs of not being good enough, even when these perceptions are based on incomplete or highly edited snapshots of reality. Over time, this cycle can increase anxiety, lower life satisfaction, and encourage even more scrolling in an attempt to stay connected or “catch up,” reinforcing the comparison loop.

Understanding how both negative content and habitual scrolling affect attention and well-being highlights why developing intentional digital habits is an important part of protecting mental health.

## Strategies for Healthier Digital Habits

Breaking these unhealthy patterns is possible with intentional steps and mindfulness. Changing digital habits can take time, especially when these patterns are built into daily routines. Small, gradual changes are often more sustainable than trying to stop all at once. Start by setting strong digital boundaries, including:

- **Check in with yourself.** Notice how you feel before, during, and after scrolling. Ask yourself: “Do I feel energized, content, sad, or anxious?” If you feel more anxious, tense, or low in mood, it may be a sign to pause or step away.
- **Limit scrolling.** Designate specific times to check the news rather than scrolling off and on all day. For instance, put your phone in another room during meals or set alarms for “news time” and then stop. Even small habits help, such as keeping your phone out of your bedroom at night can prevent you from automatic morning scrolling.
- **Set screen-time limits.** If limiting scrolling on your own is difficult, use built-in settings on your phone to limit screen time or time on specific apps.
- **Use focus mode.** When you need to focus on work or school tasks, set up “focus status” for blocks of time. Your phone will temporarily block notifications and/or access to the apps depending on the type of phone you have. Alternatively, look for a free app that will provide these features.
- **Turn off notifications.** Disable non-essential alerts for news and social apps. Fewer pings means fewer reminders to check your phone.
- **Curate your feeds.** Unfollow accounts that make you feel anxious or where you feel that you are comparing yourself to highly polished influencers. Instead, follow positive and realistic pages. Limit media sources to one or two trusted ones to reduce overwhelm.
- **Watch for perfectionism triggers.** Remember that social media shows only highlights of the good times. When you see highly styled posts, remind yourself that everyone has struggles behind the scenes. Practice self-compassion and accept that imperfections are the norm—not social posts.
- **Replace screen time with positive activities.** Invest time in hobbies, exercise, time with friends and family. Creative pursuits can boost mood and provide satisfaction beyond digital validation. Setting real-world goals, like learning a new skill, spending time with loved ones can help shift the focus away from unreachable online standards.

- **Practice gratitude.** Remind yourself of what you appreciate about your life can counteract negativity. Research shows that gratitude is linked to better mood and less stress.
- **Remove apps/deactivate accounts.** Decide if you really want to keep all the news and social apps on your phone. You can decide which apps are important to you for keeping in touch with close contacts and which ones aren't serving you anymore.


These steps aren't about never using technology but about using it with balance and purpose. Learning to recognize and interrupt the impulse to scroll, or constantly compare oneself is key to protecting mental health. Social media doesn't define us. By setting boundaries, challenging unrealistic standards, and focusing on real-life connections, you can reclaim a sense of control and well-being.

## Getting Support

If managing these habits feels overwhelming, help is available. Use your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) to connect with a counsellor or find resources to help reduce stress and anxiety. Balancing digital life is important for your physical and mental health. Your EFAP is there to help guide you toward healthier habits.

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