

I stopped reading the news. Is the problem me—or the product?

By Amanda Ripley, *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2022 (shortened)

I've been a journalist for two decades, and I used to spend hours consuming the news and calling it "work." Every morning, I read *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and sometimes the *Wall Street Journal*. In my office at *Time* magazine, I had a TV playing CNN on mute. I listened to NPR in the shower. On weekends, I devoured the *New Yorker*. It felt like my duty to be informed, as a citizen and as
5 a journalist—and also, I kind of loved it!

But half a dozen years ago, something changed. The news started to get under my skin. After my morning reading, I felt so drained that I couldn't write—or do anything creative. I'd listen to *Morning Edition* and feel lethargic, unmotivated, and the day had barely begun.

So, like a lot of people, I started to dose the news. I cut out TV news altogether, because that's just
10 common sense, and I waited until late afternoon to read other news.

Last month, new data from the Reuters Institute showed that the United States has one of the highest news-avoidance rates in the world. About 4 out of 10 Americans sometimes or often avoid contact with the news—a higher rate than at least 30 other countries. And consistently, across all countries, women are significantly more likely to avoid news than men.

15 Why are people avoiding the news? It's repetitive and dispiriting, often of dubious credibility, and it leaves people feeling powerless, according to the survey. The evidence supports their decision to pull back. It turns out that the more news we consume about mass-casualty events, such as shootings, the more we suffer. The more political news we ingest, the more mistakes we make about who we are. If the goal of journalism is to inform people, where is the evidence it is working?

20 So maybe there is something wrong with the news. But what? A lot of people say the problem is bias. Journalists say the problem is the business model: Negativity is clicky. But I've started to think that both theories are missing the most important piece of the puzzle: the human factor.

Today's news, even high-quality print news, is not designed for humans. As Krista Tippett, the journalist and host of the radio show and podcast *On Being*, puts it, "I don't actually think we are
25 equipped, physiologically or mentally, to be delivered catastrophic and confusing news and pictures, 24/7. We are analog creatures in a digital world."

I've spent the past year trying to figure out what news designed for 21st-century humans might look like—interviewing physicians who specialize in communicating bad news to patients, behavioral scientists who understand what humans need to live full, informed lives and psychologists who have
30 been treating patients for "headline stress disorder." (Yes, this is a thing.)

First, we need hope to get up in the morning. Researchers have found that hope is associated with lower levels of depression, chronic pain, sleeplessness and cancer, among many other things.

"Hope is like water," says David Bornstein, co-founder of the nonprofit Solutions Journalism Network. "You need to have something to believe in. If you're in the restaurant business, you're gonna give people
35 water. Because you understand human biology. It's weird that journalism has such a hard time understanding this. People need to have a sense of possibility."

Second, humans need a sense of agency. "Agency" is not something most reporters think about, probably because, in their jobs, they have it. But feeling like you and your fellow humans can do something—even something small—is how we convert anger into action, frustration into invention. That
40 self-efficacy is essential to any functioning democracy.

Nowhere is the crying need for agency and hope more apparent than in climate coverage. Of all the climate stories aired on nightly news and Sunday morning shows in 2021, only a third discussed possible solutions, according to a study by Media Matters for America.

Finally, we need dignity. In journalism, treating people like they matter means, most importantly,
45 listening to them. It can mean inviting viewers to talk to each other, with civility.

There is a way to communicate news—including very bad news—that leaves us better off as a result. It's a kind of low-ego, high-curiosity journalism that I've started trying to emulate in my own work.