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# How Negative Headlines Can Impact Your Mental and Emotional Health

By [Good News Network](#) · Sep 29, 2016

Do you get uncomfortable feelings when you read negative or pessimistic headlines?

You, like the rest of us have mirror neurons in your brain that predisposes you to feel empathic. The good news is empathy helps you live cooperatively with others. The bad news is you are naturally inclined to imitate what you see without thinking about it, even when you might feel hurt by it.

You can have either a positive or negative emotional response to headlines depending on their content. For example, [a study](#) of 426 headlines on the cover of five of the highest circulating women's health magazines in the United States revealed that the frequency of appearance themes (looking better) equaled those of health themes (doing something to feel better). The 103 undergraduate women in the study assigned to the appearance-themed covers reported more "body shame" than women assigned to magazines with health-themed covers.

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Headlines partnered with images are especially influential because we process them in the right brain where an automatic body response is stimulated. For example, I remember my children as infants staring intently at their first book absent words, but filled with kindly human faces. The friendly feeling portrayed in the faces consistently drew smiles and happy sounds.

Interestingly, headlines are not always dependable to tell the truth of a story. Blake Andrew of McGill University [analyzed](#) headlines versus the storyline of articles during the 2004 Canadian federal election campaign. He found that headlines were created to “attract” readers not represent the accuracy of the story. Yet, many of us don’t take the time to read the whole article. Instead, we use headlines as a shortcut to gain a sense of it.

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Further, viewing tragedy in the media has proven to be capable of creating PTSD. After the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013, the University of California, Irvine [published a study](#) that assessed the level of stress symptoms affecting people who watched it on television, social media, in print and on the radio. They found that “Acute stress symptoms increased with each additional hour of bombing-related media exposure.” As a result, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs Center for PTSD concluded that there is a link between watching news of traumatic events and stress symptoms. Further, they found people who have experienced previous trauma suffer a cumulative effect with intensified reactions. In other words, seeing scary experiences creates a biochemical event that registers in the body whether we are experiencing them directly or through empathy with others. People with previous trauma are especially vulnerable.

What’s your tipping point for negative news? Some of us are more easily influenced than others. Become aware of when you reach your limits depending on your level of empathy. The greater your empathy, the lower your tolerance for seeing tragedy without being hurt.

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Here are four ways to use your smart Emotional Operating System (EOS) to keep yourself emotionally safe from harmful headlines:

**1. Use compassion rather than empathy with others who are suffering.** Rather than imagine walking in others’ shoes and feeling their pain, establish clear emotional boundaries by reminding yourself, this isn’t happening to you and you don’t have to feel their pain in order to support them. In fact, it gets in the way. Instead, walk compassionately beside them.

**2. Read the article before you believe a sensationally negative headline.**

**3. Turn away from headlines/images that give you a bad feeling.** I once saw a mother say, “You’re a bad boy” to her 3 year-old- son. His immediate respond was to cover his ears, so he couldn’t hear her. I remember thinking that his response was intuitively brilliant because early negative labeling has been associated with negative psychological outcomes. For example, girls who have been called “too fat” by their families have a greater risk of becoming obese. You can use the power of your imagination to make a big red X through headlines/messages that don’t feel good.

**4. Emotions have a spontaneous life of their own,** however when you pay attention to what you’re feeling minute to minute, you become aware of what news is good for you and what isn’t. You can use this greater self-awareness to make choices that keep you emotionally safe.

*Dr. Deborah Sandella is the author of [Goodbye, Hurt & Pain 7 Simple Steps to Health, Love and Success](#). She is an award-winning psychotherapist, university professor, and the originator of the groundbreaking RIM Method, which is a heavily-backed neuroscience tool for reducing stress and improving the quality of life.*

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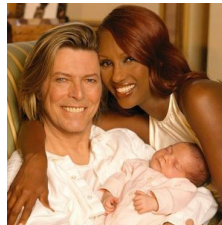
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