How to Cope with On-line Health Information Overload

By Adam Perlman, M.D.

Halloween brings with it a host of frightening images—the classic witches, ghosts and ghouls. But there are some fears we carry with us all the time. I’m thinking particularly about concerns around health. Read just a few minutes of health news online or in magazines and you’re bound to find an alarming article about the latest danger to your body or mind. Stress-related health problems show up often; in the last year I’ve seen reports that chronic negative stress will make your hair fall out, cause you to gain weight, damage your relationships, give you a heart attack, and ruin your sense of smell.

Of course, some of these scary outcomes are based in fact. Chronic negative stress is linked to poor heart health, including a higher risk of heart attacks as well as increased stroke risk, as this recent paper from the American Heart Association shows. However, sometimes it seems that the more information you have access to, the less you can trust that with common sense self-care, you'll more than likely be okay. The fear of “what might be”—the thought of a future threat—overwhelms your rational mind. And with ceaseless social media feeds, not to mention 24/7 cable news, you can feed this fear almost any time of day.

I always like to remind myself that life is about balance. In this case, you want to strike a balance between information and action. It’s important to stay current on advances in health and fitness trends; your health is truly the foundation for the rest of your life’s endeavors. New information can open a door to a new, more
nourishing eating habit, or close the door on a troublesome mental habit that’s keeping your stress levels high.

At the same time, you must become aware of your own symptoms of information-overload. When do you start fearing the future threat of this or that health risk, rather than focus on your habits and patterns in the here and now? Is it after you’ve gone down the rabbit hole of the Internet and read several articles on how prolonged bickering in your relationships can shorten your lifespan? Is it when you feel a twinge in your knee and immediately worry that you’ve got rheumatoid arthritis like the woman on the talk show this morning?

Notice when you start to feel afraid, overwhelmed, or pessimistic about your health. This is your information threshold, when you need to remind yourself to tune out for a time. It’s hard to turn away from constantly updated news, so you might try a simple mantra to help you: “This is overwhelming. I know where to find more information if I need it. Right now I need to do a different activity to support my health.”

Then, use those strong negative feelings to have a real heart-to-heart with yourself. Is there something more substantial going on than information-overload? Are the feelings coming up because you really do need to address a problematic aspect of stress levels and your health? This is your call to action. Review the basics of a healthy and resilient lifestyle: Are you sleeping enough? What kinds of foods have you been eating lately? Have you been able to exercise with some regularity? Are you feeling connected to your community, be it family, friends, or some larger circle? (At meQuilibrium we sometimes call these questions Stress 101.) Anywhere there’s a gap, fill it, or find the support to help you do so.

Ultimately, you want to combine information and action to get to the root cause of any health problem, not only to fix them, but to be the most vital person you can be, inside and out. That way, when fears about your stress and health come knocking at your door, you’ll be able to see them for what they are: opportunities to treat yourself with kindness, attention, and care.

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