

How to handle the news and the situation generated by a war

The war in Ukraine is convulsing Europe, altering our entire system of beliefs, certainties and convictions. The war has been on the front page and in the news in all the media, showing live and in real time the damage and loss of life it is causing. This international crisis comes at a time when many Europeans were already under psychological strain after the last two years of the pandemic.

How does the news of the war affect our mental health?

Anxiety produced by uncertainty is a natural survival mechanism, a common response to the anticipation of threats. However, as the news grows and the war intensifies, anxiety can be increased, generating worry, uncertainty, distrust, fear, and even sadness and anger, among other negative emotions, and therefore, putting mental health at risk.

In turn, the increase in anxiety can cause, in an unfortunate attempt to regain control, an excessive search for information. Glued to the TV to watch the news constantly, or to the tablet or mobile to search for more information and stay on top of social networks, can give a false sense of control.

This excess of information can disrupt our daily routine, and further increase long-term anxiety:

- Distorting and increasing the threat and its consequences.
- Increasing alertness and hypervigilance.
- Losing the ability to see the safety signs around us that could reassure us and calm our family environment.

How can we handle this situation?

1. Limit viewing time and keep the news in perspective.

As information increases, you need to take the necessary precautions to maintain your mental health and that of your family and loved ones. **Know the facts but don't go any further.**

The problem is often in the amount of information we receive, transmit and comment throughout the day in different contexts (family, work, leisure, etc.). Avoid

this daily monothematic cocktail that will end up generating a very high level of anxiety at the end of the day. Try **to limit exposure to media and social media**, instead, look for objective information from reliable sources.

2. **Offer security and control** to your loved ones, clearly indicating what they can do.

The war has also become a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe, in which we can all collaborate in different ways. **They will feel that they are part of the solution.**

Children are no strangers to what is happening, and we must avoid facing the catastrophic messages of the media alone. Families have an important role in managing this situation, assessing the information and guiding them in the interpretation of the facts.

Avoid anticipating facts or possible consequences, and calm fears by giving positive assurances with real aspects of the present and your close environment.

3. **Communicate with your children.**

Discuss age-appropriate information and news with your children honestly. Parents are the ones who can provide security and help alleviate fear or distress.

Remember that children will observe your behavior and emotions for signs on how to manage their own feelings in the face of the news. If you are worried or uneasy but do not communicate it, they will think there is something to fear.

Talk to them about their concerns, it will always be better than letting them imagine something worse. Create safe spaces for children to express themselves, become animated with them, but then focus on appreciating what they have closest to them to contribute to their general well-being.

With the little ones, shared recreational and/or artistic activities are recommended to find alternative ways of expression to conversation.

Adolescents are probably the most vulnerable, and their responses can become extreme in both senses, with intensification of negative emotions or with absolute disinterest. In the first case, it will benefit you to talk about it and any psychological support in managing their emotions will be welcome. Secondly, we must avoid recriminations and respect their times, but asking for their opinion or stimulating their empathy in the humanitarian situation, can contribute to reconnecting the adolescent with reality from family security.

You may need to limit the amount of information to help manage your anxiety and that of your family.

4. **Practice self-care**

Allow time for rest, relaxation, exercise, and social connection. Relaxation, meditation and/or mindfulness can give us the opportunity to maintain a calm state, individually or as a family.

5. **Seek help.**

For some, the news and images of the events unfolding in this war can become extremely distressing, reactivating old traumas or intensifying current problems. If you or a family member is struggling, seek help!

People who feel overwhelming nervousness, persistent sadness, or other prolonged reactions that negatively affect their job performance or interpersonal relationships should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists can help people deal with situations of intense stress and find constructive ways to cope.

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Sources: International Division of the American Psychological Association, Division 52; APA's Office of International Affairs; The Australian Psychological SOCIETY (Melbourne, Australia).