

Doomscrolling Addiction: Psychological Consequences and Strategies to Overcome Negative News Consumption on Social Media

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ABSTRACT:

Doomscrolling, a term coined to describe the compulsive behavior of endlessly scrolling through negative news on social media platforms, has emerged as a pervasive digital mental health concern, particularly in the post-pandemic era. The constant exposure to alarming and distressing news has been found to exacerbate psychological distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. This paper explores the mechanisms of doomscrolling addiction, its association with social media design algorithms, and its psychological impact. A literature review and analysis of recent empirical studies (2019–2024) support the identification of doomscrolling as a behavioral addiction. The paper further presents evidence-based strategies and interventions to mitigate doomscrolling, including digital hygiene practices, cognitive-behavioral approaches, and platform-based tools. The findings underscore the urgent need for public health awareness and media literacy to address the growing burden of social media-induced psychological harm.

KEYWORDS: Doomscrolling, Social Media Addiction, Digital Mental Health, Anxiety, Depression, Negative News, Algorithmic Exposure

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become the primary sources of news for a significant portion of the global population. While they provide real-time updates, they also contribute to a cognitive overload of predominantly negative content—a phenomenon known as **doomscrolling**. The term gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals compulsively consumed distressing news related to rising death tolls, lockdowns, and economic uncertainty (Ahmad & Murad, 2020).

This behavior is not limited to a passing trend; it reflects a deeper psychological dependency reinforced by the design of social media platforms. Doomscrolling not only affects mental health but also disrupts sleep, concentration, and social relationships (Boursier et al., 2021).

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS BEHIND DOOMSCROLLING

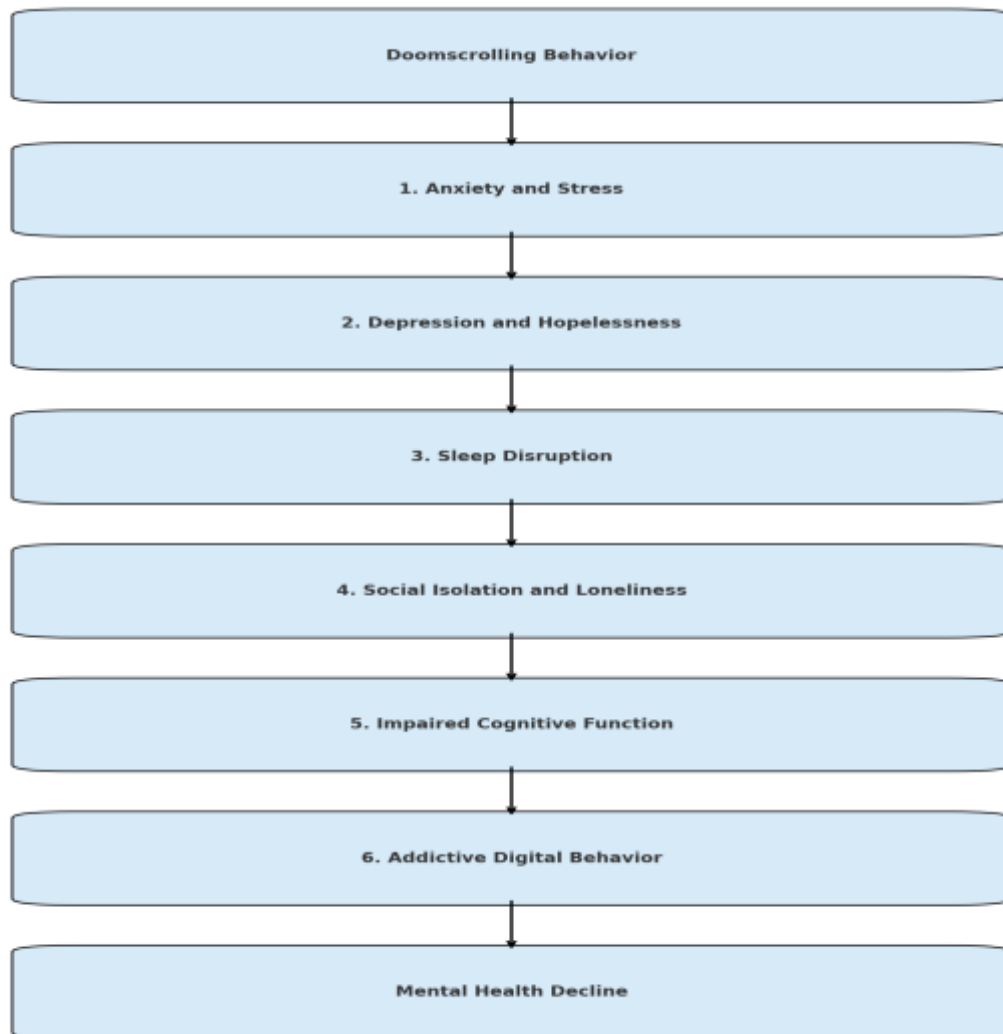


Doomscrolling is categorized under **behavioral addictions**, where a person repeatedly engages in a behavior for relief or gratification despite adverse outcomes. Several psychological processes fuel this habit:

- **Negativity Bias:** Humans naturally pay more attention to negative information than positive. Social media exploits this by promoting emotionally charged, alarming content.
- **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):** Users fear being uninformed during crises or emergencies.
- **Variable Reward Mechanism:** Similar to gambling, social media feeds provide unpredictable "rewards" in the form of breaking news, likes, or new updates.
- **Reinforcement Loop:** Anxiety leads to checking for updates, which in turn increases anxiety—a cycle that is hard to break (Nguyen & Gruber, 2022).

IMPACT OF DOOMSCROLLING ON MENTAL HEALTH

Doomscrolling refers to the compulsive consumption of negative news content online, particularly through social media platforms. While staying informed is important, the repetitive exposure to distressing or catastrophic news can have serious consequences for mental well-being.



1. Anxiety and Stress

Continuous engagement with negative content heightens the body's stress response. Doomscrolling activates the **sympathetic nervous system**, increasing cortisol levels and reinforcing a state of hypervigilance.

- **Studies** show that excessive news consumption during crises (like the COVID-19 pandemic) significantly correlates with increased levels of **generalized anxiety** and **acute stress**. Nguyen & Gruber, 2022, Journal of Affective Disorders Reports

2. Depression and Hopelessness

Repeated exposure to pessimistic news can trigger **feelings of hopelessness**, especially in individuals with existing vulnerabilities. The negativity bias—the tendency to attend to and remember negative information more than positive—intensifies with doomscrolling. Wheaton et al., 2021, Computers in Human Behavior

3. Sleep Disruption

Night-time scrolling habits, especially just before bed, interfere with **circadian rhythms** and reduce **melatonin production**. This not only shortens sleep duration but also impairs sleep quality, leading to fatigue, irritability, and poor cognitive function. Yao & Tang, 2021, Computers in Human Behavior

4. Social Isolation and Loneliness

Although social media is designed to connect users, doomscrolling often results in **passive browsing** rather than active interaction. This reinforces **feelings of isolation**, particularly when users compare their circumstances unfavorably to others or avoid positive interactions. Wiederhold, 2020, Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking

5. Impaired Cognitive Function

Doomscrolling creates **cognitive overload**, impairing decision-making and attention. The mind becomes preoccupied with future uncertainties and negative possibilities, reducing focus and increasing **ruminative thinking**.

6. Reinforcement of Addictive Behaviors

The **intermittent reward system** of social media—where users occasionally find a “new” or “more alarming” piece of news—creates a **dopamine feedback loop**, making doomscrolling behaviorally addictive.

- Notifications, algorithmic feeds, and endless scrolling features are **designed to hijack attention**, reinforcing compulsive checking behavior akin to other forms of digital addiction.

Elhai et al. (2020) found a strong correlation between **smartphone addiction, negative affect**, and the tendency to overconsume distressing online content. Elhai et al., 2020, Psychiatry Research

Table: Impacts and Evidence

Impact Area	Effects
Anxiety & Stress	Increased cortisol, hypervigilance
Depression & Hopelessness	Reduced coping, increased sadness
Sleep Disruption	Insomnia, fatigue
Social Isolation	Passive use, reduced interaction
Cognitive Impairment	Attention deficits, rumination
Addictive Behavior	Compulsive checking, dopamine loops

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS :

Modern social media platforms are designed to keep users engaged. Algorithms prioritize content with high emotional engagement, often sensational or polarizing, which further contributes to doomscrolling behavior (Montag & Walla, 2021). Infinite scrolling and autoplay features discourage natural stopping points, leading users to lose track of time and engage longer than intended.

METHODS TO OVERCOME DOOMSCROLLING AND SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION:

Doomscrolling and social media addiction are closely linked, sharing common psychological pathways such as compulsive behavior, reward anticipation, and emotional dysregulation. Addressing these requires a multi-pronged approach involving personal behavior changes, psychological interventions, and technological tools.

1. Self-Monitoring and Digital Hygiene

Self-awareness is the foundation of change. Tracking usage patterns and setting boundaries are essential first steps.

a. Screen Time Tracking

- Use built-in tools like **Digital Wellbeing** (Android) and **Screen Time** (iOS) to track daily usage.

- Third-party apps like **RescueTime**, **Moment**, and **StayFree** provide detailed analytics and alerts.

b. Usage Scheduling

- Allocate fixed times for social media use (e.g., 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening).
- Avoid using social media 1 hour before bedtime to protect sleep hygiene (Yao & Tang, 2021).

c. App and Notification Management

- Disable push notifications from non-essential apps.
- Move addictive apps off the home screen or uninstall them temporarily.

2. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

CBT is one of the most effective psychological interventions for behavioral addictions.

a. Cognitive Restructuring

- Identify irrational beliefs like “I must stay informed all the time” or “I’ll miss something important.”
- Challenge and replace these thoughts with healthier alternatives (Nguyen & Gruber, 2022).

b. Behavioral Activation

- Replace scrolling time with positive activities: exercise, journaling, creative hobbies, or social interaction.

c. Impulse Control Training

- Use techniques such as delaying access (wait 10 minutes before checking), deep breathing, or grounding exercises when urges arise.

3. Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation Techniques

Mindfulness helps break the automatic loop of compulsive scrolling and improves emotional self-regulation.

a. Mindfulness Meditation

- Practice daily 10–20 minutes of mindfulness using apps like **Headspace**, **Calm**, or **Insight Timer**.
- Focus on breath awareness or guided body scans to center the mind and reduce reactivity to negative content (Wiederhold, 2020).

b. Gratitude Journaling

- Writing 3–5 positive experiences or thoughts daily can shift focus from negativity and reduce reliance on doomscrolling for emotional regulation.

c. Digital Detox Days

- Designate one or two days a week as “screen-free” or “social media-free” to restore balance.

4. Environmental and Platform-Based Changes

Creating friction and modifying your digital environment can significantly reduce addictive use.

a. Website and App Blockers

- Use browser extensions like **StayFocusd** or **LeechBlock** to limit access to specific sites.
- Use app blockers like **Forest**, **Freedom**, or **AppDetox** to restrict access during specific hours.

b. Monochrome Mode

- Set your phone to grayscale to reduce visual appeal of social media and decrease engagement (Montag & Walla, 2021).

c. Curated Content Exposure

- Unfollow or mute pages/accounts that frequently share distressing or sensationalized content.
- Follow positive or educational accounts that promote mental well-being, creativity, or spiritual growth.

5. Social and Peer Support

Behavior change is more sustainable with accountability and shared motivation.

a. Accountability Partners

- Share your screen time goals with a friend, family member, or peer and check in weekly.

b. Group Digital Detox Challenges

- Join online or offline community challenges such as “**Scroll-Free September**” or **#DigitalDetox** groups.

c. Professional Counseling

- If symptoms of anxiety or depression persist, seek support from a psychologist or counselor with experience in internet or behavioral addictions.

6. Educational and Preventive Approaches

Raising awareness of social media’s impact helps develop informed and critical users.

a. Digital Literacy Education

- Teach individuals—especially students and adolescents—about how algorithms work and how doomscrolling can affect mental health.

b. Workshops in Schools/Colleges

- Organize awareness programs on healthy media consumption and digital well-being.

CONCLUSION

Doomscrolling represents a modern digital dilemma where technological design intersects with human vulnerability. As screen time increases globally, so does the risk of addiction-like behavior linked to online news consumption. Public health professionals, educators, and platform developers must collaborate to raise awareness, create healthier digital environments, and equip users with tools to protect their mental well-being. Incorporating structured interventions such as CBT, screen time control, and mindfulness can provide effective strategies to combat the psychological toll of doomscrolling.

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