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Increased exposure to media violence can lead to desensitizing effects on consumers

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Every day, senior Kitty Clark open Twitter on her iPhone and scrolls. Like other students, by now it's practically muscle memory for Clark.

On Aug. 13, headlines flashed news of a white nationalist rally in Virginia that turned violent. One dead, 19 injured.

On Oct. 1, reports of a deadly shooting in Las Vegas circulated. Fifty-nine dead, 241 reported injured.

Fast-forward to the end of the month. On Oct. 31, a man in New York drives a rented truck through a crowd, killing eight.

And on Nov. 5, 26 were killed in a rural Texas church.

In the wake of a series of traumatic events, a psychological effect known as desensitization can occur. This effect states that the more people are exposed to violence, whether first-hand or through media, the less it impacts them emotionally and the reaction it produces in them is less potent.

"People don't want to face the evils of the world. It's easier to put it in the back of your mind instead of understanding the extremity of the situation," Clark said. "Less and less people watch the news because 'they don't like how negative it is,' but that's our world right now."

According to the American Psychology Association, continual exposure to media violence can alter the way trauma is

perceived. In some cases, it lowers the amount of anxious arousal that is expected from viewing violent images.

However, psychology teacher Jennifer Weisbrodt says that everyone interprets tragedy in different ways.

"(After a crisis) not everyone needs therapy or counseling or help, and by actually offering it to kids that don't need it you can do more harm than good," Weisbrodt said. "I don't know that just by seeing (violent events) we're causing damage necessarily. I think part of it can be a lesson on how to deal with it."

Yet, research conducted by psychologists L. Rowell Huesmann and Leonard Eron in the 1980s found that the effects of media violence are more harmful to children. In their study, children who watched many hours of violence on television when they were in elementary school tended to show higher levels of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers.

However, not all violent media comes from watching the news.

The effect of graphic videogames on children's development has also been a concern of psychologists and parents in the past decade.

Research conducted by psychologist Craig Anderson in 2010 concluded that there is a correlation between exposure to violent videogames and increased risk factor for aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.

In addition to increased levels of aggression, children may become more fearful of the world around them. Weisbrodt worries about this consequence with her own children.

"My 10-year-old will watch the news with me and I can tell it really bothers him, and he'll have lots of questions, and there are days when we just turn it off because he doesn't need all that information," Weisbrodt said. "We have this idea that because it's there that everyone should have access to it, and I don't know if that's the case. You (need) the skills to deal with all that information, too, and that takes maturity and it doesn't happen instantaneously."

Between Anderson's studies and the work of Huesmann and Eron, both agree that the effects of violent media can lead to less sensitivity to the pain and suffering of others, especially when people are aware of it from an early age. Although freshman Lucy

Tranchita feels desensitization is a harmful reaction, she said that it could be confused with people being limited in their ability to respond to a situation.

"It's just a horrible thing knowing people are capable of doing such an act," she said. "If something bad happens you can't really do anything about it besides sharing things on social media about how sorry you are. I just think that's not right."

Although desensitization is often viewed in a negative light, it does have its emotional benefits. It can help people cope with crises, and as a society it enables for more resiliency.

Weisbrodt acknowledges that resiliency is necessary. However, she said allowing oneself a period for grieving is also an appropriate response that could help relieve effects of desensitization.

Clark has noticed more brutality in the news in recent years, and she has felt the effects of desensitization. She is strongly against this phenomenon, and worries for a desensitized future.

"If I would've heard of a white nationalist riot in the street a year ago, I would've been shocked and disgusted. Today, it's predictable," Clark said. "These things happen so often, I'm not shocked anymore. While I'm still disgusted and upset, it's not as impactful as it once was ... we've become so numb to our surroundings we stop being surprised that awful things happen. And when we get used to these things, we stop caring."



LINDSEY RAMSDELL



MY TURN
SOPHIE KEHRIG

Stop silencing news notifications

Ping!

It's 7:08 a.m. My cellphone sits face up on my dresser. It illuminates my dark bedroom with soft blue light and rouses me out of a warm, dreamy sleep. I stretch my arm to reach the glowing screen and fumble with it. A little grey rectangle dominates the display with words that shouldn't make sense grouped together:

"Texas gunman's in-laws frequented church where 26 people were killed"

I'm unfazed. I wipe the sleep from my eyes and groggily make my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth. This is routine. Every morning there's something new:

"Manhattan truck attack kills 8 in 'act of terror'"

"Puerto Rico in the Dark. Photographer Joseph Rodriguez captures the isolation of a storm-ravaged island"

"There's One Sure Way to Fix the Opioid Crisis"

"Another Michigan official to face manslaughter charge in Flint water crisis"

"Antibiotic resistance could spell end of modern medicine, says chief medic"

I don't remember when it became normal for so many bad things to happen in such rapid succession. All of a sudden, I'm no longer surprised by the constant crisis streaming out of my newsfeed. Maybe it's a sign of the times. Maybe it's technology. Maybe it's coming of age. I couldn't tell you. I can tell you it scares me, though.

As high school students, we are coming up on adulthood in a time where tragedy

appears to occur at a breakneck pace. The anxiety, as a result, can be pervasive. It seems a common coping mechanism is to ignore the alerts altogether. It's much easier to look away, to forget. What a wonderful "first world problem" to have: the luxury of pivoting one's neck and being free from the strife of the world.

Maybe that works beautifully at first, but no one is infallible. That method becomes obsolete when the problems spread to you. No one can outrun a hurricane or bring a loved one back to life after an opioid overdose. No one can stop their state government from secretly feeding their pipes polluted water or keep an antibiotic resistant bacteria from infecting them.

For some, having little control over such things means that they find futility in keeping up with current events.

"There's nothing we can do anyway."

Except there is. Take for example the Flint Water Crisis. Sure, there's nothing citizens could have done to keep officials from allowing improperly treated, highly corrosive water into their homes. But, now that the story has been exposed over such a wide range of news media, the people of Flint have received aid and have come closer to the justice they deserve. If everyone were to ignore the news, then who would have known to help those affected or hold officials accountable for gross neglect of their constituents?

Ignorance is bliss, but it's a fleeting one.

In elementary school, there was a huge anti-bullying campaign. One of the most repeated talking points was on the subject of inactive bystanders, those who bare witness to an injustice and do nothing. I remember being told that ignoring a crime is just as bad as committing one. The real world is no different. If we choose to avoid the problems in our world today, we become idle bystanders. A witness is not directly committing the crime, but complicity is far from innocence.

Desensitization FAST FACTS



The Kaiser Family Foundation found that children ages 8 to 18 spend **4½ hours** each day watching TV in various forms, including on their mobile phones and the Internet, on average.

BY AGE 18, THE AVERAGE PERSON WILL HAVE VIEWED **200,000** ACTS OF VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION ALONE, ACCORDING TO THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

Research by psychologists L. Rowell Huesmann and Leonard Eron starting in the 1980s found that children who watched many hours of violence on television when they were in elementary school tended to show higher levels of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers.

"Research has found that exposure to media violence can desensitize people to violence in the real world and that, for some people, watching violence in the media becomes enjoyable and does not result in the anxious arousal that would be expected from seeing such imagery." - American Psychological Association

A 2010 review by psychologist Craig A. Anderson concluded that the evidence strongly suggests that violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior and cognition, and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.

Variables such as mental health and family life, which may have impacted the results, as these other risk factors also cause aggressive and violent behavior.

While media violence exposure may have short-term effects on adults, its **negative impact on children is enduring.**

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.
- Children may be more fearful of the world around them.
- Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.

LINDSEY RAMSDELL