

How to stop fixating on the daily COVID numbers

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Credit: Shutterstock

Daily updates of COVID case numbers have been part of our pandemic lives. These numbers are reported, analyzed and widely shared. They're conversation starters, and with good reason.

Until recently, daily numbers had direct consequences. Officials used them to make decisions that significantly impacted our lives. No wonder many of us were glued to the daily media conferences or kept an eye on

our [social media accounts](#) announcing the numbers.

But as Australia opens up, we've [been warned](#) to expect higher case numbers. And with so many of us vaccinated, we've [been told](#) to not follow the case numbers so closely. Instead, we should be focusing on the rates of people hospitalized with COVID.

Why is it so hard to disengage from daily case numbers? What should you do if, like a car crash, you can't look away?

Why are some people fixated?

Rising case numbers can provoke anxiety, whether it's because of increased restrictions or concerns about you or a loved one being infected.

However, some people, especially those vulnerable to anxiety or who have already been diagnosed with it, may continue to fixate on daily case numbers, despite advice not to. This fixation is likely to [increase their anxiety](#), particularly as case numbers rise.

Some people seek out and pay greater attention to information around them they perceive to be a threat. This tendency, known as [attentional bias](#), is thought to have an evolutionary basis. To survive, paying greater attention to risky things around you may help keep you safe and increase your control over the situation.

Looking out for information that might affect your safety—such as COVID case numbers—is normal and can lead to helpful behaviors, such as following social distancing rules.

But too much [attentional bias](#) is [linked to anxiety](#). So, fixation on daily case numbers, particularly when it does not serve a specific purpose or

impacts day-to-day functioning, is unlikely to be beneficial.

How we interpret the numbers also matters

Understanding COVID trends is important as it can lead to helpful behaviors, such as getting vaccinated. However, exposure to COVID information can be a problem if it results in catastrophising to the point where it's having a significant detrimental effect on our psychological well-being.

With increasing rates of vaccination, daily case numbers are less accurate indicators of threat to our well-being than earlier in the pandemic when vaccination levels were low.

That's because high vaccination rates reduce the rate of transmission and severity of COVID-19.

So case numbers no longer signify the implementation of the types of public health measures we've been used to (such as state-wide lockdowns), or the likelihood of becoming unwell due to COVID.

How well do COVID vaccines work in the real world?

AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Moderna appear equivalent in reducing your chance of serious illness from COVID-19. [#vaccine](#)
[#COVID](#) <https://t.co/UNzW70xIO4>

— Deb Kirby (@DuchessFrida) [July 1, 2021](#)

What if you can't look away?

If you are fixated on the numbers and it's doing more harm than good, you may need to make some changes.

But you do not need to avoid the numbers, even if they are causing some distress. Staying [well informed](#) from reliable news sources is an important way to maintain well-being during the pandemic. Totally avoiding the case numbers is [unlikely to improve anxiety](#) in the longer term. That's because avoidance does not address the source of your anxiety.

What you can do

Here's what we recommend instead:

- **reduce consumption of COVID-related news:** constantly searching news websites and social media for information on COVID-19 is likely causing more distress than reassurance. Avoid doomscrolling and surfing. One daily update from a reliable source should be enough
- **manage your thoughts:** what catastrophic beliefs are triggered by viewing the daily case numbers? Are you fearful you or someone close to you will catch COVID? Are you worried about what will happen when you enter the world post-lockdown? Create a rational, balanced thought by using facts from reliable sources and try to maintain a realistic perspective
- **try mindfulness meditation:** rather than dwelling on events that may never occur, switch your attention to the present moment by practicing mindfulness. You can try some mindfulness exercises, for free, with the [Smiling Mind app](#)
- **plan other activities:** counter urges to repeatedly check daily numbers by scheduling other activities at these times. Activities do not to be difficult or time-consuming but should require you to focus your attention.

If you need any extra support

If you're struggling to disengage from the case numbers or other COVID-related information—and this is causing significant distress or having a negative impact on your life—you may need extra support.

Speak to your GP, who can provide a referral to a mental health professional.

Online resources or support include: [Lifeline](#), 13 11 14; [Beyond Blue](#), 1300 22 4636; [ehedspace](#); [MindSpot](#); or [This Way Up](#).

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