

Managing noise in a time of crisis

by Joseph McCormack

When Your World Heats Up Quickly—

A crisis, whether it is in your little world or global in scale, can quickly escalate to unmanageable dimensions. Whether it's a financial meltdown, sudden death, imminent divorce, natural disaster or a pandemic, the noise of fear and uncertainty can quickly become deafening.

As the author of *NOISE: Living and leading when nobody can focus* (Wiley, 2020, ISBN: 978-1-119-55337-3, \$25.00), I am deeply concerned with the effect of excessive information on our ability to focus on what really matters to us day to day. Constant dire predictions, ceaseless notifications and careless warnings erode our ability to endure difficult situations. What's more, the noise surrounding a crisis can trigger more panic than the crisis itself.

In this paper, I will help the reader address some of the following important considerations:

- 1 How facts and predictions metastasize into feelings, uncertainty and fear
- 2 When responsible media monitoring turns into information overconsumption
- 3 The power of saying no when noise levels rapidly rise
- 4 Finding calm and solace in silence

1 A MOMENT OF REACTION TURNS INTO SOMETHING WORSE

Moments of crisis come in all shapes and sizes. Some are sudden and fleeting, others more permanent and longer lasting. It's important for us to navigate these challenges by looking at what's factual and objective versus what's subjective and perceived. For many of us, these lines are terribly blurred and nearly impossible to delineate. Is my job loss going to set me back a few months or years? Will a pending natural disaster harm me and my family? Will false accusations made publicly ruin me and my career? Will an outbreak lead to a

global pandemic? Searching for answers is tough and fear steps in to fill in the blanks for us.

Yes, what's objectively happening is tough to swallow yet hard facts and troubling realities can unnoticeably transform into something graver.

Our minds can accelerate and amplify such challenges into noise that's so deafening it's hard to even hear clearly.

"Step back and ask, is that a fact or a feeling? It's our personal responsibility to know the difference between what's a valid sound and what's just noise."

Not only is it essential to check for the quality and authenticity of the facts as they come our way, but also to gauge our ongoing responses to the information itself, especially as some of it rises to become noise. Noise is all around us from external sources, but it's also inside our heads. Emotional responses shouldn't be ignored or overlooked, of course, but we need to recognize the quality and quantity of what's coming into our minds. It's our personal responsibility to manage what we think, nobody else's.

A few questions to reflect on:

- Am I reacting or overreacting to information?
- Do I take a moment to gauge my rational and emotional responses?
- Can I talk to someone else to help gain a better perspective?

2 MEDIA MONITORING CAN BE BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

When there is a calamity looming, we all need to stay well informed. What are the real risks we face? When do I need to change behavior and develop a plan? Who are trustworthy sources?

In many cases, we need to seek the right balance of both traditional and social media as go-to sources of vital updates. However, we live in a 24/7 news cycle with countless options at our fingertips. All variety of media outlets are aggressively vying for our attention. In a moment of crisis, the coverage tends to zero down into just that single subject, choosing to ditch covering any other topic. This leaves viewers, listeners and visitors with the false impression that these challenging issues are the only thing worth covering and considering.

In social media, the noise just amplifies with users posting, reposting, commenting and sharing with abandon. All of this just amplifies the noise levels, as we scroll for just one more bit in fear that we might be missing yet another nugget to placate our anxieties and fears.

"Clicking and scrolling through news channels can seem like the responsible thing to do, only to become an obsessive craving to digest more commentary on the topic."

We need to moderate consumption. There's a real risk of being overinformed, especially since media reporters practice little restraint and blur the lines of factual reporting with bold predictions to engage more audiences. What's more, social media has no rules and commentary can be likened to the lawlessness of the Wild, Wild West.

A few questions to reflect on:

- Do I overindulge in media consumption, both traditional and social?
- Can I differentiate between what's a prediction and certainty?
- Who can I get to recommend a few select sources that are trustworthy and credible?

3 THE POWER OF "NO" TO DAMPEN RISING NOISE LEVELS

In times of crisis, people can feel extremely helpless and powerless. The dire circumstances we face seem to weaken our will to endure the challenges we face. It can feel very overwhelming and easily entice us to give into fear.

It's at these times that we need to exert a forceful response, one that really can come most powerfully from nobody else than ourselves. When facing serious difficulties that appear to amplify in severity, we need to lower the volume by saying no to the noise. This decision may feel feeble and futile, but it isn't. There's a power in turning down the noise level and saying no to it.

Though we can't make the crisis disappear, we can make the intensified effects of it abate. It may not be within our power to resolve the issue, but we can exercise greater self-control in how we have been reacting to it. This restraint may define how we navigate the crisis and endure it.

"We can't allow noise to take over and deafen us to the real issues at hand - we need to start saying no more often before it builds to that point."

No is a powerful word. Let's choose to use it when facing dangerous thoughts, impulsive responses and imprudent attitudes. When facing such challenges, we have the freedom to employ our ability to say "no."

A few questions to reflect on:

- Do I let myself become so overwhelmed to the point of allowing noise to increase?
- Can I address thoughts, feelings and excessive reactions simply by saying no to them?
- Where can I find greater strength to help me pay attention to what matters?

Continued on next page.

4 FINDING TIME FOR SILENCE IN THE MIDDLE OF A STORM

It can be extremely difficult to navigate in the middle of a tempest. Our sense of direction, well-being and objectivity can easily get distorted and lead us to poor decisions. Many people that look back on how they handled themselves during such trying times wish they had acted differently.

One powerful way to lower the noise and think more clearly is to set aside quiet time. It is during these moments, initially, that silence might still seem pretty noisy because we are afraid, our minds are racing, and the future is highly uncertain. Don't be surprised that those initial moments don't give you clarity, peace and calm. Investing in silence will provide a generous return on attention.

One of the most effective ways to prepare for silence is to think beforehand how you want to use it. When your mind is still reverberating, it's very difficult to decide what you want to think about during the silence. Take some time to prepare how you will use the silence. Maybe it's to plan, pray, listen, remember, read, write, decide—or do nothing at all.

"Schedule times of silence and think about one thing at a time, not more. A great place to start is thinking of all things you are grateful for— that nearly always does the trick."

Momentary silence and solitude create solace and clarity. Under normal daily circumstances, we don't use it enough. It's even more vital in watershed moments to give our minds and souls a break. We need to give the revving engine time to throttle down.

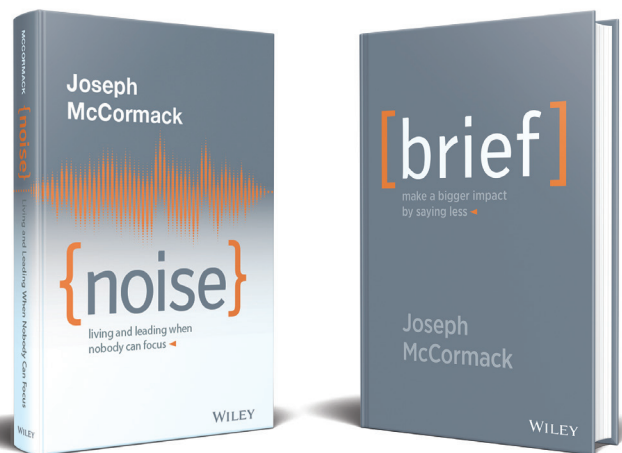
A few questions to reflect on:

- Can I set aside time in the morning and evening for silent reflection and rest?
- What thoughts, excuses and obstacles do I put in the way of having quiet time?
- Do I realize the many benefits of letting my brain slow down?

LOWER THE NOISE

By employing these simple tactics, we can weather a crisis with a clear head as we strive to make sound decisions. Managing noise— our consumption of it, creation of it and its internal effects—will allow us to live and lead intentionally during difficult situations.

© 2020 The [Brief] Lab | thebrieflab.com ▶ 3



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph McCormack is the author of *BRIEF: Make a bigger impact by saying less* (Wiley & Sons, 2014) and *NOISE: Living and leading when nobody can focus* (Wiley & Sons, 2020). He's the founder and managing director of The BRIEF Lab, an organization that helps professionals become clear and concise communicators. He publishes a weekly podcast called "Just Saying" that's available on iTunes, Spotify, Android and other podcast platforms.

More information can be found at his website at www.thebrieflab.com.