Care first

COVID-19: Fake News, What is it?

Fake news is news or stories on the internet and in media that are not true or factually accurate.

Not everything that we read or see is true - and if it isn't, and we share it, we could be making more people believe something that is actually made up. Stories like this are called fake news and they can be a problem.

There are two types of fake news:

1. Disinformation - which is spread intentionally by people in bad faith. In the case of COVID-19, there has been disinformation blaming racial groups, illegal immigrants and even governments for the spread of the virus.

2. Misinformation - which is spread innocently despite being incorrect. This is because the people writing them - for example, journalists or bloggers - don't check all of the facts before publishing the story, or they might exaggerate some of it.

What does fake news look like? You may have noticed on social media platforms recently are viral threads being circulated by various accounts, many verified which highlighted a huge spike in suicide rates during lockdown. On the surface, why would we not believe a verified account of a celebrity, athlete or person of interest. However, it pays to be mindful that these people are only experts in their field (or may just be popular) and not others, so being mindful that what they say or post may not be accurate will help us to not blindly accept everything we read. The classic "don't believe everything you read" saying comes to mind. Below is an example of misinformation which occurred recently.

Figure 1 is a recent tweet posted by a verified twitter account of a former professional athlete with nearly 700,000 followers. Upon first reading it is safe to say we can all be taken aback by the severity of such a spike in suicide figures.

Figure 1

However, don't believe everything you read. Whilst it is never a bad thing to promote support services that can help people in the darkest moments, the context in how we do this needs to be honest and accurately upheld by all. As you will see from Figures 2 & 3 below, the evidence which underpins the viral tweet that has been circulating online is inaccurate, a miscued quote from a source which has snowballed, thus leading to widespread misinformation spreading.

Figure 2

Figure 3

How can fake news impact us? A recent study by the American Psychological Association found that 66% of Americans are stressed out about the future of the country and the constant consumption of news was pinpointed as a major contributor. Author and therapist Steven Stosny created the term "headline stress disorder" following the fallout from the 2016 presidential election campaign. He is quoted as saying "For many people, continual alerts from news sources, blogs and social media, and alternative facts feel like missile explosions in a siege without end". This barrage of information, even accurate information or news can generate a lot of negative feelings like anxiety, hopelessness, despair and sadness.

How can we combat fake news?

1. Don't believe everything you read! Does the source appear genuine and professional i.e. is it a government/health website or a random twitter account.
2. Fact Check! fullfact.org can help to check the accuracy of the information you are seeing. You will have seen from the above that the BBC also have a fact checking team which you can follow on social media platforms.
3. Acknowledge your bias! As human beings we have 'confirmation bias' which means we tend to follow information that agrees with our morale standing or opinion. Try to be open minded.
4. Block or report any unwanted accounts, posts or comments you see that are not accurate.
5. Hide certain buzzwords on your social platforms.

If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

We will be discussing this content and expanding more on our supporting webinar on Tuesday 14th July at 12pm. You can register for the webinar by clicking this link –

https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/4033447763781892623

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.