

How Are You (and Others) Deleting, Distorting and Generalising for 2020 Vision?



By Eve Menezes Cunningham

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As babies and infants, we quickly learn to delete, distort and generalise as we take on board more of the world. If we didn't, life would be too big for our brains to handle. Assessing every single iota of sensory information would be too much.

With so much change this year, we're creating more new neural pathways than grown adults usually have to create. In terms of brain health (see page 10), this is great news. But it can be exhausting. We're doing our best to keep up with the changes, re-educating ourselves around histories that so many people were unaware of and attempting to come together to birth a new normal that is more compassionate, sustainable, and offers justice, equality and freedom for all. And all this during a global pandemic. People are having to learn new ways of doing many of the things we previously took for granted. For many, working from home and using Zoom was completely new. Entire industries are changing.

Deleting, Distorting and Generalising

With all this essential new information, it's natural that we become quicker to attempt to clear some headspace by deleting, distorting and generalising even more. I've lost count of the people I know who've 'given up on the news', bundling the world's journalists and reporters together as some homogenised 'mainstream media' blob.

2020 has certainly been an interesting year, and I understand the impulse to want to switch off. It can feel exhausting to stay sane while remaining informed. But saying you're not watching the news doesn't mean you're not taking in a lot of information.

While not officially called news, many people get their news via social media feeds and it is shaping perception. There are many distortions, both through algorithms that perpetuate and even strengthen echo chambers, and those who deliberately spread misinformation.

The simple concept of wearing a mask to protect others and give some level of protection to ourselves being controversial still boggles my brain. Yes, they're uncomfortable and look strange at first, but I quickly started attempting to drink through mine. I even saw a video of an American woman who'd just given BIRTH wearing hers. Obviously, a small section of society can't wear them, but those of us who can get to potentially save lives simply by enduring a teeny bit of discomfort. They're far less uncomfortable than being hooked up to a ventilator or living with the guilt of contributing to someone's long term health issues or even death.

Another example of distortion is the Black Lives Matter movement. Seeing greater awareness in the wake of George Floyd's murder this year, some people are still distorting the simple anti-racist message that Black Lives Matter TOO;

some are acting as if the people fighting white supremacist systems that have been in place way too long are starting rather than attempting to end a race war.

Generalisations, common at the best of times, are especially rife with all this newness and energy being spent on everyday essential learning. It's simpler to dismiss entire groups of people than it is to take the time to ask – with respect – for clarification. The more we can listen to each other, the more likely we are to learn from each other instead of continuing with this heightened 'othering', projecting our own shadows onto everyone else.

Are there any deletions, distortions and generalisations you might summon some energy to challenge in yourself? I see this a bit like physiotherapy. Just as we can support physical recovery with a few focused minutes a day, we can strengthen our compassion and critical thinking by questioning even one of our thoughts each day. Attempting to question ALL of them would be too much and we'd quickly lapse back.

How about others? Have you noticed a loved one's deletions, distortions and generalisations, or those of acquaintances and strangers? Does it help to exhale and remind yourself that they, too, might be overwhelmed by 2020?

We're all human. I may well be distorting by hoping all this pain is simply coming up for healing so we can learn from it and do better moving forward – but this helps me. ■

