

Good news at last: the world isn't as horrific as you think

Level 3 • Advanced

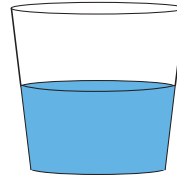
1 Warmer

Is the glass half full or half empty?

What do you think this expression means?

Give an example of when it could be used.

Is there a similar expression in your language?



2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then, find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

misconceptions	compounded	hard-wired	corruption	crave	draws
fragmented	incubator	male chauvinists	premature	conflict	sceptics

- dishonest or illegal behaviour by officials or people in positions of power, especially when they accept money in exchange for doing things for someone _____
- attracts _____
- used to describe behaviour that is caused by your genes and the way that your brain is made, rather than learnt from experience _____
- want something very much and in a way that is very hard to control _____
- wrong beliefs or opinions as a result of not understanding something _____
- fighting between countries or groups _____
- divided into many separate parts and pieces _____
- made worse _____
- people who have doubts about things that other people think are true or right _____
- men who have negative attitudes towards women and believe they are inferior to men _____
- born before it should be _____
- a piece of hospital equipment that ill or very small babies lie in to be kept warm and given treatment _____

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Good news at last: the world isn't as horrific as you think

Training yourself how to put the news into perspective – practising 'factfulness' – will change your outlook for the better

Hans Rosling

11 April, 2018

- 1 Things are bad and it feels like they are getting worse, right? War, violence, natural disasters, corruption. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer; and we will soon run out of resources unless something drastic is done. That's the picture most people in the West see in the media and carry around in their heads.
- 2 I call it the overdramatic worldview. It's stressful and misleading. In fact, the vast majority of the world's population live somewhere in the middle of the income scale. Perhaps they are not what we think of as middle class but they are not living in extreme poverty. Their girls go to school; their children get vaccinated. Perhaps not on every single measure or every single year but step by step, year by year, the world is improving. In the past two centuries, life expectancy has more than doubled. Although the world faces huge challenges, we have made tremendous progress.
- 3 The overdramatic worldview draws people to the most negative answers. It is not caused simply by out-of-date knowledge. My experience, over decades of lecturing and testing, has finally brought me to see that the overdramatic worldview comes from the very way our brains work. The brain is a product of millions of years of evolution and we are hard-wired with instincts that helped our ancestors to survive in small groups of hunters and gatherers. We crave sugar and fat, which used to be life-saving sources of energy when food was scarce. But today, these cravings make obesity one of the biggest global health problems. In the same way, we are interested in gossip and dramatic stories, which used to be the only source of news and useful information. This craving for drama causes misconceptions and helps create an overdramatic worldview.
- 4 We still need these dramatic instincts to give meaning to our world. If we sifted every input and analysed every decision rationally, a normal life would be impossible. But we need to learn to control our drama intake.
- 5 It is absolutely true that there are many bad things in this world. The number of conflict fatalities has been falling since the Second World War but the Syrian war has reversed this trend. Terrorism, too, is rising. Overfishing and the deterioration of the seas are truly worrisome. The list of endangered species is getting longer. But while it is easy to be aware of all the bad things happening in the world, it's harder to know about the good things. The silent miracle of human progress is too slow and too fragmented to ever qualify as news. Over the past 20 years, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has almost halved. But in online polls, in most countries, fewer than 10% of people knew this.
- 6 Our instinct to notice the bad more than the good is related to three things: the misremembering of the past; selective reporting by journalists and activists; and the feeling that as long as things are bad, it's heartless to say they are getting better. For centuries, older people have romanticized their youths and insisted that "things ain't what they used to be". Well, that's true. Most things used to be worse. This tendency to misremember is compounded by the never-ending negative news from across the world.
- 7 Stories about gradual improvements rarely make the front page even when they occur on a dramatic scale and affect millions of people. And thanks to increasing press freedom and improving technology, we hear about more disasters than ever before. In the United States, the violent crime rate has been falling since 1990. But each time something horrific or shocking happened – pretty much every year – a crisis was reported. The majority of people believe that violent crime is getting worse.
- 8 My guess is you feel that me saying that the world is getting better is like me telling you that everything is fine and that feels ridiculous. I agree. Everything is not fine. We should still be very concerned. As long as there are plane crashes, preventable child deaths, endangered species, climate-change sceptics, male chauvinists, crazy dictators, toxic waste, journalists in prison and girls not getting an education, we cannot relax. But it is just as ridiculous to look away from the progress that has been made. The consequent loss of hope can be devastating. When people wrongly believe that nothing is improving, they may lose confidence in measures that actually work.

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- 9 How can we help our brains to realize that things are getting better? Think of the world as a very sick premature baby in an incubator. After a week, she is improving but she has to stay in the incubator because her health is still critical. Does it make sense to say that the infant's situation is improving? Yes. Does it make sense to say it is bad? Yes, absolutely. Does saying "things are improving" imply that everything is fine and we should all not worry? Not at all: it's both bad and better. That is how we must think about the current state of the world.
- 10 Take girls' education. When women are educated, the workforce becomes diversified and able to make better decisions. Educated mothers have fewer children and more survive. More energy is invested in each child's education: a virtuous cycle of change. Ninety per cent of girls of primary-school age attend school; for boys, it's 92%. There are still gender differences when it comes to education in the poorest countries, especially in secondary and higher education, but that's no reason to deny the progress that has been made.
- 11 Remember that the media and activists rely on drama to grab your attention, and that negative stories are more dramatic than positive ones. When you hear about something terrible, calm yourself by asking: if there had been a positive improvement, would I have heard about that?
- 12 This is "factfulness": understanding as a source of mental peace. Like a healthy diet and regular exercise, it can and should become part of people's daily lives. Start to practise it and you will make better decisions, stay alert to real dangers and possibilities, and avoid being constantly stressed about the wrong things.

Hans Rosling was a Swedish physician, academic and statistician, who died in 2017. This is an edited excerpt from his posthumously published book, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*, co-written by Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund.

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What is 'factfulness'?
2. What benefits will it bring?
3. What negative effects do the media and our own hard-wiring have on us?

4 Expressions

a. Find the following expressions in the article.

1. sensibly judge how good, bad, important etc something is by comparing it with other things (subtitle)
2. in the past, things were better than they are now (para 6)
3. be considered so important that it is made the main news story (para 7)
4. a process in which a good action or event produces a good result that also causes the process to continue so that more good results happen (para 10)
5. make you notice something (para 11)
6. pay attention to what is happening and ready to react quickly if necessary (para 12)

b. Use the expressions to talk about the article.

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5 Discussion

Do you read or listen to news stories every day?

- If so, which newspapers or news reports do you prefer to read, watch or listen to? Why?
- If not, why not?
- How would you describe the style of news reports and stories you usually read, watch or listen to? Are they, for example, overdramatic, realistic, biased, impartial ...?

6 'Factfulness'

- a. Think about a news report you have read or heard recently, one that offered a particularly negative view. Give your partner a short summary of the report in the style of the original.
- b. Use 'factfulness' to try to put the report into perspective.

7 Webquest

Watch one of these talks and explain it to a partner who has watched the other talk.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vr6Q77IUHE

www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_on_global_population_growth?referrer=playlist-the_best_hans_rosling_talks_yo

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KEY

1 Warmer

used for saying that someone has a tendency to look at things in a positive or a negative way

2 Key words

Teacher's tip: Before students do the task, you could ask them to cover the definitions, just read the key words and decide for themselves which of the words they think they already know. They should circle these. They could talk briefly about the meanings of these words in pairs and put the ones they are confident about using into sentences. Then, tell students to match the words they have circled with the definitions before they attempt to match the remaining words with the rest of the definitions.

1. corruption
2. draws
3. hard-wired
4. crave
5. misconceptions
6. conflict
7. fragmented
8. compounded
9. sceptics
10. male chauvinists
11. premature
12. incubator

3 Comprehension check

1. Factfulness is the act of training yourself to put news into perspective to bring you mental peace.
2. It will help you to make better decisions, to be prepared for real dangers when they arrive and it will stop you from constantly feeling stressed about things that you don't really need to be worried about.

3. Today's media usually provides an overdramatic worldview as this is what sells newspapers and draws in viewers and readers. This feeds on our hard-wired craving for drama and gossip, and our general instinct to pay more attention to bad news than to good news. We also tend to romanticize the past and have the false belief that things used to be much better in the 'good old days'.

4 Expressions

1. put something into perspective
2. things ain't what they used to be
3. make the front page
4. virtuous cycle
5. grab your attention
6. stay alert to

6 'Factfulness'

Teacher's tip: You might like to use this task as an opportunity to get students to read and discuss local news stories that could affect them.

7 Webquest

Teacher's note: The videos are between 9 and 10 minutes long.

Further reading:

www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/26/further-reading-steven-pinker-books-to-make-you-an-optimist