

Q&A: Election season got you down? Tips for managing your mental health

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With a little more than a week to go until the Nov. 3 presidential election, stress and mental anxiety surrounding American politics are at an all-time high. According to the American Psychological Association,

more than two-thirds of U.S. adults (68%) say the 2020 U.S. presidential election is a significant source of stress in their lives, which is a significant increase from the presidential election four years ago.

What can you do to manage these feelings as the big day gets closer?

Syracuse University psychology professors Dr. Afton Kapuscinski and Dr. Kevin Antshel provide some helpful mental health recommendations.

Afton Kapuscinski is director of the Psychological Services Center at Syracuse University and an assistant teaching professor of psychology.

Dr. Kapuscinski says:

"We have noticed a significant surge in the frequency of our therapy clients expressing distress related to the upcoming election, and the trend has been true of stress surrounding political issues in general over the past several years. I have noticed two themes in particular that seem to apply across partisan lines. First, people are concerned about their personal rights and safety, and believe that the outcome of the election will influence the likelihood of COVID-19 infection, racial or gender-based abuse, accessibility of healthcare or religious freedom. These concerns may exacerbate symptoms for those with a history of trauma or anxiety disorders. Second, clients often report significant interpersonal discord resulting from political disagreements with loved ones, and this sometimes includes broken relationships and loss of social resources for people who greatly need that support."

Recommendations:

1. "Be mindful of the effects that news alerts, political articles and social media surfing have on your level of stress. Ask yourself

whether the level of engagement is helpful or harmful, and take concrete steps to reduce your exposure if needed (e.g., limit screen time, stop notifications etc.)"

2. "Channel anger and anxiety into constructive action: Support the changes you would like to see by donating to organizations you value, volunteering as an advocate, or educating yourself about issues that matter to you."
3. "Identify 'coping buddies' for election night and consider not just focusing on the [election](#). Plan other activities like playing games online together, making new recipes or watching the same movie."

Kevin Antshel is a psychology professor and director of clinical training at Syracuse University. He answers four questions related to dealing with the elections and stress.

Do you have any recommendations to offer Americans who may feel this hanging over their heads? What are some coping mechanisms you might suggest to someone who is feeling anxious about current American politics?

Dr. Antshel: A good place to start is to self-monitor the amount of exposure to political content a person has daily and the resultant emotions that they have after viewing the content. If high levels of negative emotions (anger, frustration, anxiety) are coupled with this content, consider cutting back on the exposure. Social media content and interpersonal conversations are likely at higher risk for producing negative affect. I fully recognize that divesting oneself fully from political news is difficult, if not impossible, and may not be preferable. However, limiting the amount of time that one engages with political content via the news, social media and interpersonal conversations is

most likely feasible and beneficial for those who have associated negative emotions. Well before the current state of American politics, it was already a bad idea to discuss politics at the Thanksgiving dinner table.

In addition to this important recommendation, maintaining physical activity, a healthy diet, social support systems and good sleep hygiene are also likely to be helpful.

How can you differentiate whether you have "normal" levels of stress about the upcoming election, versus something that needs to be addressed by a professional?

Stress is ubiquitous and has a part of our everyday experience for decades. It is not possible to develop resilience without experiencing stress. However, too much stress is not advantageous for emotional and mental health and is especially linked to heightened anxiety. Knowing where 'normative' or typical levels of stress ends and maladaptive levels of stress begins is relatively straightforward and involves considering factors such as your anxiety/worry levels, sleep patterns, mood and overall functioning (academic, occupational, relationship). Changes in any of these parameters or worsening of functioning likely indicates that the person has crossed out of 'normative' stress and into maladaptive [stress](#).

In your own life, what are you doing to maintain your own healthy mental balance right now?

All of the above recommendations with one additional one: Maintaining a daily routine. The antidote to anxiety is certainty and predictability.

The best way I have found to do this for myself is having daily and weekly routines.

Provided by Syracuse University

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