

## Political Stress



### How to maintain balance and use media wisely

We are all experiencing political stress, particularly in the wake of the January 6, 2020 U.S. Capitol attack. An American Psychological Association survey <sup>[1]</sup> showed that 70% of adults experienced high levels of stress leading up to the 2020 election, and that stress may unfortunately last for some time to come. This is a time to plan ahead and keep calm. Since the news is one of the major ways that political stress can "get under the skin," we need to prevent harm from overconsumption of news.

You might be wondering how you can work when you feel so distracted or anxious. With so much happening right now with the pandemic and politics, it is sometimes hard to focus. There is a high risk of greater numbers of people falling into depression and anxiety. It is important to plan ahead

now ? set up your days to be balanced and build in some stress reduction. Here are some tips for managing news overload and getting through these challenging times.

## **Reduce your work goals, increase your self-care**

You may feel distracted and inefficient, but also you probably have too much on your to do list as a usual habit. Don't expect to work the same number of hours as usual; work for shorter periods. For example, you might want to set your alarm for 30-minute segments. Reduce the demands being put on you, by yourself, for others. If you can't change your schedule, try to proactively plan several pleasurable stress-relieving activities.

Short videos <sup>[2]</sup> and apps <sup>[3]</sup> can help relieve stress because they remind us to take a break and lead us through it. We have curated a list of some that focus on stress-reducing strategies, such as deep breathing and mindful movement. While these don't touch the weighty and existential issues we are facing, they are still helpful during times of stress. When we take breaks and go inward ? focusing on breath or movement ? we increase our resilience and cut out the many sources of outside noise and overstimulation. This allows us to gather our scattered attention, be more centered, and think more clearly during this challenging period.

## **Uncertainty and political stress will likely continue for some time**

It is important to prepare for having waves of uncertainty and anxiety during these challenging times.

Unfortunately, we have a divided society and might witness further violence, or we may feel more distrustful of others. During challenging times, says UC President Michael Drake, MD, "We must rely on our core community values of respect, equity, and inclusion. We cherish the free exchange of ideas and views ? including views that differ from our own..." Our leadership tips page <sup>[4]</sup> discusses how managers can deal with differing views in the workplace.

Political stress, intolerance, bigotry, and violence are all tremendously stressful to witness through media, to be a part of, and most of all, to be a target of. The period is especially stressful for Black, Indigenous, and persons of color (BIPOC) individuals, and it can trigger racial trauma that they have experienced in the past. Know this exists, name it, and be there to support others.

During a recent webinar on building an emotional toolbox <sup>[5]</sup>, UCSF Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences Vice Chair for ZSFG Lisa Fortuna, MD, MPH, provided some tips for coping with racial trauma <sup>[6]</sup>, including the following:

- **Talk about your feelings.** Stay informed, but limit your own and your children's exposure to news media and viral videos.
- **Connect with friends who can engage in racially conscious conversations**, and who are supportive and willing to help you process your thoughts and emotions.
- **Know your triggers** (people and places). Strategize to avoid them.
- **Practice self-care** in the way you know best. You really need it now.
- **Remember that racism is a huge problem which cannot be solved by a single person's efforts alone.**
- **Know that we are the legacy of many people who have come before us and fought for justice.**

You are not alone.

- **Engage in activism**, as you feel comfortable. Feeling empowered involves participating in actions to solve difficulties.
- **Partner with allies**. Partnerships with allies are essential for taking action.

## How to cope

Regardless of political party, all sides feel their values are at stake. It is hard enough understanding the mindset of those with differing views during the best of times, so remember that discussing the political climate with people who disagree with you during this sensitive time may be highly triggering.

There is an important way to view the outcome ? take the long view. If you want to get involved in political actions, find wise and safe activities that will help the causes you are most passionate about. Getting involved in community action or local politics can have a big impact.

Schedule time to talk with people who will be calming rather than cause panic, and try to be a voice of clarity and reason for others. Protect children from your election stress by talking about other matters, such as things that are important to them. People living alone or who are socially isolated may be more vulnerable to feelings of desperation ? reach out to them.

## Consider *reading* more than *watching*

We must restrain our consumption of media even more than usual. It will be hard! The news replays the same headlines and information over and over, adding incremental new information when they can, and offers dramatic and shocking visual images. Reading gives us more information than watching television and leaves less emotionally disturbing imprints on our mood and memories. The more people expose themselves to television during natural disasters, the more they experience long-term consequences such as PTSD symptoms and health issues.

We often don't realize the effect that frequent screen use can have on our quality of life. It splits up our experience of life, preventing quality time. Surveys show that on average people feel more anxious after watching the news and have a worse mood after checking social media.

A recent study <sup>[7]</sup> found that the time spent on COVID news, and also checking a greater number of news sites (radio, television, and newspapers), were both linked to greater emotional distress. Another study <sup>[8]</sup> found that watching collective disasters on television, like 9/11, is sometimes reported to be the most traumatic event in one's life so far. Indeed, many people had PTSD symptoms from watching 9/11 coverage for several years afterward. This shows us the potential power of frequent viewing of violent or traumatic events to contribute to longer-term mental health issues. The visions of the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol are being replayed over and over ? they can trigger current and past feelings of threat to safety and should be avoided.

Remember that it is a relief to focus on positive news and important to celebrate positive events, regardless of how small they may be.

The implications of this research is that to protect your mental health during these stressful times,

limit news. **Choose only a few reliable news sources or political coverage sites.** Some people find it helpful to watch news with a like-minded person so they can discuss things that are upsetting and put them in context.

## **Decide *when* you will check the news**

Decide what time or times of day you will check the news. This will limit the amount of time you have exposure and will allow you to focus on other things. An example of a "doomscrolling" plan is to set your alarm to allow 30 minutes of reading just a few favorite papers and social media sites before work or chores. Admittedly, plans to limit don't always work because media is so addictive and the feeling we must know about latest news can become a compulsion. You are not alone in being on edge and checking too often. Everyone needs a media diet/curfew plan for this politically charged time since "news anxiety" can seep into all hours of your day, keeping you on edge and interfering with sleep. You can add some "joyscrolling" by sending texts of joyful pictures and messages of gratitude, or just by checking in with others.

## **Coping at work**

Check in with your reactions and need for self-care. At the workplace, including on Zoom, you might notice signs of anger, disdain or polarizing body language (such as harsh tones, eye rolls, or folded arms) from yourself or others. Step away or excuse yourself before you feel emotionally flooded.

Other tips for coping at work include:

- Stay connected to the shared mission at work (such as UCSF's PRIDE values).
- Repair and acknowledge missteps as soon as possible. Address ruptures respectfully and genuinely.
- Be proactive ? recognize and discuss that political stress may cause disruption for your team.
- Validate and support individual stress and reactions, and model healthy coping.
- Adopt an open approach that allows for the sharing of all viewpoints.
- Discover shared values instead of focusing on party affiliation. Use language that joins.
- Remember that we are stronger together.

## **Tips for managers and supervisors**

If you are a manager or supervisor, see our tips for managers <sup>[4]</sup> developed by Christina Mangurian, MD, MAS, with the UCSF Employee Coping and Resilience Program and Columbia University COPE. The tips lay out how to structure meetings to reduce stress.

## **Resources for help**

See our Seeking Help section <sup>[9]</sup> for a broad list of helpful organizations and crisis lines to assist anyone you or anyone you know who is feeling extreme distress or at risk of harmful behavior.

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#### Links

- [1] <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/10/election-stress>
- [2] <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/videos>
- [3] <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/apps#a>
- [4] <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/cope/election>
- [5] <https://youtu.be/np56M3SEiQA>
- [6] <https://youtu.be/np56M3SEiQA?t=1668>
- [7] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7351429/>
- [8] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/jts.22534>
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