

Coping with Election Stress

Objective

To develop coping strategies to reduce stress, anxiety, anger, and depression related to the election.

You Should Know

Many Americans are experiencing stress related to the upcoming U.S. election. According to a recent American Psychological Association (APA) survey, nearly 70% of respondents said the elections are a significant source of stress. The survey also found that 77% are worried about the future of the U.S.

Dr. Steven Stosny coined the term "election stress disorder" in 2016, with symptoms such as increased anxiety, insomnia, and difficulty concentrating. Dr. Stosny observed that the pervasive negativity of political campaigns, amplified by the 24-hour news cycle and social media exposure, creates a significant level of stress, anxiety, or anger in many people.

The APA described symptoms many of the survey participants reported. Are you experiencing any of the following symptoms? Check off any that apply to you.

- Panic attacks
- General anxiety
- Hypervigilance
- Rapid heartbeat or palpitations
- Insomnia
- Highly distracted most or all the time
- Dwelling more on things that bother you the most
- Increased irritability, anger, or resentment
- Frequent headaches
- Constant checking of social media or watching the news
- Chronic fatigue related to the current political climate.
- Digestive problems (e.g., stomach aches or upset, lack of appetite, overeating, etc.)
- Feelings of despair or hopelessness
- Low-level depression or sadness
- Uncertainty or feeling out of control.

Here are some strategies to help you manage stress related to the election:

- 1. Avoid dwelling on things you cannot control.** You might imagine worst-case scenarios, but you can break the habit of ruminating on bad outcomes by focusing on what you can control. If following the news, watching the debates, or scrolling through social media increases your stress, limit your media consumption. Take a break from the news, and instead engage in meaningful activities you enjoy. Get involved in issues that you can control – like making a plan on how you will vote, for example.
- 2. Spend time with friends and family.** It is important to stay socially connected. Research shows that people who have at least one or two friends or family members to turn to for emotional support during stressful times tend to cope better than people who do not have such support. Call people rather than text them.
- 3. Get active every day.** Exercising or taking a brisk walk helps you release the energy you experience when you are stressed.
- 4. Prepare mentally for delayed results.** Expect delays in election results. If you expect a clear answer and you do not receive it, you will experience amplified uncertainty and increased stress. It could be days or weeks before the U.S. finalizes election results. Plan how you will spend the time waiting for results. If watching TV or scanning social media is stressful, take a complete media break. Do activities that make you happy, choosing things that cause less distress and overwhelm. Avoid continually checking for “bad” news.
- 5. Increase stress-reducing habits.** Eat healthy and get enough sleep. Unplug from your devices, turn off notifications, and avoid the constant connection to information – which actually increases stress levels. Read non-political books, listen to upbeat music, or sign up for a virtual class.
- 6. Look for signs of hope.** The APA survey did find that the majority of Americans do still feel hopeful – despite high stress levels.

This worksheet will help you decrease the negative effects of election stress by increasing the use of coping strategies.

What to Do

First answer the following questions, then come up with a pre- and post-Election Day plan. For example, you can make a pact with a friend or family members. You might decide to go on a "media hiatus" for the next month. You might avoid Facebook, Instagram, and/or Twitter until Election Day passes.

Review the list of symptoms related to election-related stress. What are the top two or three symptoms you are having the most difficulty with? Describe.

What are specific things you can do to avoid dwelling on things you cannot control?

What can you do to stay physically active, or improve your sleep and eating habits? Be specific.

Who are supportive people you can connect with during this stressful time? List at least three.

Referring to the coping strategies identified above, what else can you do to decrease stress?

Pick six activities you can do to decrease election-related stress.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Next, complete the chart on the following page for the next two weeks. Write down the date, and rate your stress before and after you do a stress-relieving activity. Rate your stress from 1 to 10, where 1 = no/low stress, to 10 = the worst stress you have ever experienced.

What was the main obstacle you encountered practicing this exercise?

Which activity helped you cope the most? Explain.

If you are still struggling with election-related stress, whom can you talk with to review what went well and what did not go well? Describe what you will say.

What else can you do to decrease the negative effects of election-related stress?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
