

Suffering from Post-Election Stress Disorder?

21 ways to move beyond political chaos to find peace

'Shock and numb to my bones.' Is how some are describing their reaction to the 2020 election results... completely numb inside.

If you are feeling the same, you are not alone. All elections matter, but this one seems to be especially traumatic considering it is happening in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, along with social isolation, unemployment, global recession, schools and businesses on lockdown, protests over injustice, alongside a growing fear of what is still to come during the most stressful year in modern history. No matter which side wins – the other side loses, and for some their sense of hope is lost with it.



Continual stress brings a flood of emotion like anxiety, grief, or hopelessness. Dr. Varun Choudhary, senior behavioral psychiatrist at Magellan Health described it this way, *"People are experiencing a significant change in how they live, work, socialize, and function in society. Each element can be a serious source of anxiety. These multiple factors converging have caused many Americans to experience a substantial increase in mental health concerns."*

In a national crisis people do not automatically think of red states or blue states – they identify as the United States. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 our National Leaders joined hands and hearts to pray together on the Capital steps. This election happened during a global crisis, but instead of joining hands in prayer, many have clinched fists. People are so divided that 35% of Republicans and 45% of Democrats said they would be disappointed if their children chose to fall in love and marry someone from the opposite political party. (source: PRRI nonpartisan research)

Partisan politics build walls – not bridges

Families have been divided over issues for months and recent surveys show how this election has elevated stress, shattered relationships and affected mental health.

68% of Americans are stressed about the election

52% believe their mental health has suffered due to the election

51% anticipate the economy will worsen after the election

38% are losing sleep because of election stress

26% expect civil unrest and protests will get worse

24% feel rage about the election

47% have not sought mental health treatment due to costs or lack of access

11% have gone to therapy to cope with election stress

(sources: American Psychological Association, Caravan, Lifestance Health)

The election is like an emotional tsunami of anguish for some, joy for others and a letdown of psychological energy for all. People are ramped up emotionally because they believe the outcome of this election will have a long-term impact on their safety. Many are afraid when they go to bed at night and afraid when they wake up the next morning.

Post-Election Stress is not a mental illness – it is a description of an event that sparks extreme emotions and reactions such as all-or-nothing thinking, blame shifting, attacking, avoiding, denying reality, or irrationally clinging to only one side of an issue. This process is not new. As far back as Plato, philosophers were observing how politics and fear were connected. This is because people tend to draw feelings of safety and security from their leaders.

Anxiety is a normal reaction in an abnormal experience. Humans need to feel safe and secure but when safety feels threatened, they worry about how to fix it and regain stability. When we trust a leader, our lives feel more secure, which is only a mental perception. Life might not have been better when Ronald Reagan was President, but most Americans thought it was. This election cycle has shown huge gaps in how insecure some groups feel about their future, especially young adults, Blacks, and Latinos. The pandemic threat has exposed feelings of insecurity about health, education, government, career, finances, and the future. These are scary times for everyone.

What is going to happen next during this difficult year? That is unknown. What can you do about it today to manage a surge of post-election stress? Here are 21 actions to take as the “*President*” of your own life since you will be the one to make your life better, not the politicians.

1. Acknowledge the election did not solve stress for most people

Many people believe the country is out of control, and when people feel out of control their emotions flow toward anger, anxiety or even apathy and helplessness. Feeling powerless over circumstances is how half the country feels right now, likely more stressed than relieved it is over. Solve pressure by practicing random acts of kindness to give hope and courage to others. This is how to unite relationships after a tumultuous election cycle. Avoid any discussion that starts with ‘I told you so’. Apply the advice Thumper gave to Bambi in the Disney film, “*If you can’t say something nice – don’t say nothing at all.*”

2. Manage election stress to conserve psychological energy

If you are so anxious about the political change in our country that you cannot eat, bathe, or get out of bed it has become a life-altering problem. Focus on what you can control in your part of the world instead of being worried about problems in the rest of the world. Acknowledge the election is over to now focus on what to do next – the important task of building a healthy lifestyle during this pandemic. Listen to the

wisdom of former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt who faced many elections and said, *"You have to accept whatever comes and the only important thing is that you meet it with courage and with the best that you have to give."*

3. Choose to spend energy on productivity to prevent post-election panic

When things are not going well look for someone to help. Remember the words of Mr. Rogers, who said, *"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"* In this season of post-election stress there are many to help with words of encouragement and support. You will not have to look far to see someone who needs your kind words during this stressful time. Volunteer, donate, do what you can in your own back yard. Live out the wisdom of the ancient Chinese proverb, *"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now."*

4. It is not over until it is over

Expect conflict and disagreement about the election to go on for some time. It is unlikely every race will be announced election night. Set your expectations on what matters in life beyond the first Tuesday in November to the next day. History has shown there may be counting and re-counting of ballots. Our brains want a clear ending so we can manage the outcome in our mind. That may not be possible as election results drag on or are hotly contested. Don't let what happens in Washington change what you can manage in your life right now.

5. Build a wall around traumatic topics

Speaking up to set boundaries about aggressive political conversations will protect relationships and empower you. You are encouraged to redirect hostile conversations away from controversy. Most people do not want to hear political commentary about what is happening in America. Unless you are being paid to share partisan opinions on CNN or FOX, simply talk about your life and the people you care about. Jeanne Safer, author of the book *"I Love You, But I Hate Your Politics,"* teaches you cannot change someone's mind politically, just like you cannot make someone fall in love with you. Set a limit on what is acceptable in your home and stick to it. It is healthy to talk about tough topics – unless it becomes traumatic or attacking. When respect is gone the relationship begins to fail. Attacking someone who does not share your beliefs does not make the situation better, it only exposes who is a bully.

6. Screaming does not change someone's mind – it does the opposite

If dealing with a relative who would rather be 'right' than be in relationship with you suggest they stop the battle, take a breath, and focus on listening to others. If they cannot exercise self-control, then you may have to gently remove them from the situation to keep peace in your home. They have a choice. Stop screaming – start connecting or risk being alone. Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill observed this tendency to argue first instead of taking positive action as, *"You can always count on Americans to do the right thing — after they've tried everything else."* Stop shouting and do the right thing by moving beyond election stress.

7. Disappointment is part of life on most days – not only on election day

This has been the most stressful election in modern times. Millions of people are feeling like they are on an emotional roller-coaster surging from exhausted to exhilarated and back again. Hopefully, you exercised your right to vote, got involved, supported the candidates of your choice, and practiced the freedoms of democracy. Some of the issues and people you supported with your vote will move forward. Others will not. Life will go on for millions of others; life will go on for you as well. Consider these words about moving past disappointment from President John F. Kennedy who said, *"Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future."*

8. Reconnect with your Democratic friends and Republican relatives

It was election – not your entire life. You have known and loved people from both parties. The relationship is important more important than the issues. If you have said snarky things on social media, *(or worse, in person)*, own it and apologize. The election is over, and the relationship must go on. Wisdom is to repair and reconnect for the challenging days ahead. The COVID pandemic will go on for months after this election becomes a memory. Virtual friends on Twitter will not be there when your car battery goes dead and you need a jump – but your real friends will be. King Solomon taught this wisdom, (Prov.27:10) *"Do not forsake your friend or a friend of your family, and do not go to your relative's house when disaster strikes you-- better a neighbor nearby than a relative far away."*

9. Election stress can go beyond election day so practice self-care

Psychological distress causes our body's natural immunity to decrease, for sleep, appetite, and energy to be affected. Stop the cycle of living in continual stress by creating healing habits to manage the stress. This process is called self-care and it is not selfish to practice – rather self-protective. For some it is meditation, prayer, deep breathing, Pilates, reading, walking, swimming, biking, or knitting. Making your own wellness a priority will protect your mental and physical health during cold and flu season. There are over 60 proven ways to boost your health with self-care. Find them and get started.

10. Community is about common values

The word common is core to the word community for a reason. When we share common values and beliefs there is no conflict – only connection. The national election is over – but not opportunities about local connection. You can't change the whole world – but you can get involved and change your part of the world. Seek out places to volunteer with youth, donate to a food bank, or build with Habit for Humanity. Move from complaining about how dark it is to brightening your neighborhood with one good deed at a time. Maxine Hong Kingston described it this way - *"In a time of destruction, create something."* Tough times can shatter a community – or connect it. Orlando was divided before the Pulse massacre. Then became #OrlandoUnited as people stood together after the crisis to heal. The

strength of working together to solve challenges after an election may be the most American thing you can do right now.

11. Respectfully talk through the tension

When families come together to listen more than talk wonderful things happen – the relationship grows as tension goes down. Ask yourself if you care more about national issues than you care about your neighbors. If you are struggling with the answer to that question, it is time to seek out a counselor who can help you and your family get past the conflict. Mental health is not about winning the argument for one – it is about wellness for all. Respectful conversations can build trust and restore relationships. Booker T. Washington knew this when he wrote, *“Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him.”*

12. Decide how much news is enough

Continually watching a 24-hour news channel will give you an objective opinion; it will only give you their opinion. To gain objectivity call a friend and talk about issues. Real conversations have the power to change people more than watching TV. Ask what they believe or watch a political commentator’s point of view and discuss it together. Try to figure out why they believe the way they do? Watching people scream will not make your stress go down and will only upset you. Watching negative news may be entertaining to some, but has been proven to elevate stress, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress in others. Find the ‘off’ switch and avoid the process of *‘doomscrolling’* which is following a negative topic on social media. Watching others fight will not make you feel better.

13. Social media is not designed to solve stress – it is designed to capture attention

The *“Social Dilemma”* on Netflix opened a conversation about how billion-dollar corporations measure success in how much time you spend scrolling on their apps. Some expert’s label social media as a psychological form of mind control. Venting on Facebook will not solve your frustration but may create some. Decide to relax in ways that energize you without the risk of rejection, disagreement, or worse – social media addiction. The goal is to eliminate stress, not risk mind control. If social media is not making your life better – uninstall it and change your focus toward wellness.

14. The election adrenaline rush is over, causing anger and anxiety

It’s done. Like it or not the race is over. People living on the 24/7 news cycle of their candidate have been on political overload and may want the excitement and rush to continue. Post-election stress will be hardest on people who focused on the election while ignoring other parts of their life. This will be exposed in a surge of emotions, most notably anger, anxiety, or apathy. The angry may act impulsive or violent. People who feel violated by the election results may turn to dumping out anger to find relief for the pressure inside. Verbal explosions, impulsive rage, verbally attacking others, while losing relationships or careers in the process. Most

dangerous is when an angry group of people get together because concentrated rage does not lead to constructive actions. Gasoline and fire do not mix.

Others may stuff their anxious emotions inside, so they just keep building. Instead of blowing out, they blow in. When this happens, a person can feel emotionally numb, and sometimes commit self-destructive acts. Eating for comfort, drinking to numb the pain, hooking up with the wrong partner to try and forget about their fears of the future or putting their phone in airplane mode, closing the blinds and checking out like a hermit hiding in a cave. Darkness will not make fears go away, but it may lead to feeling greater despair.

15. Let go of complaining and move toward communicating

You have the power to change your life which cannot happen when you are complaining about it. Being critical after the election will not make your world better. Give up feeling helpless about the outcome, since our government runs as a process, not a single event. One election will not change everything for everyone. However, when you make the decision to express your needs in a healthy way, connect in relationship and get involved in community you will be living out what the President Abraham Lincoln voiced when he said, *“that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth”*. He said those words at Gettysburg about moving beyond the battle over 150 years ago and they are just as relevant today.

16. Remember they are your relatives, not your elected leaders

Your family members opinions are how they feel about issues and judging by the yard signs and bumper stickers some were quite passionate. Good they were part of the highest voter turnout in over 100 years. Not so good if they choose to continue the ‘war’ of proving their opinion correct. Bias blinds objective thinking and breaks relationships. Better is to focus on kindness, mutual respect and to follow the teaching in Scripture to *“love one another.”*

17. Embrace optimism about the future

This has been a stressful time with growing anxiety around a global pandemic, recession, and civil unrest. Many are protesting about what happened in the past. Recovering from election stress requires looking forward, even in the worst of times. Consider these words, from the *“Diary of a Young Girl,”* written during a terrible time, *“It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”* — Anne Frank

18. Accept circumstances and spend your energy on creative solutions

Creative people focus on what they can control – not what they cannot. Consider Walt Disney, who continually faced crisis and each time got more creative. When he first drew Mickey Mouse, he was facing bankruptcy, yet still dreaming big dreams. Negative energy will not boost your creativity and fighting about elections will not improve your health. The healthiest choice after an election is acceptance. It is over

and now time to move on with whoever the voters selected. You cannot change the outcome of an election by living in fear. Accept that life is a process and change your perspective. Like the old poem says, *“Two men looked through prison bars – one saw the mud – the other saw the stars.”* You can find creative strength as you practice the **Y.A.H.O.O.** process of *“you always have options and opportunities.”* Learning to manage your moods will protect the energy needed to create positive change during the difficult days ahead.

19. Remind relatives the purpose of the holiday season is to celebrate – not criticize

Traditional holidays are wonderful times to reconnect as a family – not political action groups getting together to rehash election results. This political news cycle has driven a wedge in many relationships and shattered others. Seek restoration as you suggest moving forward in peace – not protest. If a person chooses to ruin Thanksgiving by bringing their bad attitude instead of their appetite, consider a new tradition. Find families who have suffered much from lay-offs or unemployment and donate your meal to those in greater need. The act of community compassion may soften the hearts of those who would rather be ‘right’ than to have a relationship. Perhaps the “Scrooge” in your life needs to find a “Tiny Tim” in need.

20. Hope is a strategy and powerful emotion

There is a saying *“Hope is not a strategy”*, which is a reference to toxic positivity instead of realistic planning. However, now we are learning that hope, optimism, and positive psychology are indeed a powerful force when continually facing crisis. Clinical research has shown how hope will increase your resilience against anxiety, depression, PTSD, and insomnia. Positive energy can boost your endorphin level, drop your cortisol level, and super-charge your immune system. Find people who are focused on the hope of a country facing pandemics and recessions together in unified strength. Avoid the negative voices who want to attack people and ignore problems. These are dark times, but hope is a spiritual power which can spark hope in others. America’s top Psychiatrist describes it this way, *“Having a sense of purpose allows us to reach beyond ourselves to affirm that our lives matter. Without a spiritual connection, many people experience an overriding sense of despair. Morality, values, and a spiritual connection to others are critical for many people to feel a sense of wholeness and a reason to get up in the morning and take good care of themselves.”* — Daniel G. Amen, M.D.

21. Life will go on. The country will survive

Don’t despair. The United States will go on. Our country has gone through wars, recessions, depressions, Y2K, Stock Market crashes, Terrorist attacks, natural disasters, school shootings and kept moving forward. How? Regular people stepped up to lead. Everyday people found their voice. Neighbors got involved. Moms and dads and grandparents joined to make a difference. You don’t have to be an elected official to be a leader. You must know what you believe and join others who want to make things better. Author John Maxwell describes it this way, *“Everything rises -or falls on leadership”*. Politicians will not make your community better – but you can.

Step up. Voice your beliefs. Lead. It may surprise you how many of us will be in step right behind you.

What next? Develop the Habit of Resilience and mental toughness

Post-election stress is one of dozens of stressors during this pandemic. Protect your mental health by following a predictable routine, a “*daily dozen*” of coping skills as some experts describe the process of physical, mental, spiritual, behavioral, and relational wellness. These habitual patterns of mental wellness will give your brain a boost of positive energy to stay motivated and healthy no matter the circumstances. It’s not rocket-science to stay mentally tough – rather – it’s neuroscience. Humans increase in strength by following daily patterns. Post-election stress will drain you. Shift over to post-traumatic growth which carried other generations through tough times. The more automatic you can make this process, the more you will be living the habit of resilience while building mental toughness.

The election is gone – but your life remains, and life is about as good as you choose to make it. Learn new skills. Master your moods. Build emotional energy with the habit of resilience. Consider these words from Anne Frank as a final challenge beyond post-election stress - “*How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world*”.

The election is over. The clock is ticking to build a better world. Let’s get started.

About the Author - Dwight Bain is a Nationally Certified Counselor who writes on managing crisis to create positive change. He lives in Orlando with his wife of thirty years, two kids and four cats. Follow him @DwightBain