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Your guide in wellness and mental health

CBT Strategies for a Calmer Campaign Season

As Election Day draws near, there is a good chance your anxiety levels are increasing, right along with the political ads and disastrous predictions about the future of our nation. You're not alone - research shows elections significantly raise stress and anxiety for a majority of American adults.

One 2020 study found 68% of U.S. adults said the presidential election was a major source of stress in their lives. A startling 77% cited the future of the nation itself as a top stressor, and 65% reported feeling very stressed about issues relating to the election.¹



What is behind these heightened emotions? Often the messages we see during the election season provoke irrational thinking and thereby fuel the flames of our emotional fires. These are the sorts of thoughts that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) identifies as problematic and unhelpful. The role of the political campaign advertisers is to highlight voter fears and persuade them that disastrous consequences will occur if the "wrong" candidate is elected. This messaging not only heightens feelings of stress, anxiety, and panic, but deepens the divide leading to an us vs. them mentality that has loneliness at all-time highs.

Now the good news is that we can learn strategies to adjust our troubled thoughts and reduce those heightened emotions. CBT has been proven to be an incredibly impactful solution to dampening the flames of our emotional fire. Using CBT strategies, millions have gotten past stress, anxiety, depression, worry, etc. and been able to navigate life's challenges.

Although CBT is not a magic solution for healing national divides, it provides tools to avoid getting swept up in unproductive thoughts as Election Day nears. Part of CBT's power comes from holding objectivity as we carefully examine our thoughts and relying on facts over catastrophic predictions. It facilitates trying to understand others' perspectives and choosing actions that don't tend to deepen divides.

Using Learn to Live for CBT Skills

It's understandable, even important that people care deeply about elections and the thorny issues they represent. When we learn CBT skills and put them into practice, we can build a resilient mindset that empowers us to navigate times of uncertainty. So, as you are in the midst of this election season, keep these CBT concepts in mind:

- **ANTs:** Automatic Negative Thinking Traps (ANTs) are mental short cuts or assumptions that can trip us up and cause us to ignore important information or make snap judgments. When we become aware of our ANTs and begin counting them, our thoughts can become more reasonable. These are some important ANTs to keep an eye out for during election season:
 - **Disaster-making:** this is when I decide that something will be not just bad, but so bad that I COULD NOT HANDLE IT! I picture myself entirely overwhelmed by the terrible outcome.
 - **Fortune-telling:** this is when I decide that something is going to happen, even if I really don't know for sure that it will.
 - **Feeling Makes Fact:** this is when I am saying this thought is true because I feel it so strongly.
 - **Labeling:** this is when I hand out broad, negative labels to myself or others. When one negative detail is true, I apply a broad label.
 - **Mind-reading:** this is when I assume that I know what people are thinking or why they acted in a particular way. I may picture them judging me or my efforts, not caring about me. I think I know why they did what they did.

¹ American Psychological Association (2020). Stress in America 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/report-october.pdf>

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- **Thought Inspection:** Thought Inspection allows us to look, in-depth, at whether our thought is rational or not. This strategy walks you through the factual evidence supporting your disastrous predictions (often there is none) and helps you to come up with a more realistic way of thinking about the situation. You might have an initial thought along the lines of: "If the other side wins, they're going to strip away all my rights because they're corrupt/evil". And Thought Inspection would help you to look at the facts and change that thought to something more like: "While we have some conflicts in core values and priorities, most people on both sides are well-intentioned and want what's best, we just disagree on the approaches. Writing off half the country as evil is unproductive."
- **Worry Time:** Worry Time is a strategy where we schedule a reoccurring worrying time, about 15-30 minutes or so, where you can spend that time focusing on your worries while choosing to set them aside at all other times of the day. Worried thoughts about the election can start to dominate our day. If you see that happening, try to limit worried thoughts by containing them to a specific time period, like 6:30-6:45pm.
- **Assertiveness & Boundaries:** Just because your friend or uncle wants to discuss all the potential consequences of the upcoming election, doesn't mean you have to engage. It's okay to set boundaries about what political topics you'll discuss. Maybe memorize a clever phrase to change the subject when you dislike where the conversation is going, like "Hey, I'd like to hear how your family is doing."
- **Emotional Flooding:** Be aware of the potential for emotional flooding in conversations. Debates with friends and family can quickly intensify emotions, at which point logic goes out the window. Simple practices like deep breathing, getting some exercise, and getting good rest can help you calm your emotions before these types of conversations. You can use that simple phrase to change the subject before debates become unproductive, or even walk away for 15 minutes if either of you are too flooded.

Another relatively simple, yet effective approach is being aware of our media intake during this season - consider limiting it to an hour or less each day. Being mindful not to over-consume negative political coverage as well as making efforts to understand different media sources can help limit the us vs them mentality as well as broaden your perspectives.

No matter how high the stakes may feel in this election, remember - we are resilient. We don't have to agree on every issue, but we can model being passionate about our beliefs without pushing away those who think differently. CBT equips us to avoid getting swept up in our worried thoughts and gives us tools to handle this election season.

Getting Started

Election season is often accompanied by heightened stress and anxiety and if you find yourself struggling in those heightened states, consider starting a Learn to Live program. Many of the tools mentioned above can be found and elaborated on in either our Stress, Anxiety, & Worry or Resilience programs. Or consider taking a quick mental health assessment by scanning or visiting learntolive.com/partners and enter access code **MMHG**. It is available to you and your family members, ages 13 and older at no cost.



RESILIENCE | STRESS, ANXIETY & WORRY | DEPRESSION
INSOMNIA | SUBSTANCE USE | SOCIAL ANXIETY | PANIC

