

Navigating the Mental Health Maze During Election Season

Election season is a time for passionate debates and civic engagement, but it also is a stressor on our mental health. We had two elections recently; there is a runoff election in June, and there are six more months, possibly seven, until the end of the election cycle. As people become inundated with political rhetoric, this overload of candidate information received on a constant basis causes more stress on our mental health. We must prioritize our mental well-being.

Most of us want to be informed about candidates and issues, but that can be overwhelming because with that research comes knowledge of new things happening in the world politically. It can affect us mentally, emotionally, socially and physically. This can lead to normal reactions such as fatigue and low energy or motivation, which could escalate to depression and anxiety if not monitored in a healthy way.

Doing things which make us happy, such as creative activities, exercising, meditating, reading or talking to a licensed counselor can be a big help. Limiting our exposure to news, social media or who we follow will make us less likely to spiral. Keep in mind that between now and December, there will be other things going on in your life. It's OK to turn off the campaigns for a little while and focus on things to give us that little morale boost.

Learning to set boundaries is an important coping skill when having difficult conversations. Boundaries keep us mentally, physically and emotionally safe. The way to set boundaries is by telling people, "I do not want to talk about this at this time. I care too much about you and our relationship to keep having these types of conversations."

Another option is to leave a conversation if someone persists after you tell them you are not comfortable or do not want to talk about this now. Say, "I don't want to talk about this now, so I'm going to physically leave the space." Whether dropping the conversation, leaving the room or ending the call, it's important to tell the person you're doing it. You can't just end it and disappear because that can cause more tension and hurt feelings for everyone.

Another coping skill is learning to have healthy discussions. When we talk to someone, we mostly listen to react to others, not to respond. We might pick up on one word and focus on that, so we miss what they're actually saying. Do not interrupt each other. Use active listening skills by repeating what we heard and using feel statements such as: "I feel 'blank' when this happens," or "I feel hurt having these conversations with you." Making statements using "always" and "never" are tricky. Those are absolutes which lead us to think of other occasions when that person told us we never listen.

In extreme cases, limiting your reactions can be helpful. If you feel that someone is going on a tirade and trying to bait you, it's OK to give one-word answers and walk away. Limiting our reactions and not elaborating keeps us safe and our personal information private, especially at work or other professional settings.

When you see or hear something triggering, rate it from one to five. If it's something such as a bumper sticker on your drive home, let it go because there's not much you can do about it. If

something rates a three, which means it might bother you more, do something that makes you feel better. Spend time with your family or play with your pet. If it's a four or a five and comes from a close family member or friend, you need to set your boundaries and perhaps talk to a counselor.

We are all human and have emotions and values even if they don't always align. But we can still connect with each other emotionally while taking care of our mental health.

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