



Coping With Political Anxiety

How are you feeling about politics these days? Political life and its media coverage can evoke many strong feelings in us at the best of times, but in the highly polarized political climate in which we find ourselves, our emotional responses can often become more intense and difficult than usual.

Mental health clinicians on both sides of the Canada- United States border are noting a new condition that they are naming, “political anxiety.” This form of anxiety is triggered by information about politics and events that cause us distress. In its more extreme forms, it can lead to feelings of shock, rage, resentment, confusion, helplessness, and even despair. Some political news and information can cause some of us to feel threatened and fearful. Others may feel rage and frustration at a particular policy initiative or political party.

Some families may become fragmented and divided.

These feelings are normal and natural when we are confronted with upsetting events; but, as with any form of chronic stress, they can affect our mental health with symptoms such as loss of sleep, irritability, reactivity, and obsessive or intrusive thoughts. Strong emotions like these can also affect our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour in negative ways. This can lead to tension and conflict in our closest relationships, particularly with those whose political views differ from our own.

One simple way of dealing with disturbing political news is to just use the off switch on our televisions, computers, and mobile phones. But coping effectively with political anxiety in our everyday lives is often more challenging than that. It calls for a response at three levels of our being: the inner emotional level, the cognitive or reflective level, and the action level.

Working With Our Reactivity

The discipline of mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy invites us to approach any form of anxiety and stress first with self-awareness and inner observation.

When we view a politically charged newscast or social media post that triggers a strong internal reaction, it is good to start by breathing deeply a few times, noticing what is coming up for us, naming it as clearly as possible, and gently allowing it to be.

Responding with this kind of non-judging presence to strong reactions within us helps us to hold and release them in a beneficial way.

It can also help to talk our feelings through, walk them off, or offer them in prayer.

You may wish to speak with a trusted friend, a member of the clergy, or a therapist, who can support you in this process. The key is to objectify the emotion so that we are not completely identified with what we are seeing and feeling. We have the emotion, but the emotion does not have us.

Gaining Perspective

Growing self-awareness, which often comes from working with a therapist, can also free us for deeper reflection on the issues and help us gain more perspective. Anger and fear can distort our perceptions and lead to catastrophizing, in which we imagine the worst scenario.

Strong emotions can also lead to demonizing politicians.

It can help to take the long view of politics and remember that this too shall pass. Governments come and go. Political parties rise and fall. Change is inevitable and will come again at some point. This realization can give us the hope and courage we need to carry on regardless of the immediate circumstances.

Getting Involved

Finally, one of the best strategies for overcoming political anxiety is to actually get involved in the political process. Political participation through letter-writing, social media campaigns, peaceful protests, or engaging with your elected representatives can alleviate feelings of frustration and powerlessness.

One of the positive aspects of political anxiety is that it can be transformed into constructive change that strengthens the democratic process and public institutions.

Author and social activist Parker Palmer in his beautiful book entitled *Healing the Heart of Democracy* explores how to recover the heart and soul of politics at the deepest personal level. He reminds us that no matter what our political values might be, if we can understand and overcome our more reactive tendencies in political life, the “alchemy” of our hearts can turn “suffering into community, conflict into the energy of creativity, and tension into an opening toward the common good.”

In facing our political anxiety creatively, we have an opportunity to not only transform our own hearts and minds but also our common life together.

by Michael Hryniuk, Ph.D., RP

Am I Safe? Exploring Fear and Anxiety with Children

Am I Safe? is a new book, written by Iona Snair and Tim Huff, illustrated by Tim Huff. This book has a companion song, “A Heartbeat Away,” written by Steve Bell. It is free for download at:

<https://www.compassionseries.com/heartbeat>

A lovely song of comfort, encouragement, and hope, it can remind you that “when it’s a struggle for you to be calm,” think of one who loves you “standing by you.” In the midst of political anxiety, or any anxiety, remember that you are not alone.

Iona Snair and Tim Huff. *Am I Safe? Exploring Fear and Anxiety with Children*. Burlington: Castle Quay Books, 2018.

References, Further Reading

American Psychological Association
Managing stress related to political change
<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-political-change.aspx>

Good Therapy
Political Anxiety
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/political-anxiety>

Parker J. Palmer. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.



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