

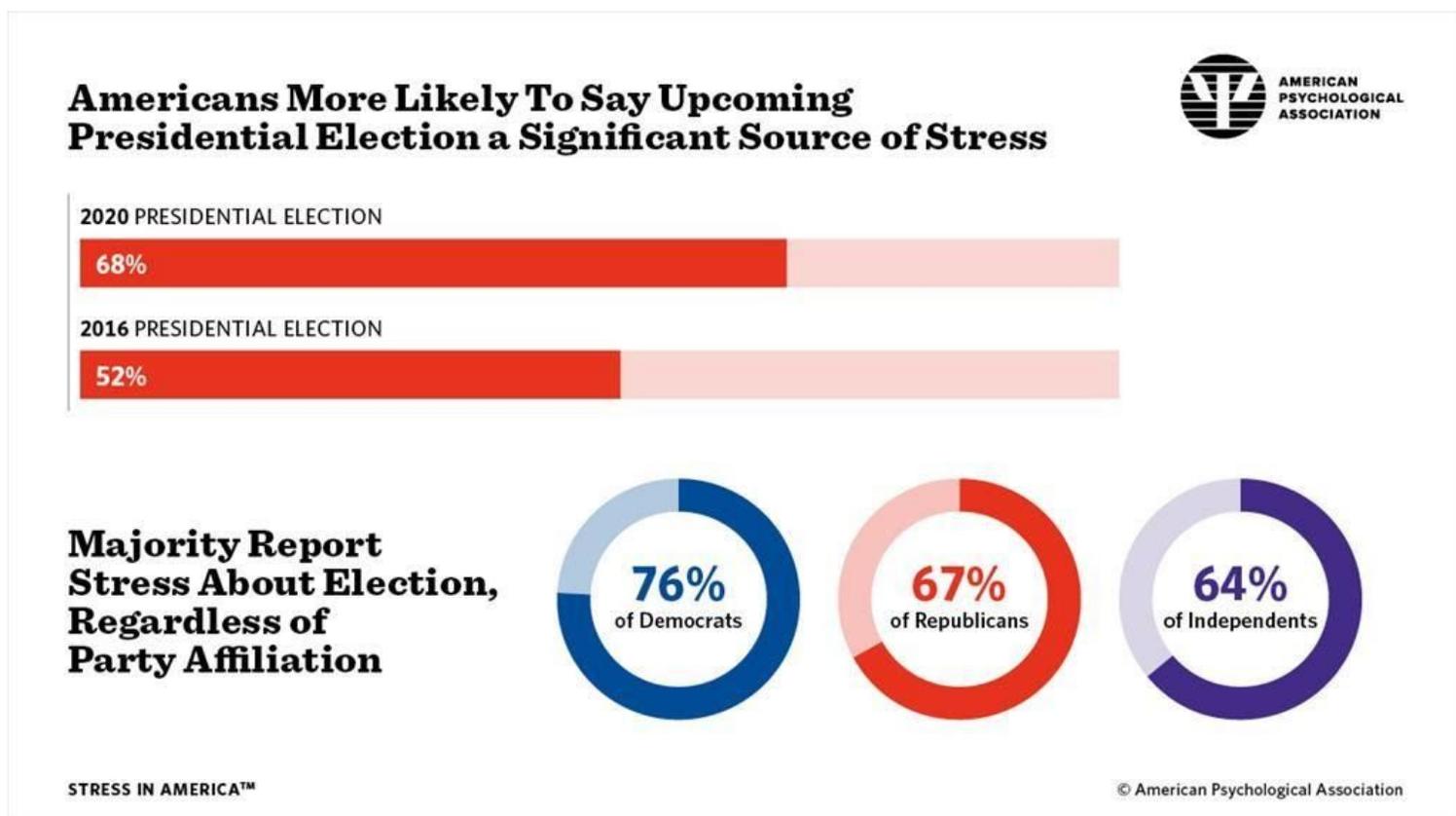
# Maintaining Mental Health

*The Election Edition*

LAFAYETTE  
COUNSELING CENTER

# ELECTION STRESS

Many people are experiencing stress related to the 2020 presidential election. A recent survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Psychological Association found that more than two-thirds of U.S. adults say the election is a significant source of stress in their life. This finding was consistent across political affiliations.



## Tips for managing stress during the election:

### Remind yourself that you are not alone.

It's important to acknowledge collectively that this is hard. We're in the midst of a global pandemic and are trying our best to balance competing personal and professional responsibilities. Adding the stress of a presidential election during this time is challenging for most of us. There are no "right" or "wrong" emotions. Begin by simply being aware of and naming the emotions you feel. You might then remind yourself that others are experiencing similar feelings and challenges. The idea of shared humanity is more important than ever in cultivating hope and resilience.

## **Limit the amount of time you are on social media.**

Focusing on divisive political turmoil can be a major contributor to daily stress. Media content is designed to keep people engaged 24/7. It often promotes conflict to maintain interest by presenting the most polarizing examples. Consume reliable and diverse media. Consider turning off push notifications. Give yourself permission to unplug periodically. Even small breaks from your phone can provide relief and help you feel more rejuvenated.

## **Have a self-care routine in place.**

Nourish your body with healthy foods. Stay hydrated. Avoid substance use. Maintain a consistent sleep/wake schedule. Intentionally incorporate movement in any way you can. Routine exercise boosts your mood and provides a physical outlet for anxious energy. Spend time outdoors. Practice deep breathing. It can also help to reflect on what you feel grateful for each day. Gratitude offers perspective which helps us focus on good experiences, feel better about ourselves, and build stronger relationships. Positive affirmations are another way to help foster hope and resilience during difficult times.

## **Maintain a hobby that is separate from the election.**

Hobbies that absorb your mind can allow you to obtain a break from your thoughts and feelings about the election. Creative outlets provide the opportunity to express your thoughts and feelings. Hobbies that require physical exertion provide stress relief.

## **Surround yourself with positive, supportive relationships.**

Social connection helps to reduce stress. Spend time engaging in enjoyable activities with family and/or friends. Turning to others for emotional support enhances coping as does providing support to others who are struggling. Consider identifying an election buddy for mutual support. It's ok to limit your time and set respectful boundaries with people who initiate unproductive conversations.

## **Take an active role in causes you care about.**

Select causes that align with your values. This can help ground you and provide direction when coping with uncertainty in other areas of life. Get involved in ways that are meaningful to you. Donate your time or help with fundraising efforts for a cause that is important to you. Engaging in productive projects enhances feelings of self-efficacy. In addition, identifying and writing about your core values, not only boosts distress tolerance, but mitigates the effects of stress on decision-making and behavior. Writing a few sentences about your core values before a stressful event reminds you what you truly care about and allows you to act in ways that support those values.

## **Focus on what you can control.**

It's possible we might not know the outcome of the election on Election Day which adds more uncertainty to our daily lives. It is important to take time to acknowledge the uncomfortable feelings this may elicit but avoid dwelling on things you can't control. Setting a daily limit on checking for the outcome may be useful in managing anxious feelings. In addition, it is normal and appropriate to take some time to grieve if the final election results are not what you had hoped. It can be helpful to remember that you are not alone in your experience of disappointment. It is equally important to remain engaged in your daily routines as much as possible. Consider prescheduling a few enjoyable activities in the days following the election.

## **Create a plan for managing family gatherings.**

Many holidays and events immediately follow the election. Devise a plan for how to navigate these situations to help alleviate stress. Remember that family gatherings are about celebration and bringing people together. Initiate activities that help to build connections such as cooking or preparing food together, sharing fond memories, playing cooperative games, spending time together outside, or engaging in projects with children who may be present. Identify a quiet space to obtain a break and take a few deep breaths if conversations become too intense or unproductive.



# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Navigating difficult conversations about politics can cause strain on any relationship, particularly when we hold different ideologies from someone we care about in our lives. Dr. Tania Israel, a counseling psychology professor, has written a book called *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide* which addresses how to engage in dialogue about political differences.

Dr. Israel stresses that engaging in face-to-face conversations with someone we know provides a better context for mutual understanding than engaging through online platforms. She acknowledges that dialogues can be uncomfortable and challenging, and identifies how it's important that we are aware of our own viewpoints, emotional reactions, conflicting motivations and boundaries before making the choice to engage. Dr. Israel's work highlights how dialogues can be highly productive when we approach the conversation with goals of increasing understanding and building connection.

## Approaches to increase understanding during a dialogue:

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- Employ active listening skills: "listen to understand" versus "listening to respond."
- Offer reflections that summarize what you heard the person say to increase your depth of understanding.
- Ask open ended questions. Be mindful of traps, "gotchas" or statements posed as a question.
- Operate from a stance of curiosity and a genuine desire to understand what is important to the other person.
- Try to take the other person's perspective by drawing from your own past experiences.
- Look for something you appreciate about the other person to help you maintain a balanced perspective.
- Instead of reacting strongly to the areas where you disagree, attempt to identify areas where you agree.
- You may be able to identify a shared value once you obtain a deeper understanding of the other's views.

*"Help me understand how you came to that view?"*

## Ways to express yourself in a dialogue:

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- Use assertive communication while maintaining open body posture and appropriate eye contact. Avoid aggressive styles of communication. The goal is to express yourself in an effective, respectful manner.
- Consider sharing the story of how you came to your views. Talking about our experiences and values are much more accessible than informational statistics.
- Approach the conversation with intellectual humility. We all have assumptions about those with differing viewpoints. Remember that it's a human tendency to want to confirm our own beliefs/biases.
- When tension builds take a few deep breaths with extended exhalation, become aware of your emotional reactions and remember your intentions. Also, remind yourself that you are speaking to another human being who has a deeper context for how their viewpoints have been shaped.
- If the tension becomes too great, you have a choice to change the direction of the conversation or to take a break.
- Remember, the goal is not to convince another person to change their viewpoint. It's ok to agree to disagree.
- Lastly, it's essential to know when to end an unproductive conversation such as if someone becomes disrespectful or unwilling to listen.

After engaging in dialogue, it's important to take time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings and to practice self-care as needed. While it's difficult to share opposing viewpoints with people in our lives, developing a deeper understanding of others' views helps to clarify our own viewpoints and broaden our perspectives. Despite our perceptions of people "on the other side," engaging in dialogue is not about winning or losing, it's about shared humanity. Dialogue creates room to build understanding and enhance relationships, which are the seeds of hope for humanity.



# ACTIVISM

Activism can be a meaningful way to channel feelings of anger and frustration by uniting with others to effect social and political change. Working together toward a shared cause that's bigger than ourselves also helps us remember we are not alone. One of the most challenging aspects of activism is sustaining the mental health and energy of the activist.

Caring for yourself is central to your ability to continue to engage in activism without sacrificing your emotional and physical needs. Self-care can sometimes be viewed as an act of privilege. A common misconception is that a good activist is selfless and should spend most of their time working to relieve the suffering of others. This belief can cause feelings of guilt when using time and resources to meet your own needs which can contribute to burnout over time.

## Signs of Burnout:

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- Emotional exhaustion
- Physical exhaustion
- Depression or anxiety
- Numbing behaviors
- Health challenges
- Feelings of isolation or alienation
- Cynicism or hopelessness
- Shame or guilt
- Persistent hypervigilance or panic
- Difficulty focusing or concentrating

Self-care is about the activist's right to be well, safe and fulfilled. Caring for yourself is a way of preserving yourself in environments that are challenging, demanding, or even hostile to your identity, your community, or your way of life as you strive to create change. It is about developing sustainable practices, and it may involve challenging yourself to step outside of your comfort zones.

## Reflection Questions:

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1. How do you practice self-care in stressful times?
2. Who might be a self-care role model for you, and how might you emulate their behaviors?
3. How do you hold yourself accountable to practicing your own self-care?
4. How do you promote self-care in your community?

# Tips for caring for the mental health of the activist:

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## **Check in with yourself.**

Ask what you need to nourish yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Take time to breathe, stretch, exercise, eat well, get rest, unplug from social media and care for your body. Maintain healthy boundaries. Create balance in your life by developing meaningful hobbies, activities, relationships and interests outside of the work.

## **Create space to reflect on and process your emotions.**

It's common to experience a variety of conflicted emotions while engaging in activist efforts including enthusiasm, hopefulness and compassion, as well as anger, frustration and sadness. When you feel overwhelmed, consider what helps to ground you in the moment. Try box breathing (in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4) or focusing on your senses: [5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique](#).

## **Invest your energy into conversations, actions and roles that you feel make a difference.**

It's important to recognize there are many ways to practice activism. Honor what fits best for you. It's ok to say no. It's also ok to step away when something becomes unproductive. Provide yourself with permission to acknowledge when you are engaged in ways that detract from your well-being. Connect your activism to what you value and what energizes you.

## **Celebrate victories, no matter how seemingly small.**

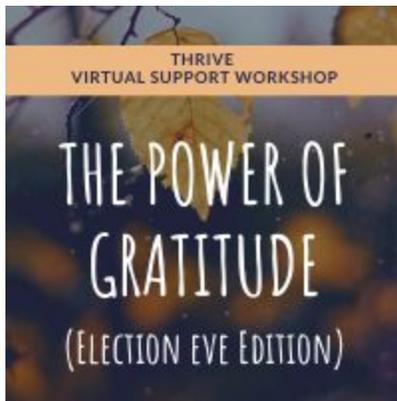
Activism includes both big and small acts. Progress can be slow and frustrating. Be mindful of setting unrealistically high standards. It's common to feel like you are not doing enough or making enough progress. Any progress is progress. Keep a list of the accomplishments that make you feel proud and reaffirm the value of your efforts.

## **Promote wellness and connection in your community.**

Encouraging wellness in activism helps to build a sustainable, supportive community. Community care and connection are essential. Working and standing together as a community cultivates a space in which its members can lean on one another for support as well as celebrate shared successes.

# COUNSELING CENTER RESOURCES

The Counseling Center offers same day teleconsultation appointments: Monday - Friday from 10-11:30 am and 1-3:30 pm. After-hours and weekend crisis support is available by calling 610-330-5005. Consider joining one of our virtual workshops or support spaces designed to help students cope with election stress.



## **November 2 @ 11am**

Discover how the practice of gratitude can help us cope when life is hard. Students will examine how to apply the skills from this workshop to potential stressors experienced during the U.S. Presidential election.

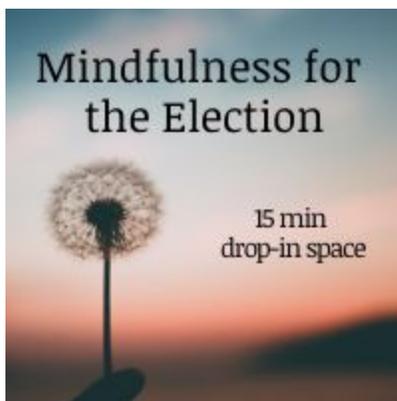
[Register here.](#)



## **November 2 @ 3pm**

Learn how to tolerate distress, regulate your emotions, and become fully present in your experiences. This drop-in, virtual workshop will be offered to Lafayette students for 3 consecutive weeks beginning on 10/26 – feel free to attend 1, 2, or all 3!

[Register here.](#)



## **November 3, 4, 10 & 11 @ 4pm**

Mindfulness can help us notice when we feel overwhelmed and point us in the direction of balance. Drop in to one of our 15-min guided mindfulness meditations.

[Register here.](#)



## November 4th @ 4 pm

How are you taking care of yourself during this time? This week's drop-in, online discussion group is for students to identify ways to maintain self-care following the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election.

[Register here.](#)

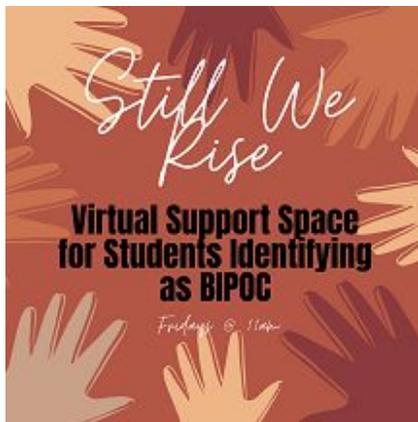
## Values Based Coping



## November 5 @ 4pm

This virtual gathering will provide tools for identifying your core personal values and facilitate discussion on aligning your values during times of stress.

[Register here.](#)



## November 6 @ 11am

This week's BIPOC virtual support space will focus on students coming together and safely discussing the cultural, racial, and emotional challenges specific to the U.S. Presidential Election.

[Register here.](#)

## Additional Resources:

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- [National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation \(NCDD\)](#)
- [Coping with DACA and Immigration-Related Stress](#)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): (800) 273-8255
- [Crisis Text Line](#): 741-741 (text HOME to connect for crisis support)
- [The Trevor Lifeline](#): (866) 488-7386 (crisis support for LGBTQ youth)

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