

Practicing Self-Care After Highly Stressful Events

The recent election has led to a wide range of reactions. Some people feel that their voices and wishes have been heard, while others are experiencing stress, worries, anxiety, fear and anger. For those who have experienced the election's outcome as highly stressful, reactions may be experienced in a variety of domains, affecting our emotions, behaviors, cognitive functioning, and physical well-being.

The most common reaction people exposed to stress report is the powerful impact on our bodies. Initially we may feel anxious, sense our hearts racing, or experience an adrenaline rush. After a few days, we may feel exhausted but have difficulty sleeping, notice that we are on edge, or feel numb or detached. Often people report they cannot stop thinking about the stressful event, watching it on television, or reading about it in the news repeatedly.

To help manage in stressful times, we need to remember self-care is important and find ways to take care of ourselves on a daily basis. Here are a few things you can do to help yourself:

1. **Maintain social connections:** When we experience a significant stressor, it is easy to isolate or withdraw from our network of friends and family. But in a time of high stress, these support networks are more important than ever. Reach out to those who can support you. Make plans to see family and friends and stay connected in-person, online, or on the phone. You may decide you want to temporarily avoid people who are not being supportive. And remember that it is okay to take time out for yourself to rest and recharge.
2. **Engage in health-promoting behaviors:** Exercise several times a week and try and maintain a healthy diet. Our healthy routines and good eating habits disappear during stressful times, so we need to find ways to carve out time to go for a walk, swim, or whatever exercise you enjoy. Do not overdo it. If you are pressed for time, a short walk is fine. Do not be hard on yourself. Right now may not be the time to start a diet or quit smoking. Stay hydrated. When we are stressed we tend to use up more water than normal, and our bodies do not always give us the signals that we are thirsty, so it is important to drink a lot of water.
3. **Maintain routines:** Sticking to our daily structure of activities like mealtimes, bedtime, work routines, etc., reduces anxiety and allows us to feel more in control. If you have familial or cultural routines that you find comforting (i.e., visits with extended family or religious services or customs) be sure to use these.
4. **Maintain good sleep habits:** Stressful events often disrupt our sleep. Some people report nightmares or find that nights are harder for them. Try to maintain regular sleep routines and get eight hours of sleep a night. Stay away from caffeine in the evening. Recent studies support turning off all electronics – televisions, phones, computers – at least one hour before bedtime.
5. **Find balance in your life:** During a stressful time, people often report excessive behaviors – working, eating, sleeping, and sometimes drinking too much. Avoid excessively watching or reading news and social media outlets. Set limits for yourself on activities and make sure you are taking care of yourself in all areas – social, behavioral, and spiritual. Your assumptions and hopes may feel shattered and anything you can do that gives you a sense of meaning or provides a plan of action will help you feel back on track.
6. **A moment to reflect:** This is a good time to reflect on personal, family, and community values. It will help to remind ourselves that our country and democracy are strong and have gone through changes for hundreds of years. Take kind and compassionate action in your community towards others. Highly stressful events make us feel like we have lost control, so any constructive activities we engage in help us feel in control and less vulnerable. And while some of us may feel vulnerable, we are not helpless – there are ways for each of our voices to be heard. If you are worried about how you are reacting, speak with a counselor, mental health professional, faith leader, or community leader.