

# PSYCHOLOGY TODAY



**Steven Stosny, Ph.D.** Anger in the Age of Entitlement

## How to Cope With Trump Anxiety

There's hope in a nervous nation.

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Since last summer, my practice has been overwhelmed with distress calls from people coping with anxiety in our current political environment.

First it was the vitriol and inescapable negativity of the presidential campaign, and now it seems that we wake up daily to an endless stream of shocking executive orders and headlines questioning our national security and the foundation of our electoral process. Our current environment, amplified by 24-hour news outlets and social media, has created a level of stress, nervousness, and resentment that has intruded into many people's lives and intimate relationships, the likes of which I've not seen in nearly 30 years of clinical work.

Some people are worried about losing their health care or about future economic distress. Others are angry about the travel ban while others fear for their civil rights and personal safety. The list of concerns is daunting.

If you've been nervous or anxious since the election, you're not alone. In fact, according to a recent survey, you're in the majority. "Nervous Nation: An Inside Look at America's Anxiety in the Age of Trump," commissioned by the online healthcare site CareDash.com, found that more than half of Americans (59%) are anxious because of the November election results. Half (50%) of Americans are looking for ways to cope with the negative environment; and more than a quarter (26%) are engaging in negative behavior such as drinking or smoking more often, eating unhealthily, or arguing with loved ones more frequently as a result of their election-induced anxiety.

If you're among the tens of millions currently anxious in our nervous nation, here are few things you can do:

### **Empower Yourself**

Stand up for what you believe. Write letters, demonstrate, lobby Congress, and so on, remembering that you'll be most effective (and feel better) when focused on the change you want to see rather than merely reacting to what you don't like. Anxiety and nervousness rise whenever we feel powerless. The first rule of empowerment is focus. If we focus on what we cannot control, like other people's opinions and behavior, we feel powerless. When we shift focus to what we can control, for example, our own behavior and the meaning of our experience, we feel empowered.

### **Connect**

Connection to others is the best antidote to anxiety. Reach out to friends and family. But don't just text or email them. Meet them, eat with them, call them, hear their voices and see their faces. Join communities of shared values, goals, or experiences. These can be work, school, parents', professional, neighborhood, religious, or sports associations. And don't forget your spiritual connection, which can be some expression of religious values or meditative experience or appreciation of natural and creative beauty. Whatever means the most to you, do more of it in these unsettling times.

### **Appreciate Your Ability to Cope**

When anxious, we underestimate our resilience, tolerance, problem-solving capacity, and our overall ability to cope. The perceived ability to cope almost always underestimates actual ability to cope, that is, we usually cope better than we think we will. Recall times when you showed your better qualities under stress.

### **Get Physical**

Walk 30 minutes a day. Studies show that this simple exercise can be as beneficial as anti-anxiety medication, with none of the side effects and lots of health benefits.

### **Write**

Write down your anxious thoughts. When anxious or nervous, our thoughts go by very fast, and the faster they go, the more overwhelming they seem. To slow down the flow, sit down with a pad and paper and write them down in long hand.

### **Assign Probability and Plan**

Next to each of the worries you wrote down, assign a probability, using a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most likely to happen. Anxiety is about unknown possibility, and anything is possible. Reasonable behavior is informed and based on probability - what is most likely to happen. Find out more about what worries you. After you've assessed how likely it is to happen, write what you will do if it does occur. This converts unproductive worry into useful contingency planning, which in itself creates a sense of empowerment.

## **Retain Hope**

Personal and national growth typically follow struggles with anxiety. Nervousness forces us to reevaluate what is most important and what we most want for ourselves, our loved ones, and our fellow citizens. From careful reevaluation emerges a course of meaningful behavior based on our deepest values.