
Election season source of stress, anxiety for many

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A woman stares at a large video screen announcing that Joe Biden will become the 46th president of the United States outside of the Chase Center in downtown Wilmington. For more photos of the Wilmington celebration, (Special to the Delaware State News/Butch Comegys)

In Joseph Zingaro’s 30 years as a therapist, he’d never heard clients talk about politics as much as they have in the past four years.

“Never. In all my years,” he said. “I’ve never heard them be as anxious about it, or as stumped by what’s going on and challenged by trying to maintain relationships and friendships with people that they have found out hold incredibly divergent views.”

Those past four years culminated Tuesday, when voters on both sides of the aisle waited to hear who would be president of the United States. In the days that followed, there were razor-thin margins in some states and the anticipation of ballot counts, the announcement of a projected winner, the threats of lawsuits and a sowing of discontent regarding the legitimacy of the election.

“I’m not sure we could compare this current election to any previous election in our lifetime. I think we are in very different territory,” said Dr. Zingaro, of People’s Place in Milford. “That’s

part of what makes us a little more anxiety provoking. We don't have a history dealing with such extremes and at such volume."

Put that all together and you get stress.

Stress, said Dr. Neil Kaye, a psychiatrist and member of the Medical Society of Delaware, comes from fear and fear stems from a lack of control. "People really feel like things are out of control," he continued. "Whichever side you're on, you may feel like you don't have adequate control in the election, even as things are rolling in. You see the vote for your candidate going up and your anxiety goes down. You feel better and hopeful and optimistic and then the numbers change again. ... You're bombarded to a level that you can't really digest always."

2020 hasn't exactly been the easiest year. There's an ongoing public health crisis with cases on the rise in Delaware; there has been scrutiny and action surrounding racial injustice; there have been economic and social challenges. And all of it is compounding.

"Just think of a table. You keep putting bricks on it. Well, eventually that last brick — the straw that breaks the camel's back — the table collapses. It wasn't the last brick that did it. It's acute stress and stress is cumulative," Dr. Kaye said.



Joy Adebayo and her fiancé Jerome McDonald, both from Boothwyn, Pennsylvania, attend Saturday night's celebration

for President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris in Wilmington. (Special to the Delaware State News/Butch Comegys)

“So you have the stress of the pandemic and people worrying about their jobs, people worrying about paying their bills, worrying whether or not there’ll be another stimulus assistance program. And then you get the stress of the election.”

A study conducted by the Harris Poll for the American Psychological Association in August, which surveyed about 3,400 American adults, found the election was listed as a primary stressor. Regardless of party, many (68%) said that the election or current political climate was a significant source of stress. By party, the margin of difference was fairly slim: 76% of Democrats, 67% of Republicans and 64% of independents found it stressful.

Now that the election has technically passed, the uncertainty following it — spanning the better part of the first week of November — is not healthy, Dr. Kaye said.

“It causes all of the stress reactions in the body and it elevates the level of stress chemicals in the body that promotes headaches, tension, muscle problems, impaired concentration and sleep,” he said. “Heart attacks go up.”

Every time there is stress, the “underlying system” is weakened, he continued.

“Stress management is something we should all be working on, whether there is a pandemic and an election or not,” said Annie Slease, director of advocacy and education for NAMI Delaware. “I think this just kind of sheds light to something that we should have all been thinking about before.”

Using the “bucket analogy,” she likened stress to water in a bucket. If stress is water, we need a way to release that water to maintain “optimal wellness in that bucket and not overflow,” she said. The taps to release water are self care.

And while some acts of self care may seem frivolous or selfish, they’re essential to balancing wellness.

“Without having those taps to release the water, our buckets are going to overflow,” she said.

“This election has just really brought to light the critical need for practicing self care all the time. And now we can really do it in a way that we will, hopefully, set trends for ourselves, moving forward.”

Even with a winner declared, this isn’t the end of stress. In terms of politics, there are two runoff senatorial races in Georgia that will surely be scrutinized until the election happens in January.



“He’s a people person” said longtime Joe Biden supporter Faith Green 73, of New Castle, right, as she take part during Saturday’s celebration for President-Elect Joe Biden and Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris, held at the Chase Center in downtown Wilmington. (Special to the Delaware State News/Butch Comegys)

Even though Democratic challenger Joe Biden won the White House Saturday, there will be months before the inauguration. Outside of political offices, there’s a pandemic that doesn’t end with a winner being declared.

“While the fire goes out, the embers are still smoldering and much easier to relight,” Dr. Kaye said of stress. “We’re not going to get much of a break.”

In 2016, Dr. Kaye said the way mental health professionals helped people post-election was by letting them grieve.

“It’s sort of like death and grieving,” he said of being on the “losing side.” “You have to allow people to be angry, the first basic human emotion when loss occurs. And then help walk them toward acceptance of that loss. And then, eventually, in the case of an election process, ‘Well, OK, you have another chance in two years and in four years to channel your energy to try to get

a new outcome, a different outcome.’ So we can take that negative energy and try to get you to channel it into something positive.”

NAMI Delaware offers a helpline (English: 888-427-2643, Spanish: 302-415-4356), with resources available at www.namidelaware.org/resources.

Talking about stressors helps people work through them, Dr. Zingaro said.

“Talking about something is utilizing a different part of your brain than just thinking about it. By sharing it, you actually begin and have this more critical analysis of the value of that idea,” he said.

“People are feeling certain ways — anxious, depressed, angry — and then they talk about it and hear someone help them talk it out. They begin to see that maybe there’s options they hadn’t thought about before, or maybe they need to make an adjustment in their attitude so they’re not so angry or frightened as they were before. And that’s really what the value is in seeing a therapist and talking about these issues.”

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