managing uncertainty about election outcomes

“I feel anxious every time I think about the outcome of the presidential election. I can’t seem to stop thinking about what will happen.”

This may sound like you as you find yourself unable to focus on anything else while waiting for the election results. Emotions are running high this election due to so many viewing each other on the other side of the political spectrum as a fundamental threat to their health, rights, and way of life. It is most likely going to take days or weeks for the election results to be tallied. We need to mentally prepare ourselves for a waiting period. For many, it will surely be a time of anxiety and worry.

What is the difference between anxiety and worry? **Anxiety** is an emotion, while **worry** is a type of thinking often caused by feelings of anxiety. It is ongoing thoughts to solve whatever problem is causing you feel anxious. People commonly believe that worry helps them to anticipate and prepare for threat. Those prone to worry tend to feel uncertain they can control events and can’t tolerate this uncertainty. Worry helps them feel that they’ve thought of all possible threats and taken action to protect themselves. This election has many anticipating something in their life is being threatened.

**How can we cope while we wait?**

One way is the idea of managing your expectations. Some people prefer to keep their expectations low, or brace for the worst, to help manage their reaction to bad news, if it ultimately arrives. Others adopt an attitude of hope and optimism while they wait — a technique called positive expectation management. Using positive expectation management can be very effective to reduce worry; however, it can also lead to an emotional blow if the outcome is not favorable. So which strategy works best?

**Initial research seems to suggest it depends upon how a person manages worry.** If a person uses the strategy of keeping expectations low and bracing for the worst, the period of time spent waiting tends to feel rather miserable. However, once the outcome is known, if it is unfavorable, then the person does not experience a large emotional letdown. On the other hand, expecting a positive outcome can help the person get through the waiting time with less worry. This can have healthier outcomes because some research indicates worry is correlated with increased alcohol use when the outcome is uncertain.
Decide which strategy works for you –

bracing for the worst outcome, or maintaining positive expectations.

- Whichever strategy you adopt, be aware of how much time you spend worrying, since worrying while waiting on an outcome in which you have little ability to influence the outcome (once the votes have been cast) can lead to high levels of alcohol consumption.

- Excessive worry will eat away at the time typically used for study; while this election is significant, the work you are doing this semester is also important. Don’t lose sight of that.

- Take good care of your physical health with adequate sleep, good food and exercise.

- One behavior often associated with long-term anxiety is “reassurance seeking” - searching for conclusive evidence that the situation is under control, and that we don’t need to worry. Typically, information found through reassurance-seeking does not fulfill the need, and feeds into the cycle of anxiety. Be aware if you slip into this pattern.

- Reduce your media consumption to a few reputable sources if you catch yourself spending too much time pouring over stories and postings. Stay informed, but try not to obsess.

- Avoid the urge to engage in arguments. Before you submit that comment on social media, ask yourself if you are actually accomplishing anything. Will this end up causing more stress, and is it worth it?

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