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Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Political/Election Anxiety by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.



[\(Pandemic Horse Race\)](#)

The current United States presidential election has many people on edge. Therapists around the country are reporting spikes in patients dealing with election anxiety. Even the *Wall Street Journal* has stated that *political anxiety disorder* is definitely a “thing.” And in my own private practice a concern at the top of the ladder is not just the Coronavirus, but *political anxiety*.



While *all* elections stir up some anxiety because their outcomes impact our lives, the 2020 election seems more negative and intense than usual, no doubt made worse by Covid-19 pandemic fears and lockdown frustrations. People are edgy, angry, defensive, have “hair-triggers” tempers, and in some cases have acted out by becoming violent, or turning to food, drugs, alcohol, and even suicide. When we turn on the TV, and we witness people yelling obscenities at each other and throwing things, it’s very upsetting. It has gone way beyond the point of our usual “election jitters.”

About Anxiety

The DSM-5 identifies the criteria for *generalized anxiety disorder* as a state that “*alerts us to possible danger and prepares our body to respond to danger.*” This is known as the “fight-or-flight” response. We may hyperventilate (breathing becomes shallow and fast), or have other bodily responses which can range from dizziness, feeling faint, visual changes, increased heart rate, or tingling sensations. One therapy client, as yet unaware of the historic roots of her own political anxiety, described it in terms of just such a “fight or flight” response: “It was right here in my chest, a tightening sensation that sent adrenaline through the rest of my body. It felt like I was gearing up to run away.”

What’s at the Root of Political Anxiety?

While it’s normal to have anxiety when there are legitimate threats to our well-being, the problem comes when our anxiety is so over-the-top that it interferes with our daily life and functioning. Therapists recognize that there are individual reactions to stress-inducing events. Some people are able to stay grounded; others admit to “freaking out” when they turn on the TV and witness political arguing and insult-throwing.

For this latter group, it’s about more than politics. It’s actually related to childhood trauma – and what they’re seeing and hearing on TV is what they used to see and hear at home – threats, noise, shouting, bullying, and fear. People who are the most vulnerable to “political anxiety” are often those who are struggling (or have struggled in the past) with domestic violence abuse, which can include verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. When they flip on the TV it feels like the same thing – just like domestic abuse! There are many politicians who use the same kinds of rhetoric to win elections that their own husbands and/or partners used on them at home. And it stirs up their anxiety ten-fold!

How to Stay Centered

If your anxiety is going beyond the reality of any actual threat, and is continuing day after day, it’s a good idea to examine it more closely to see if the political events and rhetoric you are reacting to might be triggering memories of childhood trauma or exacerbating current domestic abuse issues. The more we understand about the deeper sources of our excess anxiety, the more likely it is we’ll be able to manage it successfully. If you are, for example, a survivor of childhood verbal/emotional/sexual abuse and you witness people on TV using the same *toxic tactics* (yelling and screaming), it can trigger more anxiety within you. You can’t “fix” the people on TV, but you can get insight into what’s behind your own reactivity. One client, Alice, had an “Aha!” moment about her political anxiety by watching a couple of protesters from opposite political sides shouting at each other. She realized that it reminded her of her parents’ constant bickering when she was a child. It gave her a change of perspective: “It helped me to be more forgiving of myself for getting upset. I also realized that I have more power now. I can change the channel or turn off the TV!”

Here are some of the toxic tactics commonly used to stir up chaos, shame, and self-doubt in others, both in the personal sphere and political sphere, leading to heightened anxiety and often capitulation.

List of Some Toxic Tactics

With the goal in mind of shedding light on what’s triggering political anxiety, and to help people diffuse it, I am suggesting a two-step process: The first step is to self-educate by identifying and naming the toxic strategy. The second step is to retrain the brain *not* to respond from an earlier-learned “victim position,” but from a position of increasing empowerment.

Here are some of the *toxic tactics* I’ve identified as commonly used by certain politicians (as well as domestic partners!) that are meant to throw the listener off-balance and trigger internal anxiety, fear, shame, and self-doubt, often without the victim even realizing it. By pointing out the tactics, it gives the listener a chance observe, detach emotionally, and then respond in a more effective way, thereby reducing anxiety.

Bullying: This toxic tactic has gotten a lot of attention over the past decade because it’s used so early in life (in schools), sometimes because the child doing the bullying is being bullied himself at home. He then brings the technique to school and turns it on others. When things aren’t handled where they start, the pattern continues.

Bullies grow up and bring their bullying into the workplace, the marketplace, and the political arena. Often the upsetting dialogues we see on the news are the result of people acting out unfinished family of origin business. If you are, for example, a survivor of childhood physical/emotional abuse and you witness people on TV yelling, screaming, throwing things, and making threats – *bullying* – it can trigger *your* anxiety. Understanding what’s behind your strong feelings may help: “He is bullying his political opponent just like my father used to bully me.”

Gaslighting: A toxic tactic used to gain power and manipulate others into doubting their own reality and sanity. Over time, the victim of this tactic gets so beaten down that they start believing they are at fault and are all the negative things their partner accuses them of being. In the home, by the time you are deep into the dance with your gaslighting partner, you are allowing him to define your reality; you are no longer the same strong self you used to be. You have lost the strength of your intuitive wisdom and don’t even know what’s real. You can’t even see that something is "off" with your partner.

Lying: This is one of the first and most disarming tactics of an emotional abuser. Even when there is clear proof or recorded evidence, liars will often lie without flinching. Nothing of importance can be discussed intelligently (finances, economy, climate) when the facts are denied or ignored. Liars are adept at telling a stream of untruths so that it is impossible to stay focused or on track. When facts and truth are twisted, or deemed irrelevant, it’s extremely difficult to have a normal conversation with someone for whom the basic rules of a discussion are eliminated. Become wise to the con, especially when the lies are becoming more fanciful, more divorced from reality.

Denial: Like lying, denial is one of the key tactics of toxic abuse, whether the abuser is the politician at the podium or the spouse at the breakfast table. Denial, like lying, changes the rules of fair discourse. Denial means cutting you off, refusing to engage, and refusing to be held accountable for their own words. Even when facts are easily verified, the speaker continues to deny and ignore them.

Blame Shifting: In one of the first and most important books on verbal abuse, *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* written by the late Suzette Elgin in 1980, one of the central toxic tactics named is “blame shifting.” Some politicians, as well as some parents and partners, have mastered this technique to such an extent that they never hold themselves at fault. Whatever the problem is, they will find a way to blame others.

Bait and Switch: The manipulator moves the goal post, pretends to be talking about one issue in order to end up talking about what he or she really wants to say. It’s a sophisticated “bait and switch” technique in order to avoid having to answer for an issue, such as accounting for his political record (or accounting for the withdrawals from the joint bank account). In politics, the speaker redefines the goals of the argument in order to jam in his talking points. The purpose is to wear the other out, and humiliate them for even daring to be skeptical or ask questions.

Projecting: The manipulator, with astonishing efficiency, accuses the victim of doing exactly what he himself is guilty of. For example, we see this when one politician creates an entire campaign around the idea that his/her opponent is the most dishonest politician in history whereas in reality the accuser is the dishonest one, creating a huge gap between perception and reality.

Generalizing and Exaggerating: When there is no attention to detail, no plan of action, no proposals or plans to discuss, the tactic is to pull the listener off focus by using grandiose generalizations, exaggerations and hyperbole. Domestic arguments involve many “I never” and “You always” statements, or politicians make promises and success claims that are very difficult to prove or disprove or fact-check. Generalizing is one of the classic abusive patterns.

Yelling and Shouting-Over: For toxic manipulators and abusers (the domestic type as well as the political type), instantly flaring up, yelling, or talking louder or shouting-over is meant to put a stop to the other’s chance to be heard. It is typical to use the voice as a *weapon of violence* so only their own words are heard and the words of the other are stifled. At a political event, the speaker at the microphone may refuse to stop talking when out of time, or

interrupt the person who is speaking, or refuse to let the other have the last word. In a domestic situation, it's the same thing. This causes deep frustration and anxiety.

Fear-Mongering: Almost all toxic manipulators incite fear, and during this particular political campaign we've heard a lot of fear-mongering and threat-making – so it's no wonder we get anxious! Those who have experienced fear-mongering in childhood or in their intimate relationships get doubly anxious. In the political arena, when it becomes “not okay” to talk back or discuss differences or there will be some consequence, that threat shuts people up. It's hard to fight back in an atmosphere of terror.

Body Shaming: Both politicians and domestic partners use this one – saying something hurtful to somebody about their looks or physical condition causing shame and hurt. Most of us are sensitive to how we look and function, so this is a particularly debilitating tactic that can have severe impacts, causing a person to be too humiliated to speak, advocate, or appear in public. Perpetrators of emotional abuse/domestic violence have a particularly troubling history of body-shaming women. Women who keep being told they look “fat” or forced to weigh in every week by their significant others may end up not even wanting to leave the house, so when they see “body-shaming” on TV, it stirs them up all over again.

This list could go on and on, but the point here is, if you can spot the toxic tactic and label it, then you can begin to deal with it. People who use these tactics are usually acting out unfinished business from the past. It doesn't mean the behavior is okay, but if you can see the similarity and remind yourself, “He is bullying his political opponent just like my father used to bully me,” it can take the edge off your anxiety.

Don't Be a “Political Anxiety” Victim

To sum up, knowing what you are dealing with (toxic tactics) and being able to name them will put you in a much stronger position and help you feel less victimized by your reaction of “high anxiety” to political events. Learn ways to defend yourself. We are experiencing fear based blustery and it has caused a tear in the fabric of our society. In a world now where family members and friends break up over political differences (which itself causes anxiety), arm yourself with a few phrases or even quips to break the tension. Have a come-back on the tip of your tongue. It will make you feel more empowered. Sometimes a simple “Let's not talk politics” is enough to keep a friendship from breaking up over the election!

After the Election

This too shall pass. The election will be over – eventually! In order to create a positive change for healthy future generations, the world needs clearer thinking in order to work through many of its personal, local, as well as global issues that are triggering so much of this current political anxiety. Educate yourself about the tactics other people use (whether in your personal, professional, or community life), understand why you may over-react to certain tactics (childhood or current abuse experiences), know your political facts, know your triggers, know *why* they are triggers, and know how to respond to situations that used to throw you. And breathe.

Thank you for your support!

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