

# [***Opinion: Campaign despair is crushing our mental health***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJV-W6K1-DY7V-G002-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Democracy is founded on the importance of having an informed citizenry, but what if we have reached the point where citizens find staying informed a challenge to their mental health? What I am hearing in my psychotherapy practice worries me deeply. The paradox of living in a 24-hour news cycle is that the quantity of news does not guarantee more knowledge. As we stare down the start of the 2024 presidential campaign, we must reconcile how to help people balance managing their capacity to function with their need to be informed.

The [*well-documented mental health crisis in our country*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/28/health/mental-health-crisis-undermine-our-democracy-us-surgeon-generals-say/index.html) can be attributed in part to the feelings of inevitability that we are facing the [*same two candidates as in the 2020 election*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/06/us/politics/trump-biden-presidential-campaign.html) and dysfunction in Congress will continue to reign. So now, rather than staying up to date with current events, my patients are withdrawing as much as possible from the news. Rather than compulsively listening to news, they are compulsively avoiding the news.

Even my most politically engaged patients are increasingly turning away from political news - but significantly, they are doing so on purpose. Withdrawing from political information or solicitations is an active stance as contrasted with the more common idea of disengagement or apathy, which is a passive stance. Their sense of purpose comes from maintaining an active stance of withdrawal as a silent protest against a system that feels broken and unfair.

Having a sense of agency is better for mental health than acquiescence, but it can be tricky to find the line between being informed versus overwhelmed. It's not that my patients don't care about the outcome of the election; far from it. But in their attempts to manage how much they are impacted by the campaigns, they are consciously restricting the amount of attention they will pay to the candidates.

Withdrawal is also a healthy response to fatigue. "Why do the ads have to start so early? They think if they blast me enough it will change my mind? Honestly, if the election was today rather than in November, do people think the results would be different? Who hasn't made up their mind?" asked one patient incredulously. Because this election seems to be [*less about policy and more about personalities*](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2024-biden-trump-rematch-policy-matter-vibes-voters/story?id=105438984), there doesn't seem to be as much to learn. And the candidates have been sufficiently vetted for most people. In this milieu, more information can further the divide and confirm one's viewpoint rather than change opinion.

A patient recently expressed her need to limit news intake as a way to maintain her mental health: "I let them suck me in the last two elections, and look where it got me - nervous, not sleeping, a wreck," she said of her cable news consumption. "I won't be fooled again." Indeed, my patients talk openly about feeling skeptical of all news and being fed up with feeling lied to. While they tend to cluster toward one end of the political spectrum, [*this jaundiced viewpoint on the value of mainstream journalism cuts across political parties*](https://fortune.com/2023/02/15/trust-in-media-low-misinform-mislead-biased-republicans-democrats-poll-gallup/). More information is considered unwelcome rather than informative. As one patient said, "Democracy is already broken. We are living in a plutocracy now. I will vote out of habit, not because I think it matters."

My college-aged patients, however, have not yet developed voting habits and profess no desire to politically engage to the point of being unmotivated to vote. A [*December poll reflected just how low this enthusiasm is*](https://www.axios.com/2023/12/05/young-voters-2024-democrats-republicans), with just 49% of individuals 18 to 29 years old "definitely" planning on voting in the presidential election. They experience ***politics*** as something happening around them or to them, but not about them. Unlike the enthusiasm expressed by students during [*the first election cycle*](https://www.pewresearch.org/2008/11/13/young-voters-in-the-2008-election/) of former President Barack Obama, the young adults in my practice now are more focused on making up for the time they lost during the pandemic. Their [*sense of powerlessness to get anyone in* ***politics*** *to care about what is foremost on their minds*](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/young-voters-explain-re-bailing-biden-whether-d-come-back-rcna130186) lends itself to withdrawing from larger national debates. "They are both older than my grandparents! I just can't get excited about voting," one college student in my practice said of President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump. "If they understood us, they would figure out how we could vote by text." This is not a flip comment from an entitled young adult, but rather the sentiment of a citizen who feels forgotten.

In these expressions of withdrawal that I hear from my patients, there is an underlying depression. Taken together, a sense of powerlessness, skepticism and fatigue make a potent cocktail for despair. My patients are hardly alone: [*a September Pew Research Center survey*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/), conducted long before the first presidential primary, found 65% of respondents felt "exhausted" always or often when thinking about ***politics***. Thus the remedy, withdrawal, can be understood as an active protective stance, one that attempts to allow the individual to go about life and function rather than giving in to hopelessness. In other words, by limiting their intake of news they are hoping to be less depressed.

Understanding this response from a psychological perspective is imperative if we want to build an active citizenry. Consider the example of adolescents who respond to requests from their parents by withdrawing to their room. As the parents yell louder, the teens go deeper into themselves, turning up their music and frustrating the parents further. Scare tactics only go so far when trying to change someone else's behavior. Without meaningful communication between the two sides, viewpoints become intractable.

The current practice of endless text messages from politicians running for office is a perfect illustration of such impotent scare tactics. My patients receive requests for money from candidates across the country; they consider these intrusive and they tune them out. When messages like these arrive during a session, patients express outrage that their perceived personal space is being violated: "My phone is on in case my husband or kids need me, not so someone I've never heard of can ask for money," one patient said. Actively texting STOP to these messages is one way of exercising power in a seemingly powerless situation.

However, developing a sense of purpose is a more effective antidote to despair than active withdrawal. Consequently, I encourage patients to identify ways they can actively participate in the election process rather than feeling victimized by it. For some, this has meant getting involved in local ***politics***, where they have a greater connection to the candidates. For others, making the time to write postcards or call people in other states has enlivened their sense of being an American because they feel like they are doing something on their own terms rather than being apathetic.

The ultimate question is whether or not the choice to actively disengage from the campaigns will translate into lower voter turnout. The challenge is to support people's efforts to take care of themselves psychologically leading up to election day, while still engaging enough in the necessary steps to be able to vote. This will give them the benefit of knowing they participated even if they are unhappy with the outcome. As a country, and a people, we thrive when we have a sense of purpose.

Opinion by Maggie Mulqueen

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