

1 in 4 college students really stressed out by 2016 election: survey

October 22 2018, by Amy Norton, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—For some college students in the United States, the 2016

presidential election triggered significant distress symptoms, a new survey suggests.

Nearly 800 students were surveyed at one university. One-quarter suffered distress levels similar to what's seen among witnesses to a mass shooting, researchers said.

Such [stress](#) can interfere with daily tasks, including academic work. It can also be predictive of symptoms seen in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the researchers said in background notes.

However, the findings don't mean the election caused PTSD in those students, said Melissa Hagan, the lead researcher on the study.

The election and its outcome do not constitute a "trauma" as defined by the American Psychiatric Association, explained Hagan, an assistant professor of psychiatry at San Francisco State University.

By that definition, a trauma refers to an immediate threat to a person's physical safety or life.

"These students were not assessed for PTSD, and therefore cannot be diagnosed as having PTSD or not," Hagan said.

But the findings do add to evidence that the political climate since the 2016 election has been a source of stress for many Americans.

The American Psychological Association (APA) conducts an annual "Stress in America" survey. Last year, it found that nearly two-thirds of Americans were stressed over the future of the nation—making it the most commonly reported source of stress (just beating out perennial issues such as money and work.)

Lynn Bufka is a psychologist and associate executive director of practice research and policy at the APA.

While the new study asked different questions, the findings are "certainly consistent" with the APA survey, said Bufka.

She said the post-election political climate may have been enough to create an unusual amount of stress for some people.

Bufka noted that the survey was done about two to three months after the 2016 election.

"At that point, people may have come to terms with the [election results](#)," Bufka said.

But, she added, many people may have been increasingly stressed by news reports, social media posts and face-to-face interactions with people who did not necessarily share their political views.

"The general tenor of conversations shifted after the election. And that can be stressful in itself," Bufka said.

Hagan agreed that the aftermath of the election may partly explain students' distress levels.

The findings come from a survey of 769 students at Arizona State University.

They all completed a standard questionnaire on stress responses to "significant life events." It asked them, for example, whether thoughts of the election cropped up in their daily lives, when they didn't actually want to think about it; or whether they actively avoided reminders of the election.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, students who identified as Democrats or Independents had higher distress scores than Republicans. Racial minorities, women, lower-income people and non-Christians scored higher, too.

The findings were reported Oct. 22 in the *Journal of American College Health*.

Since the survey was done at one university, Hagan said, the results would not be representative of all young Americans.

But she said that, to her, the message is straightforward: If the [election](#) stressed you out, "you're not alone."

Unplugging may help

For people who are distressed by today's political climate, Hagan said it might help to take more breaks from political news, including social media—unless that's how you get your social support.

Bufka agreed that media breaks can offer some needed perspective, especially for people who think they need to stay on top of all the news.

She also suggested volunteering, either with a political campaign or any cause you care about. "That helps you feel that you're having an impact, even when things feel like they're out of your control," she said.

And, Bufka said, never underestimate the importance of adequate sleep, exercise and a healthy diet—especially when you're stressed.

Those tips do not just apply to unhappy Democrats—or any one group, Bufka said. In the APA [survey](#), stress over the nation's future cut across party lines.

More information: Melissa Hagan, Ph.D., M.P.H., assistant professor, psychiatry, San Francisco State University; Lynn Bufka, Ph.D., associate executive director, practice research and policy, American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.; Oct. 22, 2018, *Journal of American College Health*, online.

For advice on dealing with stress related to political change, visit the [American Psychological Association](#).

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