

There Must Be Some Way Out of Here: Coping with the Outcome of the Recent Presidential Election

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Many people in the LGBTQ and allied communities were surprised and disturbed by the outcome of the recent presidential election. The election results represent different things to different people, and some in our communities feel shattered and overwhelmed.

Fortunately, we have several decades of research (which started right here in Boulder) that helps us to understand the psychological impact of political events like this on our community. Moreover, this research offers us some important clues about how we can best manage the impact of these events and use them to take care of ourselves and our communities.

I will describe what we know by referring to three different sets of experiences.

The immediate aftermath

This refers to what many people have been feeling since the election.

Reactions might include: sadness, fear, anger, a sense of being out of step with much of the country, a sense of alienation, and a host of other reactions. The results might even call to mind your reaction to other difficult events that you have experienced at some earlier point in time.

All of these reactions are *normal*. The rhetoric around this election and its possible consequences are disturbing. These reactions are not pathological. The reactions are not about a *personal* problem; they are about a *collective* problem. The most obvious solution to a collective problem is a collective one.

Pay attention to how you label your reactions. Grief about a real outcome is not necessarily depression. Feeling upset and overwhelmed by the results is not necessarily trauma. You share these normal reactions with many other people both within and outside the LGBTQ community.

During this period of time, you might want to do the following: let yourself have the feelings you have; talk with friends about your feelings; do comforting things for yourself; exercise; get plenty of sleep; distract yourself with fun activities; avoid reading about the election all the time; read the things and listen to the music that give you comfort and inspiration. If you find yourself starting to only think in worst-case scenarios, step back and breathe and allow yourself to challenge these scenarios.

As time goes on

As you get more distance from Election Day, you may want to focus on coming up with a way to make sense of your experiences that helps you to move forward. We think about this as creating an appraisal that promotes optimal coping and creates the most room for moving forward with a sense of empowerment and the chance to add positive changes to the world.

Remember when Harvey Milk said, "And you ... gotta give 'em hope"? Well, the first step in coping is to give ourselves hope.

Ask yourself this question: How can I look at this election in a way that allows me to be active and engaged and moving forward? That may feel like a big task—and it is—but it carries a huge probability of getting us moving in a good direction.

Consider a couple of examples that members of our community have told me about, describing how they're making sense of the election. One friend said he sees the election as the best opportunity for a widespread, coalition-based progressive movement that we've had in decades. Another friend says that they are using the election as an invitation to understand the people they had been vilifying for a long time. Another friend says she came out years ago as a lesbian and now she is learning to come out as an ally to people who are not as safe as she is.

These are ways to think of the election that lend movement, power, and possibility to people. That's the sort of making-sense that helps.

What does not help over the long run (though we may feel this way in the immediate aftermath and even from time to time as we go on): hopelessness, self-blame, telling ourselves that we are not at all impacted, cynicism, seeing everything as a catastrophe, using substances in destructive ways, engaging in unsafe sex, isolating ourselves, and doing things that tear ourselves down.

Other tools you'll want to consider:

- Action: call a friend; make culture; build community; sing a song; dance; tell people you love that you love them; write your personal plan for your "first 100 days" starting on January 20, 2017. Create as much joy as you can. After all, "Joy is a revolutionary act."
- Watch and resist the negative messages about yourself and your group that are going around. They are designed to be your poison. Do not drink them. Instead, learn more about the history and culture of our communities. Steven Biko, the great South African freedom fighter, wisely said: "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."
- When you resist internalized oppression, you change more than yourself. Remember Gloria Anzaldúa's words: "I change myself; I change the world." Imagine that: We work on resisting oppressive messages and we end up changing the world!
- If you are pulled out of your own sense of balance, stop, breathe, and answer these questions: What do I value? What do I cherish? What is important to me? Use this exercise to get back in touch with yourself and your own grounding.
- Consider making a list of what you like about being LGBTQ. Is it the bigger view of the universe that we get from being at the margin? The possibility for more empathy? The motive to change things? The opportunity to live a life outside the usual categories and ruts?
- Use and contribute to LGBTQ communities. Use our communities to be safe and to refuel. Use them to learn the truth about our lives. Learn about our culture and history, and make more culture and history.
- Pay attention to allies. It's tempting when we feel under attack to focus on people who don't like us. Of course it's important to know what those people are up to. But it's even more important to notice who's with us. Ask your allies for what you need.

- Be especially attentive to the possibility of hate crimes in the coming days and weeks. Take appropriate precautions, including traveling with friends, especially after dark and in unfamiliar areas. Let someone know where you are. Don't hesitate to report people or actions that seem potentially dangerous (if you can do so without incurring additional risk).
- Think about how you can be an ally, including to members of our communities who have relatively less privilege than you do. Learn about your privilege. (Just about everyone has some areas of privilege.) Know where your privilege is; you'll be less likely to use it destructively against other people. And you'll be more likely to heed Suzanne Pharr's great advice to us to spend our privilege well.
- Tell stories to friends about great ally behavior—the small things and the big things. We need to inspire ourselves and one another.
- A word about anger: It is a signal that a violation has occurred. Use it as that and express it in ways that reflect your values and best aspirations. But don't cultivate anger for its own sake. You end up giving power to the targets of your anger and keeping yourself tied to them and to the past.
- Watch what you take in through the media. We can use the media to get inspiration and stay in touch with good ideas. But we can also encounter demoralizing stuff there. Be intentional about what you read and listen to. You wouldn't eat dirt. Don't consume unhealthy messages.

And On Into the Future

It is impossible to know yet just what the upcoming administration will do. In many ways, the uncertainty of what is ahead is one of the most stressful aspects of this time. It is important to be aware of the decisions that come out of the administration and how they might affect us as individuals and as communities. It is important to respond rapidly and judiciously when something could impact you directly. It's also a good idea to watch what you do with fear. It's a normal reaction, but you don't want it to run your life. Audre Lorde has given us important advice about managing fear: "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

This is a long-term movement we're in. Don't confuse this brief moment, however painful it may be, with that movement. We have to be in it for the long run. We have to pace ourselves and be compassionate to ourselves and to others.

Move forward in the company of people who want to change the world in ways that promote and sustain justice, love, and peace. What better way is there to go through life!

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