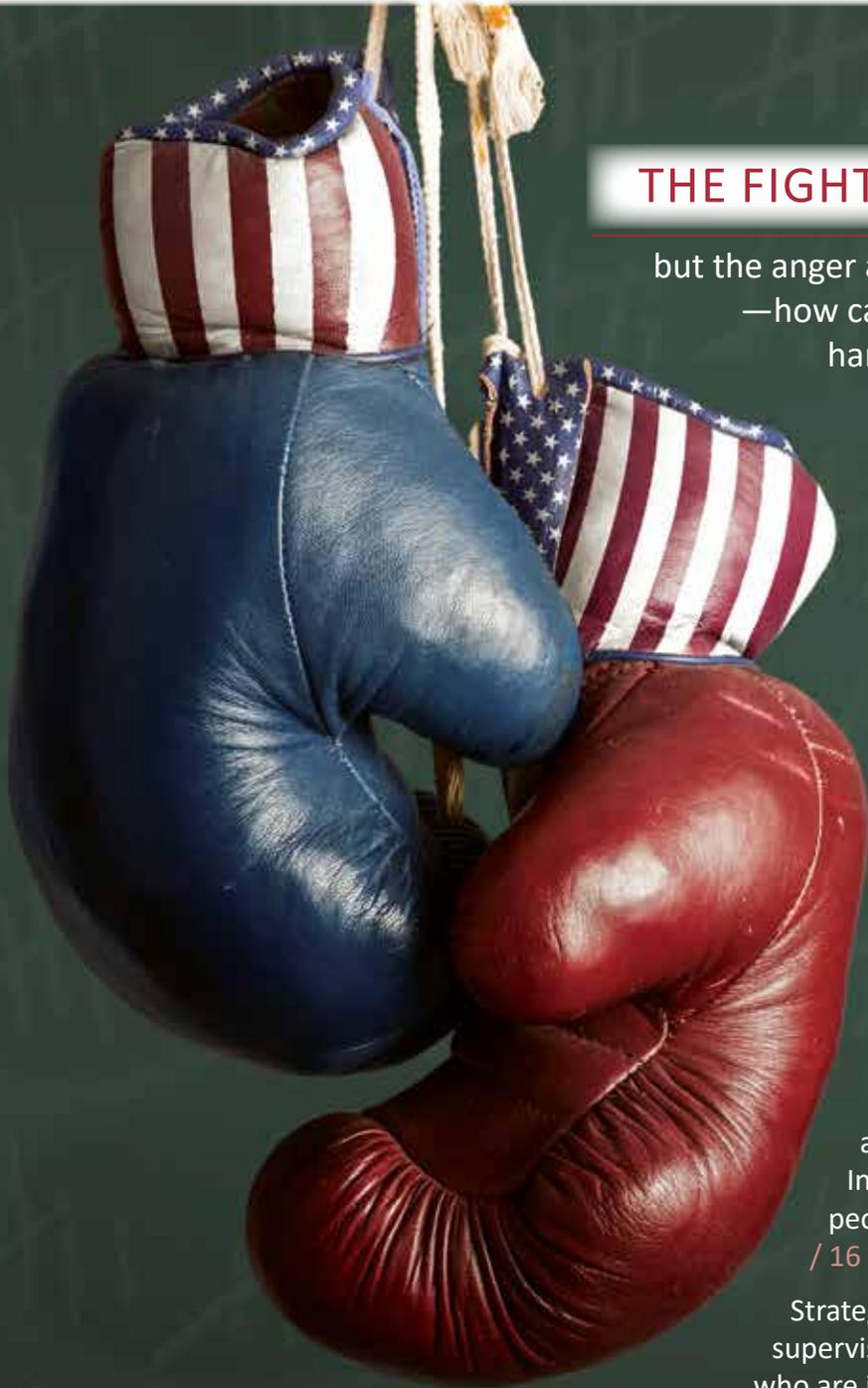




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THE FIGHT'S OVER

but the anger and anxiety aren't
—how can you help clients
hang up the gloves?

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Therapy After the Election: Helping Clients—and Ourselves—Deal With Unwanted Results



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As I write this article, I don't know who's going to be inaugurated as president of the United States in January, and the election results may still be challenged by the time you read this article. Twenty years of clinical experience has taught me that regardless of who wins the election, four things are certain:

1. Some of my clients are going to be upset, and they're going to want to talk about it;
2. Some of my clients are going to be happy with the outcome;
3. Some of my clients won't care much either way; and
4. Some of my *colleagues* will be upset, and some of them are going to want to talk about it.

In this article, I'll offer some suggestions for how to address pre- and post-election discontent—"political dysphoria"—for both counselors and clients.

COUNSELOR, KNOW AND HEAL THYSELF!

The AMHCA *Code of Ethics* calls upon clinical mental health counselors (CMHCs) to maintain objectivity (I.A.1); to take care of our own mental health so that we can be centered for our clients (I.C.1.h); to understand the role of our beliefs, values, and biases in our clinical work while seeking to better understand our clients (I.C.1.m); and to refrain from discriminating against our clients for their political beliefs (I.C.2.c).

These ethical prerogatives raise some interesting and bold questions. Have you become politically self-righteous? What do your personal social-media posts look like? Do you think that your beliefs are right, and the other side is wrong? Do you think that labeling the other side "communists," "fascists," "Nazis," or "libtards" helps your case? Do you mock people who view things differently than you? Are you demonizing, scapegoating, or shaming them? What kind of example are you setting for your clients?

I think that it's important to note that we CMHCs are biased and are not as politically diverse as the general population. In a study I conducted with my colleague Tony Tan, EdD, I found that CMHCs are more likely to (a) identify as politically liberal; (b) be registered with the Democratic Party; and (c) endorse liberal political beliefs as compared to the general population. You can read more about our study at tinyurl.com/y5tl39qr. See how the CMHCs we studied describe their political ideology in the pie chart on page 13. For a more refined breakdown of CMHC's self-described political ideology, see t.ly/oqkh.



JOINING IN WITH YOUR CLIENT

When clients present with political dysphoria, I think that in the early state of therapy it is important to let them vent and discuss their frustrations in a therapeutic and nonjudgmental environment. When a CMHC disagrees with a client's political views, not challenging them may require some internal work. If your client is troubled about political matters, I can assure you that *regardless of what side your client is on, your client is thinking morally.*

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) is a pluralist fusion of social psychological, neuropolitical, and anthropological research that provides a useful model for seeing the good in your client's perspective. MFT proposes that human moral reasoning can be divided into six foundations that evolved in human beings concurrent with the development of civilization:

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- **Care/Harm:** Virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance fostered by our ability to feel and dislike the pain of others;
- **Fairness/Cheating:** Virtues of justice, rights, autonomy that can be further divided into two types of fairness: equality and proportionality;
- **Liberty/Oppression:** Characterized by people’s feelings of reactance and resentment towards those who dominate them and restrict their liberty; a contempt for “bullies” and oppressors;
- **Loyalty/Betrayal:** Virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group;
- **Authority/Subversion:** Virtues of leadership and followership, including respect of legitimate authority and traditions;
- **Sanctity/Degradation:** Reflective of the idea that the body is a temple that should not be desecrated by immoral activities or contaminants.

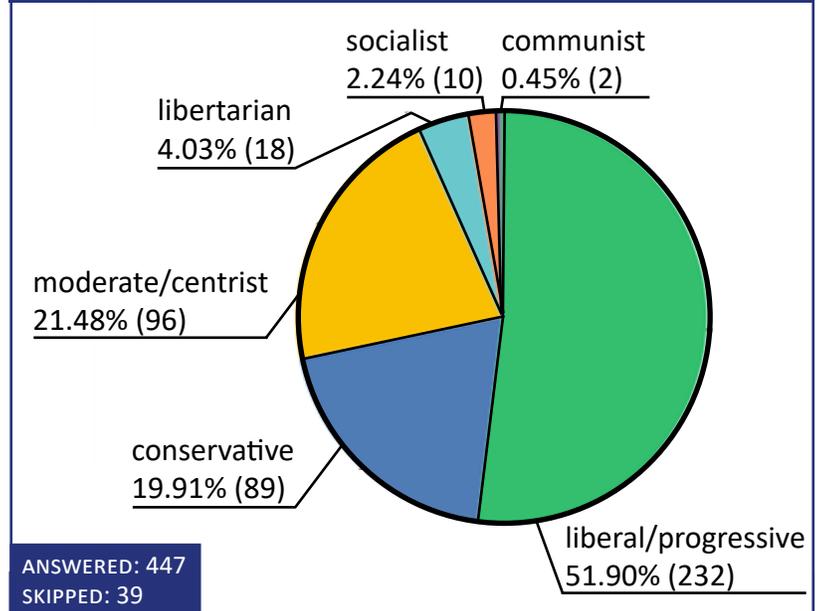
Each of these six foundations plays a role in civilized, peaceful co-existence. Conservatives tend to emphasize nearly all six moral foundations equally, whereas liberals emphasize the care foundation above all others, and libertarians emphasize the liberty foundation above all others. If you are a CMHC, and you disagree with your client’s political positions, you can modulate that disagreement with the awareness that your client’s intentions are likely *good*, looking for evidence of these moral foundations. You can remind yourself that a balanced world needs conservatives, liberals, and libertarians. Use your active listening skills as your client laments political outcomes. Ask questions. Learn more. Demonstrate empathy and understanding. Validate what makes sense to validate. Don’t make the interaction about you and your beliefs. Seek to find your client’s underlying positive intentions.

CONTROLLING WHAT WE CAN CONTROL: HELPING CLIENTS TAKE ACTION

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” —The Serenity Prayer (attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr)

“The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil?”

CMHC Answers to: “Which of the Following Best Describes Your Political Beliefs or Ideology?”



Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own.” —Epictetus

Prior to earning his freedom from slavery, the Greek philosopher Epictetus learned the same principle that Victor Frankl learned in the concentration camp at Auschwitz and that people in recovery from addictions recite all over the world—there is power in letting go of what is beyond our control while acting boldly on what is within our control.

Empowerment is critical. It is important to help clients to direct their energy away from what they cannot control and towards how they can be impactful. Here are some examples of what clients can do:

- Vote (and encourage others to do the same)
- Participate in peaceful protests
- Volunteer for a political party, organization, or cause that they identify with
- Dialogue with others about what they believe and why
- Donate to a cause they believe in
- Lead by example
- Share resources with others
- Write about their positions and principles
- Run for political office

In addition to these strategies, you can help clients to develop skills they can use to more effectively influence peers, friends, and family members. Attacking the opposition won’t get your

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client far. Those of us trained in motivational interviewing know that if a person is ambivalent about a healthy behavioral change, then advocating too intensely for change may push a client towards resistance. Better to influence through relationship.

I offer clients the following recommendations for a healthy political dialogue with others:

- Before you give your own perspective about a controversial issue, start by learning more about the other person's perspective. Ask questions (e.g., "What do you want to be different?" "What are you concerned about?" "What about this is troubling to you?" "Why is this issue important to you?").
- When you think you have a clearer picture of the other person's perspective, summarize your understanding of his or her perspective to check in and make sure you do understand. In relationship counseling, this is often referred to as "mirroring" or "summarizing." If the other person does not think you understand, ask him or her to clarify and then continue mirroring until he or she agrees that you have it right.
- After mirroring, validate anything about the other person's perspective that you agree with or find commendable (e.g., "I really like that you're concerned about whether or not this piece of legislation is fair. I have the same concern." "I can see that you really care about others' suffering, and I admire your compassion.").
- After validating, introduce your own perspective, using "I-language" (e.g., I feel, I think, I'm concerned about, I believe, I'd prefer, etc.).
- Try to keep the dialogue respectful (e.g., monitor your tone of voice, avoid interrupting, avoid labeling and exaggerating, etc.). If you notice yourself getting upset, you can acknowledge that you are too passionate about the issue to have a respectful dialogue at the moment and then politely terminate or postpone the conversation. You can later reflect on what was going on within you during the discussion. As Confucius said, "When we see [people] of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves."
- Release the need to be "right," and the need for the other person to see things as you do. Political, religious, and moral issues are controversial precisely because there are so many valid, reasonable points on both sides of the argument. Practice accepting that others do not believe as you do and shift your attention to understanding the other person's perspective, and to attempting to help the other person to understand yours. The goal here is understanding, not necessarily persuasion.

REDUCING EMOTIONAL INTENSITY THROUGH COGNITIVE CHALLENGING AND RESTRUCTURING

If a client is doing what is within the client's control, the remaining task involves acceptance. This often doesn't come easily, as it involves challenging one's thinking. When I read social media posts of some of my friends, family, and—yes, even my colleagues—I see statements that concern me. They look like cognitive distortions—thinking traps that people engage in that are irrational (i.e., maladaptive and illogical) and that feed intense and unpleasant emotions. After teaching clients cognitive distortions, provide them with political statements and see if they can match those statements to cognitive distortions.

Because of *salience bias*, the human tendency to focus on information that is odd, unusual, extreme, or noteworthy rather than what is benign, common, neutral, or uncontroversial, media provides a skewed picture of American civics—one that is very oppositional and combative. In reality, most of us are getting along just fine and agreeing on most things. Here are some examples of exercises that might help counter salience bias:

- **Do you think political debate is more polarized than it's ever been?** It's easy to buy into this, especially after seeing the first presidential debate this year, but check out the ads between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in the early 1800s! Those ads—and many others in American history—make contemporary ads look benign. For that matter, watch some of the debates in Parliament in the United Kingdom and India on YouTube. They get pretty intense. In the words of both Stoic philosophers and various characters in *Battlestar Galactica*, "All of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again." (By the way, Jefferson and Adams were good friends both before and after their contentious election: bit.ly/2lao0jM.)
- **Are you a liberal who is frustrated when either the White House or Congress veers "red"?** Consider the big picture. When my grandfather, who is still with us, was born, there was no Medicare, government-funded healthcare, minimum wage, or unemployment benefits. Income taxes were new and women had only been able to vote for a few years; there was widespread overt and covert racism; gay marriage and transgender rights weren't even on the nation's radar; there was no Civil Rights Act; people in the United States sometimes died of starvation; an entire town of Black citizens were murdered in my state of Florida and there was no justice (i.e., Rosewood, FL); and within a couple of decades, the United States would be placing Japanese Americans into

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concentration camps without any evidence of wrongdoing. We've changed an awful lot in just one lifetime, and much of this change is appreciated by both conservatives and liberals. Learn more about human progress at humanprogress.org, or read "The Rational Optimist" by Matt Ridley. In almost any objective measure of human suffering, humanity fares better now than at any time in history. This doesn't mean we don't have a long way to go, but it also doesn't mean we're getting worse.

- **Do you think your side is rational and the other side isn't?** Take any political ad, speech, or statement, and filter it through a list of cognitive distortions (e.g., psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions). If you become skilled at identifying thinking traps, you'll find that it doesn't matter what side of the aisle you're on—your side is often irrational. Better yet: Before sharing that scandalous post about wrongdoing on the other side, consider fact-checking the information you're looking at. Snopes.com, Factcheck.org, and Politifact.com are some great resources for this.
- **Do you think our country is not tolerant of political dissidence?** Do you think that red and blue can't co-exist civilly? Flipboard has put together a great collection of articles and videos that remind us that all in all—conservatives and liberals (and everyone else) do a pretty good job of co-existing peacefully, civilly, and even with love and respect bit.ly/2U3WNC3.
- **Are you afraid that if "the other side" wins, horrible things will happen?** It's okay to be concerned, but it's also good to have an objective gauge. CMHCs can help clients create a list of what they are afraid will happen, preferably in specific terms (e.g., gay marriage will be banned, the 2nd Amendment will be repealed) rather than general (e.g., we'll lose our rights). I have helped clients revisit these lists for years, and they are surprised to see how few of their fears are ever realized.
- **Do you spend more time on media that feeds your political bias?** Not only are many news

outlets biased, but social media algorithms are designed to detect information you favor and feed you more of the same, further skewing your view of reality. Consider watching or reading a diverse group of news sources. Even apps can help! For example, Ground News shows you the political bias of each source as you view your daily news and tracks your bias based on what you view. Knewz shows you a trending topic and then provides links to a variety of articles on that topic so that you can see how differently each source reports the information.

PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE: IT IS TEMPORARY

The American political system is a pendulum—for every action, there is a reaction. In my lifetime alone, I have seen both Congress and the White House shift back and forth from Red to Blue to Red to Blue over and over again.

No matter who takes control, understand this: *it is temporary*. A counterreaction is coming right around the corner. In the meantime, you and your clients can do what you can do to support the causes and politicians that you favor, and to practice your principles in your daily life. ♦

Resources

- Take the Moral Foundations Questionnaire and learn more about your moral foundations at www.yourmorals.org.
- Read "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion," a book by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, PhD.
- Check out facts that fill your heart with optimism at humanprogress.org.
- Read "The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves," by Matt Ridley.
- Check out a collection of articles on how liberals, conservatives, and everyone else live in harmony at bit.ly/2U3WNC3.
- Read "7 Steps to Alleviating Election Anxiety" in *Psychiatric Times*, by H. Dr. Steven Moffic, MD, at bit.ly/3k99I5R.
- Read more about my study of mental health counselors' political beliefs, and whether those beliefs impact the quality or nature of the therapeutic relationship between counselor and client at bit.ly/332jX4.
- View the Facebook LIVE discussion on "Managing Value Conflicts Post-2020 Election," held Nov. 13, 2020, and co-hosted by the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) at www.facebook.com/amhca.
- Read *Medical News Today's* "How to Look After Your Mental Health in the Aftermath of the Election" at bit.ly/3nDPKN5.
- Read Bustle's "7 Strategies for Dealing With Political Conversations Over the Holidays," at flip.it/bp9cS-.
- Are you passionate about addressing political bias in counselor education? Check out www.heterodoxacademy.org, and consider joining the Heterodoxy in Counseling Facebook Group at www.facebook.com/groups/679550992696834/

Survey of Clinical Mental Health Counselors: What a Survey Reveals About Our Political Biases



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Figures 1 and 2 complement Norton's article ("Therapy After the Election: Helping Clients—and Ourselves—Deal With Unwanted Results"), which runs on pages 12–15 of the 2020 FALL ISSUE of *The Advocate Magazine*.

AMHCA members can download the issue free at connections.amhca.org/publications/advocatemag.

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- Identify as politically liberal;
- Be registered with the Democratic Party; and
- Endorse liberal political beliefs as compared to the general population.

Read more about our study at tinyurl.com/y5tl39qr.

Figure 1:
Scatter Plot
of Scores
of LMHCs
on Political
Beliefs
Survey

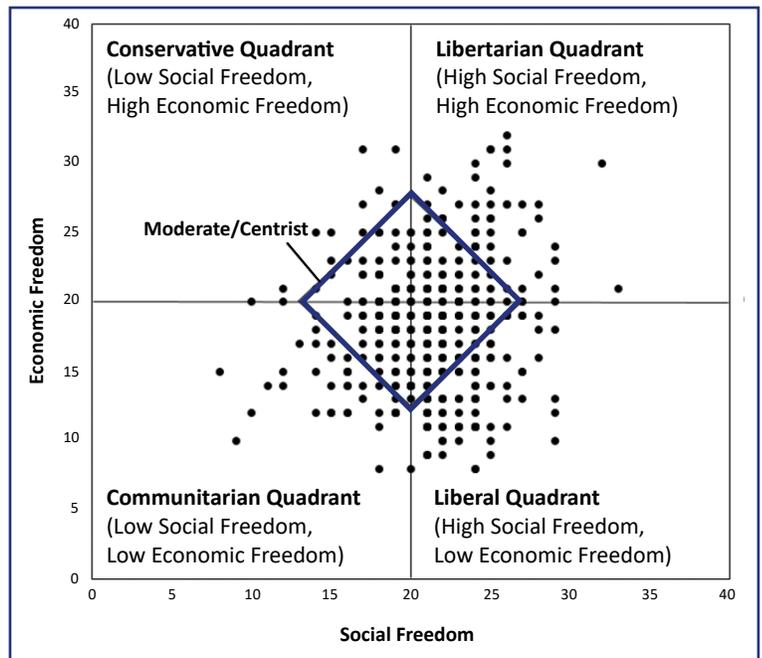


FIGURE 2:
Mean
Scores of
LMHCs
on Political
Beliefs
Survey

