

The Politics of Depression

It is primary day in Illinois. And I have been hearing people talk politics a lot. So many of them are giving voice to frustration and depression about politics in the USA. It strikes me how similar these voices are to the voices of people with depression that I hear in my clinical work. You do not have to suffer depression to feel glum and discouraged about how impossible it is to change the way politicians operate and the way politics affect our daily lives. If you are depressed, you will find it much harder to cope with political stalemates and your frustration about inaction or wrong action in the Congress and Senate. Depression is non-partisan and dismay about politics can fuel depression whether you are 'right' or 'left', 'red' or 'blue'. Feelings of frustration and hopelessness are fodder for depression, and, as the political season means non-stop political discussion in all the media and among your acquaintances you might feel no place to get relief from these feelings. However, there are specific things you can do with those emotions to diminish their impact on your life.

If you are depressed and politics are getting you down, understanding of how your brain works suggests four 'C's' to managing this: Change Cognition, Chart Connection, Channel Activity and Contain Thinking and Talking.

- 1) First it is necessary to change to cognitive outlook.

The rumination of a depressed brain keeps you stuck in repeated thoughts that go in circles without solution. It seems to me that in this way, political discussions can mirror depression – too many ruminative, oft-repeated negative thoughts everywhere you listen or read, too few solutions and not enough energy to make it all orderly. The lack of civil discourse among politicians mirrors the debate and harangue of negative thoughts in your mind! That is what makes it so easy to get hooked on the negativity in political discussions. When you are depressed you don't have enough brain energy to push those thoughts away and your neural networking keeps reminding you of all the other situations that are this frustrating. You end up feeling helpless about all the negativity.

To move out of this loop of negativity and helplessness, use that mental energy to make a small decision that will shift you away from frustration. (Frustration lessens when you get a realistic view of what is in your control and what is not in your control.) For example, you alone *cannot* decide health care policy for the United States. You alone *can* vote for the persons who share your views. To change your cognition, decide: You are one person and one vote, and while you cannot change the whole system, your vote has influence.

- 2) Next, chart a connection between what frustrates you and one straightforward action you can take to make a difference.

For example, are you mad about the debate about raising taxes or cutting spending? Write a letter to those who are in office and tell them they are losing your vote in the next election by stonewalling. Then, whenever you start to feel upset, remind yourself you have done what you can. Or, are you mad at the way welfare is handled? Find a group that provides for the needy the right way, support them, and vote for someone who will change welfare as it stands today.

- 3) Channel is the next step. In depression low energy is an enemy of action, so be careful not to waste your energy on ranting, fuming, or fussing.

Having charted the connection, channel your energy into action. Volunteer or donate or both: influence outcomes with your time and money. Beyond a healthy commitment there, you do not have to do anything else, because *it is what you can do*.

- 4) Finally, contain. Stop thinking about it.

You only make yourself miserable if you keep up the hopeless, helpless, angry thoughts in your head. You must turn them off in your environment and turn them off in your mind. Turn off the rage mongers in your life: Stop listening to the talking voices on TV, radio and internet that stir up your anger. There are way too many of them who fuel frustration without offering solutions. Find those who encourage and have productive ideas and support them with your attention. And take responsibility to turn off your own thoughts. *Change the channel in your mind* when you are in the loop of frustration. Go back to the first 'C' – change to productive thinking.

And take note of this substitute thought if you cannot think anything else, "At this moment all is well." If you do not understand how it is possible to say that, just think on it for a bit, and see what happens.