



reCAPS

Counseling & Psychological Services
University of California, Santa Cruz

The Impact of Politics on Mental Health



A rolling art installation by David Datuna in New York City, November, 2016.
 (Photo by Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

A popular saying coined by activists in the 1960s is “The personal is political,” underscoring that struggles people may face in their day-to-day lives, such as discrimination, are systemic and political issues, not just individual problems. One could also say that the political is personal: Because laws and policies have a direct impact on people’s well-being, political change can have emotional, psychological, and practical effects.

Policies initiated by the new administration,

such as restrictions on travel from certain countries and promises to crack down on illegal immigration, have taken a toll on many people’s emotional and mental well-being. For example, educators and mental health professionals are seeing a surge in stress, anxiety, and depression in undocumented immigrants and their loved ones and Muslims.

People who were already under stress due to discrimination and other problems may be seeing increases in stressors

and declines in mental and emotional well-being. For instance, the current political climate seems to have resulted in an increase in hate speech and hate crimes.

Potential changes in education, employment, and access to affordable health care are also causing anxiety for many. Although it is too soon to get hard numbers on how these factors are affecting the nation’s mental health, anecdotally it’s not looking good.

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All About CAPS

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) offers confidential mental health services to registered UCSC students all year:

- Helpful workshops, trainings, and self-help tools
- A variety of therapy and support groups
- Let’s Talk drop-in consultations
- Brief individual and couples counseling
- Referrals to on- and off-campus resources
- Crisis services in person Mon–Fri 8 am–5 pm and by phone 24/7 at (831) 459-2628

To make an appointment, call (831) 459-2628 or stop by (Student Health Center, East Wing, 2nd floor) weekdays between 8 am and 5 pm. To learn more, visit our [website](#), check out the [CAPS blog](#), and like us on [Facebook](#)!

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With all of these challenges and stressors, there is no easy answer to staying emotionally balanced. However, there are some effective ways to build resilience and coping. One is to seek support from the positive people in your life: Assess which family members, friends, classmates, and community members understand and empathize, and spend more time and energy on these connections. Or, if you feel you don't have any or enough of these positive connections, think about ways to build them, perhaps by joining a student organization or religious community, reconnecting with old friends, or strengthening your relationship with a family member.

Conversely, it may help to minimize or avoid time with people who add to your stress or actively voice discriminatory views. When avoiding these people is not possible, it can help to make a plan to get extra support before or after interactions; for example, if you know you must see an offensive uncle at a family gathering, plan a phone call or

Skype date with your best friend afterward to get support.

Getting involved with political activism and/or charitable work supporting causes that are important to you is another way to build your own strength and resilience. Doing something positive, especially when it allows you to join forces with other like-minded people, can boost your mental health.

Good self-care (e.g., eating and sleeping well, exercise, setting boundaries, finding ways to relax) is another important component of coping. Many students find self-care challenging due to being busy and for other reasons; however, even small improvements in self-care can make a difference. For instance, getting an extra hour of sleep may serve you better than one extra hour of studying. Organizing your time can allow you to be more productive and get things done more efficiently. Taking 30 or 40 minutes out of your day several days a week to take a walk or run or go to the gym may provide more benefits than using that time for other things. Research shows

that students who studied more hours but did not exercise did worse in school than those who studied slightly less but did take time for physical activity. Saying no to extra obligations when possible is another aspect of self-care. It's hard to juggle all your important responsibilities and still take care of yourself, but it's important to see what changes you can make that may benefit your mental and physical health, especially if you are under more stress due to the current political climate.

Seeking help and support from a clergy person, mentor, or mental health professional may also be beneficial. CAPS is one resource for UCSC students facing stress, anxiety, and mood issues due to political and social factors. CAPS strives to treat everyone with respect and empathy and create a safe environment for all our students. Visit our website to find other resources that may be useful if you are experiencing stress related to political or social concerns: <http://caps.ucsc.edu/about/reactions.html>.

Getting social support is one way to build resilience and coping.



Dear CAPS,

I heard mindfulness is good for mental health, but I don't meditate. What else can I do?

—Seeking Peace

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. By using different mindfulness techniques, we get better at noticing and accepting what we are experiencing, struggling less with our thoughts and emotions, and often, reducing stress and distress in our day-to-day lives. We often rush through all of the activities of our day, missing the opportunity to really experience them, or we get caught up in thinking, worrying, and overanalyzing. Mindfulness can help us learn to “quiet down” our busy minds. Although it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular (nonreligious) practice of mindfulness has entered the main-

stream of United States culture and psychology in recent years.

Sitting meditation is just one way to practice mindfulness. Meditation provides a lot of short-term and long-term benefits, but it is not for everyone. One alternative that some people find easier and more pleasurable than sitting meditation is [“walking meditation.”](#)

Anything you do to feel more present and aware can build mindfulness. A simple mindfulness practice is to sit quietly and just breathe: Notice what it feels like to allow the breath to enter and exit your lungs. Another mindfulness practice is to sit outside and breathe calmly while allowing yourself to notice the sights, sounds, sensations, and smells around you without analyzing or judging them.

A popular exercise to promote mindful eating is to [eat a raisin](#) or an orange slowly and deliberately, noticing what you experience dur-

ing each part of the process. This exercise can be done with any food—or with activities other than eating. For more thoughts on ways to bring mindfulness into simple, everyday experiences, watch this [video](#) by Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh or this [video](#) of Oprah Winfrey interviewing mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn. You can also sign up for Embrace Your Life, CAPS’ three-part mindfulness-based workshop series. See “Upcoming Events” on page 4 for more info.



Wellness Tip: Exercise

Regular exercise is good for the body. But did you know that it is also one of the most effective ways to improve your mental health?

It can have a profoundly positive impact on stress and many mental health conditions. It also can help improve memory and sleep and boost overall mood. Research indicates that even modest amounts of exercise, when done on a regular basis, can make a difference—you don't have to go all out to feel the effects.



There have been many studies on the impact of regular exercise on depression and anxiety. It can be as effective as

medication in reducing and preventing mild to moderate depression. There are several specific reasons exercise can help with depression and anxiety: Not only does it promote neural growth and reduce inflammation in the brain, it also releases endorphins—powerful brain chemicals that make you feel good. It can

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Upcoming Events

See our [website calendar](#) and [Facebook page](#) for more upcoming events.

WELLNESS WORKSHOPS: CAPS offers a different drop-in workshop every Wednesday from 3:30 to 4:30 pm at our central office. These workshops provide info and tools for being mentally healthier. Topics include self-compassion, mindfulness, healthy thought patterns, how positive psychology relates to academic success, and improving focus. Read more on our [website](#) and [Facebook page](#). No sign-up needed.

EMBRACE YOUR LIFE: EYL is a three-part workshop series that uses mindfulness-based tools to increase insight and self-awareness and build coping. The skills learned in EYL apply to a range of issues, including managing stress and difficult emotions. Each hour-long workshop provides info and experiential skills. Series start on different days throughout the quarter. Read more and see the schedule on our [website](#), or call to get more info and sign up at (831) 459-2628.

LET'S TALK: Let's Talk is a drop-in space where you can have a brief, confidential, one-time chat with a professional CAPS counselor. It's free, and you don't need an appointment—just walk in! Let's Talk is held several afternoons a week at different locations around campus. All registered UCSC students are welcome at all locations of Let's Talk. Read more and see the schedule on our [website](#).

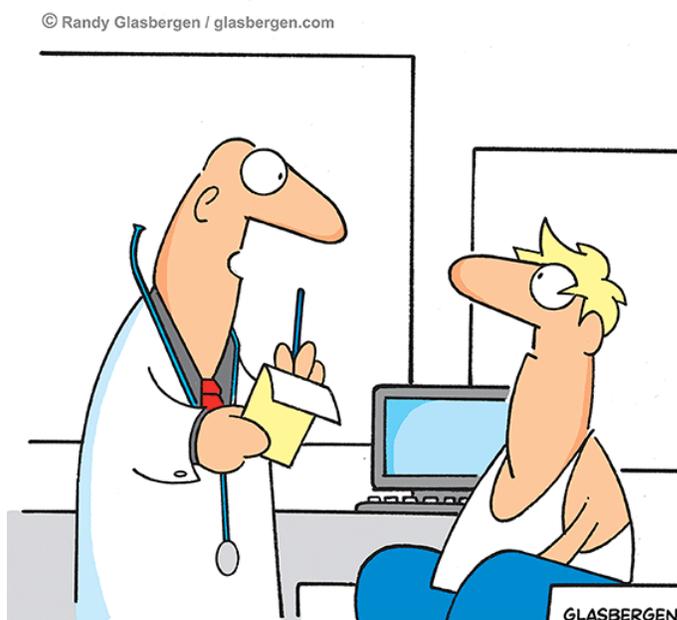
MENTAL HEALTH AND STIGMA: PERSPECTIVES FROM STUDENTS AND PROFESSIONALS: Come hear psychology professor Tony Hoffman and CAPS counselors Kristen Lohse and Mark Ryan talk about mental health in college-age adults, mental health stigma, and mental health in the media. A preview of a student-made video on mental health and stigma will be screened. Free food! Sponsored by CAPS and Cowell College and organized by the CAPS Student Advisory Board. Cowell College Fireside Lounge, Tuesday, April 11, 7 to 8:30 pm. No sign-up needed.

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also boost energy, relieve tension, and serve as a helpful distraction from worries and thoughts that feed depression and anxiety.

You may not be aware that exercise is also an effective tool for managing ADHD. Because physical activity immediately boosts dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin in the brain, it can improve focus and attention. These effects work in a similar way to ADHD medications.

Starting or amping up an exercise routine can seem daunting. Begin with activity that is not too strenuous for just a few minutes a day a few days a week and build up the intensity, frequency, and length of workouts gradually. Getting a friend to work out with you may help with motivation. Be sure to check with a medical professional before starting a new exercise routine if you have any injuries or health conditions that might make exercise problematic for you.



"I'm prescribing exercise. Think of it as a stress pill that takes 30 minutes to swallow."