

# Worrying about election stress can harm your health: Here's what you can do about it

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New research from North Carolina State University finds that simply anticipating stress related to political elections causes adverse physical health effects. However, the study also finds there is something people can do to mitigate those negative health effects.

"This is the first study to show that anticipatory [stress](#) related to elections can harm our health," says Shevaun Neupert, corresponding author of the study and a professor of psychology at NC State. "It's well established that stress can adversely affect our health. This study tells us that thinking we're going to feel stress in the near future can also adversely affect our health."

The study draws on data collected from 140 adults from across the United States. Study participants were asked to fill out an [online survey](#) every day for 30 days, from Oct. 15 to Nov. 13, 2018—the weeks immediately before and after the 2018 [midterm elections](#).

"We found that study participants reported worse physical health on days when they also reported having high levels of anticipatory stress—meaning they expected to experience election-related stress within the next 24 hours," Neupert says. "In other words, simply anticipating possible stress was enough to make them feel worse."

"This study relies on study participants self-reporting about their health, but this is a well-established and widely used approach that has consistently proven to be an objective indicator of physical health and well-being."

The good news is that the researchers found there is a strategy people

can use to help preserve their health, even when anticipating stress. It's called problem analysis.

"Problem analysis, in this case, is when people think critically about why they believe they'll experience election-related stress over the next 24 hours," Neupert says. "For example, if they think they're going to have an argument about the election with an acquaintance in the next 24 hours, they might think about why they're going to have that argument or what that argument will be about. Basically, problem analysis is all about mentally engaging with whatever problem they're anticipating."

Here's how effective problem analysis was: on days when study participants anticipated stress, but were also actively engaging in problem analysis, participants reported no decline in [physical health](#).

"One reason we think problem analysis is so important is that it's a necessary first step for many additional coping strategies," Neupert explains. "For example, problem analysis may help people think of ways to avoid having an argument they're anticipating, or help them think of ways to make the argument less heated."

And these findings were true across the board.

"We controlled for the [political orientation](#) and age of the study participants," says Brittany Johnson, first author of the study and a former undergraduate at NC State. "We controlled for whether they actually experienced election-related stress on the days when they anticipated it. We controlled for the presence of other types of stress."

"No matter how you slice it, anticipating [election](#)-related stress adversely affected health—with the exception of when people were engaged in problem analysis."

The paper, "Combatting Election Stress: Anticipatory Coping and Daily Self-Reported Physical Health," is published in the journal *Psychological Reports*.

**More information:** Brittany K. Johnson et al, Combatting Election Stress: Anticipatory Coping and Daily Self-Reported Physical Health, *Psychological Reports* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00332941231165444](https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941231165444)

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