

Keep Calm & Carry On

Saving Democracy the Smart Politics Way

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Presented by



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The Problem

Politics Is Making Americans Sick

- **99 million suffer major political stress**
- **44 million lose sleep**
- **30 million report worse physical health**
- **11 million have contemplated suicide because of politics**
- **Damage to our health is comparable to that from alcohol**

Why This Matters

“ ”

One of the first pieces of advice I was given when I started organizing is that you can't pour from an empty cup. Far too often, activists wait until their cup is empty with no way to refill it.

Milkayla Tillery
Stanford Daily

**You need to be
mentally
resilient to be
effective**

Advantages of emotional resilience:

- Think clearly
- Act strategically
- Communicate effectively
- Calm others
- Avoid burnout

**50% of activists burn out
and withdraw from politics
permanently**

**You need to
understand why
it's so hard to get
other people into
politics**

Americans are avoiding politics:

- **43% avoid political news**
- **70% avoid disagreement**
- **45% avoid discussing politics with someone they know**

The Solution

**We need to train emotionally
for the resistance with the
same discipline soldiers
prepare physically for war.**

How to Build Emotional Resilience

1. **Boundaries** to prevent emotional overwhelm
2. **Mindfulness** to stay clear-headed in the heat of the struggle
3. **Desensitization** to increase tolerance for common stressors

Boundaries

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Boundaries protect our time and energy, allowing us to focus on what truly matters.

Greg McKeown

Three Types of Boundaries Every Activist Needs

1. **Information Boundaries**
2. **Social Boundaries**
3. **Health Boundaries**

Information Boundaries

- **Regulate news and social media intake**
 - **Limit hours**
 - **Consume only as much as you need**
 - **Choose media that informs**
 - **Avoid outrage media**
 - **Avoid punditry**
- **Seek out good news about the resistance to offset bad**
- **Seek out historical stories of resistance for perspective**

Social Boundaries

- **Anxiety and stress are contagious**
- **Limit time with people who catastrophize and are always in crisis mode**
- **Avoid people focused on what's wrong rather than how to fix it**
- **Avoid anyone who disrespects or devalues you**
- **Set clear expectations for how you want to be treated**
- **Seek out stabilizing relationships: friends, family, therapist, pastor, support group**

Health Boundaries

- Know your limits and stay within them
- Take scheduled breaks
- Don't skip meals
- Keep a regular sleep schedule
- Spend time with friends and family
- Find time to do things you enjoy

Boundaries vs. Avoidance

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Choosing to avoid uncomfortable feelings offers immediate short-term relief, but avoidance can lead to long-term consequences.

Amy Morin

Political Avoidance

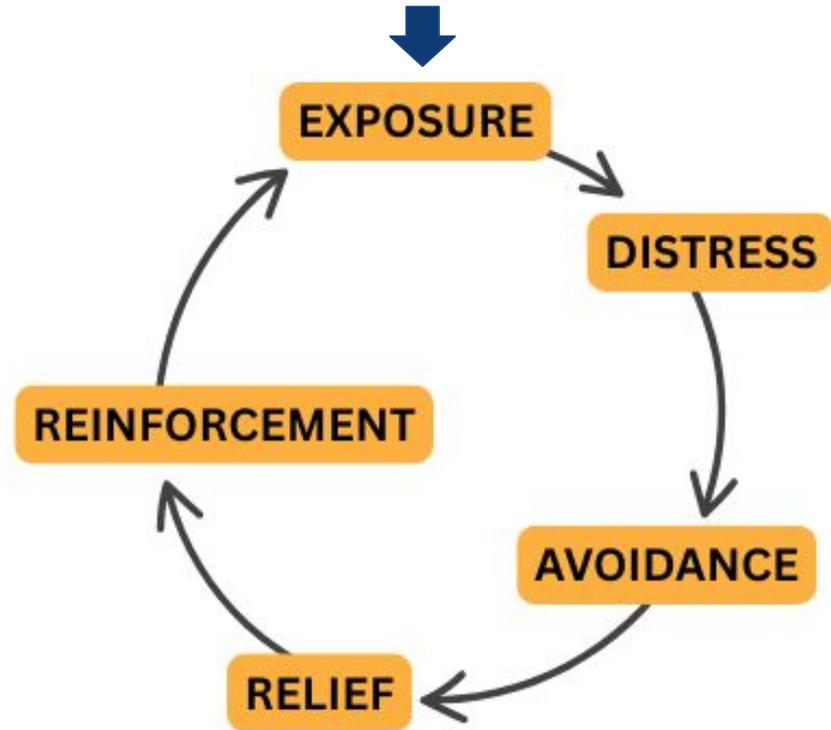
Political avoidance is fleeing...

- **News/media**
- **Information**
- **Conversations**
- **Relationships**
- **Civic responsibilities**

Because they generate emotional distress pertaining to politics.

Political Avoidance Cycle

Avoidance feels good initially—but over time it makes political distress worse



Political Boundaries

Political BOUNDARIES involve choosing how to engage with

- News/media
- Information
- Conversations
- Relationships
- Civic responsibilities

To make political engagement sustainable and effective long-term.

Healthy Boundaries vs. Political Avoidance

- Rational
 - Sees emotional discomfort as normal
 - Aimed at long-term management of emotional discomfort
 - Facilitates political engagement
 - Limits interactions with people who engage disrespectfully
 - Leads to greater emotional resilience over time
- Reactive
 - Sees emotional discomfort as unbearable
 - Aimed at immediate emotional relief
 - Undermines political engagement
 - Limits interactions with people who disagree
 - Leads to greater emotional fragility over time

A Note on Political Avoidance and Privilege

Cis, straight, white people often tell me:

"I cut off my racist family—for my mental health."

But here's the problem:

- **Disengagement is an act of privilege.**
- **Marginalized people don't get to opt out.**

The solution isn't avoidance.

The solution is building the resilience to stay in hard relationships without losing our sanity.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness

- **A way to train your brain to respond, rather than react, no matter what is happening**
- **It creates a mental pause—space to think, choose, breathe**
- **Validated by neuroscience**
- **It's a lifelong practice that improves your nervous system over time**

Strategy #1

Name Your Emotions

- Identify and write down (or speak aloud) each of your emotions
- For example, “I am feeling sad” or “I am feeling angry”
- The more specific you can be, the better
- Naming emotions engages the rational brain, helping you shift to a less emotional, more logical state of mind

Strategy #2

5-4-3-2-1

Grounding

- Look around, identify 5 things you can see
- Touch 4 things around you
- Identify 3 sounds around you
- Take a deep breath through your nose. Identify two smells.
- Notice your mouth. Taste 1 thing near you.

Strategy #3: Meditation

- **Sit and breathe normally**
- **Observe your breath moving in and out**
- **When you get distracted, bring your attention back to your breathing**
- **Notice your thoughts and wandering mind without judgment**
- **Even one minute a day has been shown to reduce emotional reactivity and increase mental clarity**

Desensitization

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What happens when we're willing to feel bad is that, sure enough, we often feel bad - but without the stress of futile avoidance. Emotional discomfort, when accepted, rises, crests, and falls in a series of waves. Each wave washes parts of us away and deposits treasures we never imagined.

Martha Beck

Political Desensitization

- Gradual, structured exposure to political triggers in tolerable amounts
- Increases tolerance over time
- Eventually eliminates fight or flight response to political stimuli
- Repeated safe exposure teaches our brain the trigger isn't dangerous
- Builds resilience so you can stay engaged and clear-headed no matter what

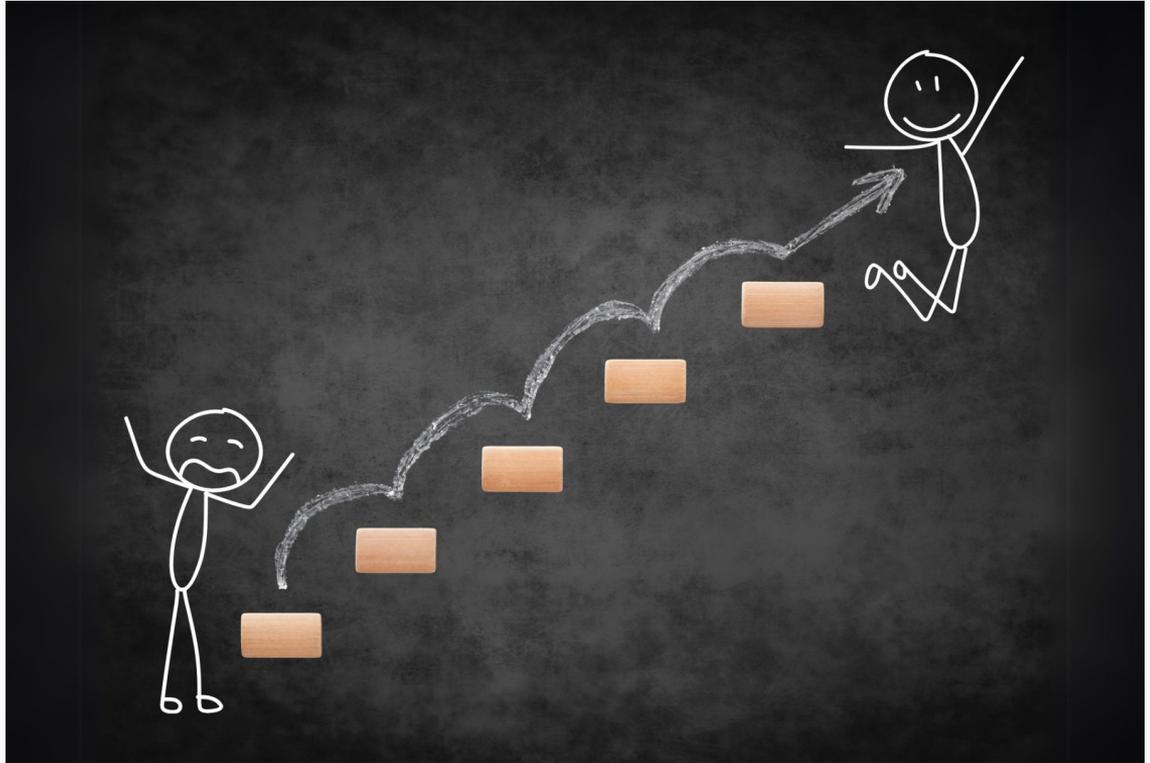
Step 1

List Your Triggers

- **Visual/auditory cues:** Images, voices, videos (e.g., pictures of Trump)
- **Information:** Newspapers, television, radio reports
- **Contrary opinions:** Opinion pieces, social media, Fox News, OANN, statements by others
- **Direct interaction:** Talking with or spending time with people who disagree with you

Step 2
Build an
Exposure
Ladder

Rank your triggers from least to most distressing



Step 3

Climb the Ladder

- 1. Start with a trigger at the bottom of the ladder**
- 2. Expose yourself for a brief period**
- 3. Notice your distress rising**
- 4. Calm yourself with deep breaths**
- 5. End session when your distress falls**
- 6. Repeat until it feels easy**
- 7. Move on to next trigger**

Desensitization Tips

- This is a slow process, don't rush it
- Some triggers may take days, weeks, or longer to overcome
- It's normal to feel frustrated—this is hard work
- Regular practice, rather than forcing yourself to advance, works best
- Work with others to make the process less onerous

Role Playing

Role Playing as Political Exposure

- **Simulates real-world triggers in a safe, controlled environment**
- **Lets you rehearse hard conversations—without risking real relationships**
- **Builds emotional tolerance by practicing what to say and how to stay calm**
- **Can be done with a friend, coach, therapist, or even an AI chatbot**



Angry Uncle AI Chatbot



- Gamified
- Built with OpenAI ChatGPT-4
- Accessible 24/7
- Free and paid models
- Teaches communication skills
- Transcripts are available afterwards for debriefing

Wrap Up

A Call for Emotional Resilience

Politics is making us sick.

We can't organize, lead, or persuade when we're in a constant state of distress.

Avoidance feels protective—but over time, it makes our distress worse.

The way forward isn't withdrawal. It's resilience.

Three tools that make long-haul activism possible:

- **Boundaries** – to protect your energy and focus
- **Mindfulness** – to stay present under pressure
- **Desensitization** – to face political triggers with equanimity

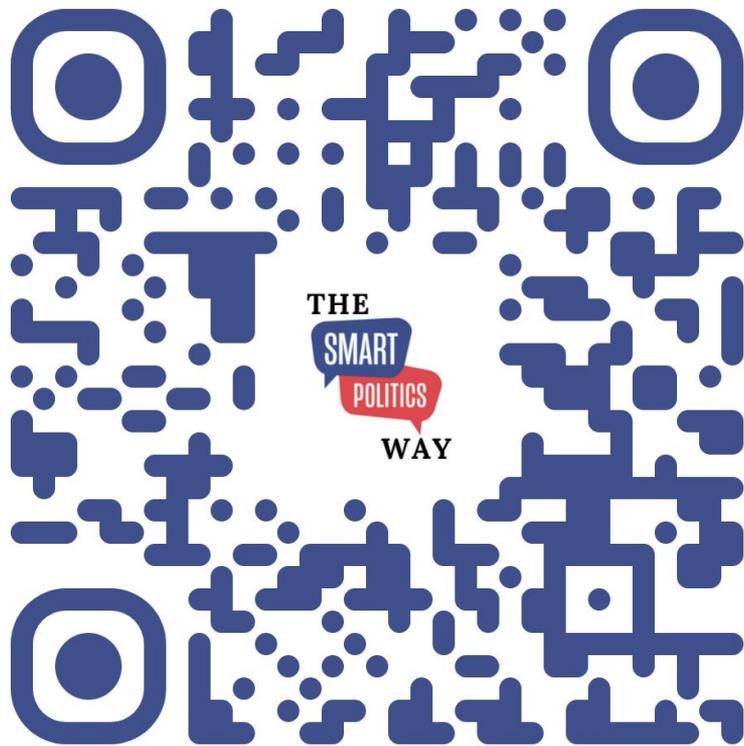
Together, they make it possible to stay in the fight—not just today, but for the long haul.

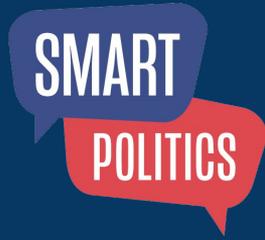
Q & A

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Your essential guide to
staying sane during the
fight for democracy—
no matter how bad
things get.





Learn more

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