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OPEN FORUM

# A doctor’s tips to fight Trump anxiety

**By Ariella Cook-Shonkoff**

In my psychotherapy practice in Berkeley, my clients are struggling. This may come as no surprise, since the San Francisco Bay Area is a progressive enclave where many oppose the Trump 2.0 agenda.

They tell me, for instance, they are frightened and fearful of immigration raids. They’re angry over federal job layoffs and cuts to social safety net programs like Medicare. They’re saddened by the revocation of national monument land protections or by the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement. Many feel increasingly helpless as they watch crackdowns on student protestors, the defunding of universities and the dismantling of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

When changes of this magnitude happen too quickly and overwhelm our capacity to cope, it can feel traumatic. What’s clear is that the Trump administration is deliberately manufacturing collective trauma to disempower its opponents.

Long before it won the election, Trump’s team knew the best way to achieve all of its aims was to steamroll its Project 2025 agenda starting on Inauguration Day. Indeed, Donald Trump unleashed an unprecedented 37 presidential executive orders in his first week in office. He has also declared eight national emergencies in his first 100 days of office — more than any other modern president in the same period.

Nine years of Trump in the political spotlight have gradually infected the mainstream, shaping our country for the worse. According to an international group of mental health experts, the World Mental Health Coalition, Trump’s traits have encouraged the expression of negative qualities, like paranoia, greed, bullying and vilification in American citizens. Psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton describes this psychological transmission of negative beliefs and behaviors from leaders to their citizens as “malignant normality.”

As a result, for many folks, life feels weird right now. While we might have an existential awareness that what’s happening in the nation’s capital is not normal, we’re also experiencing the human instinct to keep going on as though life is normal. We do this by focusing on day-to-day needs and concerns, such as working, paying bills, making dinner and taking care of our families. The term hypernormalization describes the psychological dissonance of functioning “normally” despite the onslaught of political destruction breaking down the social fabric.



Colin Peck/For the S.F. Chronicle

**A family joins the No Kings protest in Oakland on June 14. Collective resilience is part of individual resilience and can help progressives cope with the Trump administration’s onslaught of change.**

One of my clients described this sense of just trying to keep up with all that is happening. “I’m just trying to keep my head above water ... above all of this s—,” she said.

The only problem with this strategy is that our physiology was not designed to endure chronic levels of distress. Eventually, our systems will shut down if we pay too much attention for too long and do not adequately resource ourselves or find the support that we need.

Numerous changes packed into Trump’s budget, national emergency declarations and threats to democratic procedures like government checks and balances can foster helplessness, overwhelm our ability to function and isolate us from each other. That’s exactly the point.

This is why we must do everything in our power to resist psychological disempowerment. We must do this for the sake of human rights and democracy, but also our well-being.

The other day, a client asked me, “What are your other clients doing to get through this? What are you doing?”

It was at this point that I dropped my typical practice of asking exploratory questions and got real. My response to her was, “Three things: One, community. Two, action. Three, care.”

When structural forces are at play, collective resilience is part of individual resilience (not just vice versa). As political scientist Erica Chenoweth posited, all we need is 3.5% of a country’s population to engage in nonviolent protest to topple a government and bring about social change. There is indeed a hopeful story unfolding right now — one of people coming together in their communities to protest a malevolent government that is the extension of its leader.

This is already happening — at the Tesla protests, at the Hands-Off and No Kings Day rallies. And there is more to come. Every dissenting American has an ability (and some might argue a responsibility) to step forward and join the ranks of this national movement moment.

Community is a rich and renewable resource that we simply cannot underestimate.

At the end of the day, hope lies in action. When Trump throws a military birthday party that sends shivers through many Americans, we can find strength in the more than 5 million protestors who attended the No Kings protests in the U.S. and abroad. We can take solace in the fact that thousands of Idaho residents demonstrated in Boise, the capital of a deep red state. Many Americans are fed up right now, and not just in California. No longer

can the grassroots response be minimized as a movement of the coastal elite. Through these actions, people can find their voices and their strength. Through these actions, American citizens can inch closer to that 3.5% threshold.

One of our biggest lifelines is linking up with others. Social connection improves mental health by reducing anxiety and depression. By entering into community, we can find metaphorical homes that widen our sense of inter-being. More than ever, we must remember that our humanity binds us, as much when we are suffering as when we are celebrating.

These connections lead to what experts call “collective effervescence,” an awe-like state that emerges when we are in community with others. You may have felt this before: It’s a profound feeling of synchrony that breeds heart-bursting hope, relief and resolve. To know that others care as much as you do is a huge gift. Looking out for one another, holding compassion for ourselves and others, and acting out of our values buoys one and all.

*Ariella Cook-Shonkoff is a licensed psychotherapist based in Berkeley and the author of the forthcoming book “Raising Anti-Doomers: How to Bring up Resilient Kids Through Climate Change and Tumultuous Times.”*

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR** Submit your letter at [SFChronicle.com/submit-your-opinion](https://www.sfchronicle.com/submit-your-opinion)

# Letters downplay Great Highway traffic

Regarding “The bad and good of traffic since the S.F. Great Highway closure” (Letters to the Editor, SFChronicle.com, July 10): It amazes me that in three of the four letters the Chronicle published about traffic on San Francisco’s west side since the closure of the Great Highway, one writer saw no difference, one was noncommittal and a third actually claimed that traffic had improved.

Those of us not under the influence of the Chronicle’s bias know differently. My wife’s sister and our son and his family live on Sunset Boulevard, and they report that traffic is worse.

When going north on 19th Avenue, every traffic app tells you to abandon it around Ortega Street because it is so clogged.

Later this summer, the city will begin repaving 19th Avenue in both directions. It will be a traffic nightmare with the Great Highway’s closure, thanks to Supervisor Joel Engardio.

Engardio is being recalled, and his billionaire backers have raised \$667,000 to save his seat, more than four times as much as recall supporters. Too bad all that money won’t be enough to save Engardio’s job.

**Kenneth Jones, San Francisco**

**YIMBYism not nasty**

Regarding “When YIMBYs disrespect those who disagree with them, it sounds like right-wing rants” (Letters to the Editor, SFChronicle.com, July 11): How clever of Amelia Marshall to at first sound measured by stating, “It behooves us progressives to quit arguing among ourselves.”

But she shows her true colors with phrases like “domineering attitude” and



Jack Ohman/S.F. Chronicle

“outsiders,” and then ends by referring to the “entitled nastiness of the YIMBY movement.”

I am not involved in any YIMBY organization, just a concerned citizen. The YIMBY movement is not “nasty.” It’s one of the most progressive and compassionate views on helping the less fortunate.

We have one of the highest homeless rates in the country. A significant reason is NIMBY people who manipulate the levers of the California Environmental Quality Act to delay and diffuse plans for large housing projects.

We need to build up, not out. The six-story building in Fairfax referenced in the letter and other projects like it need to be viewed as reasonable if we

are going to create a better state for all.

**Theo Reynolds, Oakland**

**Praise those who serve**

Regarding “‘Carrying the torch’: WWII soldier who died in prison camp in Philippines identified, buried in S.F.” (San Francisco, SFChronicle.com, July 11): Kudos to Tom Li for his masterfully written, heartwarming and heart-wrenching story.

I am so thankful that our military was able to give Army Cpl. Ernest Ulrich a befitting memorial service and burial at the San Francisco Military Cemetery at the Presidio. Things like this are what once made me feel proud to be an American.

I fear that this respect for our military and honoring all of our veterans will soon be a distant memory, one of the reasons this story brought me to tears.

**Ronna Kincaid, Walnut Creek**

**Repeal abuse claim law**

Regarding “This California school district has zero sexual abuse claims. It’s still paying a price” (Editorials, SFChronicle.com, July 12): There is no moral or rational justification in making school districts pay for decades-old crimes.

The students, local taxpayers, teachers and administration are not the responsible parties and should not be punished for terrible crimes they had nothing to do with. The law that allows this should be repealed, not modified at the edges. The state can separately fund services supporting sexual abuse victims.

For once, try to take a pragmatic approach, California — one which does not break the critical local services we all need.

**Jonathan Gole, El Cerrito**

**Park cars in garages**

Regarding “S.F. residents had parked in their driveways for years. Then someone started snitching” (San Francisco, SFChronicle.com, July 13): There’s a simple solution to the driveway problem.

Driveways lead to garages, so park your car in the garage and stop blocking the sidewalk, even if there is enough room for “two wheelchairs to go in tandem down the street.”

**Kevin McCarthy, Oakland**