

Is There Room for Realistic Optimism in a World of Divisiveness?

Part I

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A couple of weeks before the 2024 presidential election, I read an article about citizens of the United States who planned to move out of the country based on the election results. The people interviewed, some planning to vote for Kamala Harris and others for Donald Trump, voiced a similar concern: if their candidate lost, our country would rapidly deteriorate and not be a place where they wanted to live. While some U.S. citizens also held similar feelings before the 2016 and 2020 elections, the intensification of divisiveness, anxiety, and anger during the past eight years has fueled an ever-increasing desperate perspective about the election's outcome.

Within a day of Trump's victory, I heard from people who had voted for Harris and expressed their sadness and notable anxiety about the future. I also read interviews with Harris supporters. Some specifically referred to their concerns for vulnerable groups that were singled out during the campaign, including undocumented immigrants and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Others referred to the loss of reproductive rights for women, not only abortion but the curtailment of in vitro fertilization (IVF). Fears of increased racism and polarization were expressed.

Some of those who contacted me suggested I write an article about what they might do for themselves and their children to cope more effectively with the distress and loss of hope they were experiencing. They noted that their feelings of anger and hopelessness seemed more intense than ever before, as did their worries about what might transpire during the next four years. One observed that while a little more than half the country was rejoicing in the election results, the other half to which she belonged was overwhelmed with sadness and anxiety.

In writing this article, I struggled with what to say that might offer some hope without minimizing the angst that was being felt. I have always been wary when people express false hope, such as: "Don't worry, things will get better" or "There is nothing to worry about." Even if expressed, for instance, by well-meaning parents to ease their children's anxieties, such statements fail to validate the child's distress. Children are keenly aware when significant adults in their lives are consumed with worry and unhappiness. When they are told by these adults that there is nothing to worry about, rather than feeling reassured, the message many are likely to

hear is: “Let’s not talk about this since there is nothing we can do. We are powerless.” Denial of an obvious problem does not lessen anxiety but rather creates an atmosphere in which anger and despair become more pronounced.

As I write these words, I am reminded of several of my previous columns, two of which stand out given their relevance to this article. One was written in October 2020 and described [“The Stockdale Paradox.”](#) For those unfamiliar with the story of Admiral James Stockdale, he was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam for more than seven years and endured repeated torture. In an interview with Jim Collins, author of the book *Good to Great*, Stockdale observed that the prisoners who had the greatest struggles were “the optimists” who continued to tell themselves they would be released by Christmas; when that did not occur they would select another upcoming holiday by which time they expected to be freed. As holiday after holiday passed, their hopes waned. Stockdale recounted that eventually “they died of a broken heart.”

When I first read Stockdale’s words, I recommended that qualifiers be added to the word “optimist,” qualifiers used by those researching the concept of optimism, namely, “realistic” and “unrealistic.” As one example, Heidi Grant, a social psychologist at Columbia University, wrote, “Realistic optimists believe they will succeed but also believe they have to *make success happen*—through things like effort, careful planning, persistence, and choosing the right strategies. They recognize the need for giving serious thought to how they will deal with obstacles.” Grant advised the presence of “an honest assessment of the challenges that await you,” citing studies that indicated the poor outcome experienced by “unrealistic optimists,” those who believed that “*success will happen to them.*”

The [second article was written in November 2016](#), shortly after Trump won the election against Hillary Clinton. I had not read this article recently and when I did, I thought about how many of the suggestions I offered in 2016 were equally relevant today. I cited the “stressed-out electorate,” the anxiety of vulnerable groups such as undocumented immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community, and an increase in racially or religiously motivated acts of violence.

In the 2016 article I reflected on the core values and principles that have guided my personal and professional lives and how these values might provide clarity, hope, and direction during challenging times. As I did in 2016, I have selected several strategies to discuss in this column with a focus on what parents and other caregivers might say and do to help sad and anxious children and teens become more resilient.

I plan to devote next month's article to the actions we can take to nurture resilience in our adult lives. In the past, I typically first discussed the importance of our own self-care given the belief that if we are to help our children we must ensure that we maintain our emotional and physical well-being. The reason I decided to start by examining what we can do to help our children is based on the many questions I've received during the past few days about assisting children in managing their distress.

Personal Control: A Critical Dimension of Emotional Well-Being

Anxiety is intensified at any age when we begin to believe there are no actions we can initiate to solve a problem. A sense of helplessness is aroused, which increases anxiety, making it even more challenging to call upon our abilities to confront the problem. In essence, a negative cycle is created that perpetuates the existing struggles. If this cycle is to be broken in children, we must promote an outlook of personal control—an essential component for restoring a sense of hope and empowerment.

Many of my readers are aware that when I refer to personal control I often cite the words of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl as expressed in his remarkable book *Man's Search for Meaning*. The following is one of my favorite quotes:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from us but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Strategies to Strengthen Personal Control

I first read Frankl's book many years ago in graduate school. Given his insights and wisdom, I have re-read the book six or seven times. I try to imagine being in a concentration camp and still having the strength and courage to advocate that we have more control than we may realize in terms of our attitude and response to horrific situations. This perspective should not be interpreted to suggest it is easy to identify and apply what we have control over, especially during painful, dark moments in our lives. Rather, I believe that even during these moments there are strategies we can use to help our children develop personal control that allows them to shift from a passive to an active position. They include:

Model resilience for your child. Children of all ages are keen observers of our behavior. They recall what we may have said or done during the seemingly endless election campaign. Did they witness us expressing a doomsday scenario if our candidate lost? And, if our candidate did lose, has this doomsday scenario continued? I am not suggesting we remain silent about our thoughts and emotions since such a stance will not be helpful to our children. Rather, I am recommending that we consider the following questions that I often pose when discussing empathy:

“What words do I hope my children use to describe me, especially during these difficult times?”

“What do I *intentionally* say or do so that they are likely to use the words I hope they use to describe me?”

As we consider what to say, we must take into account our children's ages and developmental levels in order for our communication to be as effective as possible.

Validate what your child or teen is communicating. Validation does not mean we agree with what our children are saying but rather that we are attempting to understand their point of view. Having conducted many sessions with families in my clinical practice, I have seen well-meaning parents fail to validate what their child or teen is expressing.

As an illustration, Lisa, a young teenage girl, had the courage in a family meeting to say that she had been feeling depressed for several years. Her mother responded, “But there’s no reason for you to be depressed. You have friends, live in a nice home, and we (parents) love you.” The mother’s attempt to give her daughter reasons for not being depressed served to repudiate what her daughter had said. Not surprisingly, her daughter did not want to say anything else.

Brett, a shy seven-year-old boy, was exhorted by his parents, especially his father, that there was no reason for him to be shy and that he had to learn to say hello to people. Brett replied in a remarkable way, “Don’t you know that if I could say hello to people, I would. I just can’t.”

Earlier in this article, I advised that if a child or teen is upset with election results, the child’s feelings should not be discounted with hollow encouragement such as “Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

How might adults reply in these different situations? My answer leads to the next point.

After validating a child's feelings or thoughts, encourage a problem-solving approach.

A more empathic response on Lisa's mother's part might have been, "I'm glad you could tell us how depressed you've been feeling. One of the reasons we're seeing Dr. Brooks is to try and figure out what gets you depressed and what we all can do so that you feel less sad." The words "figure out" suggest there is a path to helping Lisa cope with her feelings of depression.

In a follow-up meeting with the parents of Brett, we discussed an alternative response to their initial one. It was, "We know it's not easy for you to say hello to people you don't know. It's not easy for many kids. Maybe together we can think about what will make it easier." This statement acknowledges and normalizes ("it's not easy for many kids") Brett's struggles and, similar to my comments about Lisa, communicates that there are steps that can be taken to help Brett feel more comfortable in social interactions.

Children or teens who are feeling overwhelmed by election results (or any disturbing event in their lives) should not be met with false reassurance. Even young children can sense when such communications occur. A first response might be to ask the child what they are most worried about. Whether or not the child is able to identify their worries, parents or other adults might say, "A lot of people worry about what's going to happen when the person they want to win the election doesn't. There are also a lot of people who are happy that the other person won. We have to do our best to find ways for all of us to work together." If we're speaking with teens we might add, "We should also think about what we can do to help our candidates in future elections."

The exact words used by parents or other adults to validate a child's message and encourage a problem-solving approach will vary from one child and situation to the next, but what is important is the parent's empathy and calmness when speaking with the child or teen.

I realize that if children are living with an undocumented immigrant, especially if that person is a parent, the threat of deportation produces an uninterrupted, intense level of sadness, anger, and anxiety that is difficult to manage. Given the focus on deportation in the recent presidential campaign and in the days since the election, there are few words undocumented immigrant parents can say that will be comforting. Many parents in this situation will find it difficult to express hope. Any semblance of reassurance would need to come from communities that offer support to families who have been working here for years, pay taxes, and yet face deportation.

Encourage engagement in “contributory” activities. I have long advocated the therapeutic benefits for individuals of all ages when engaging in activities that provide a sense of meaning and purpose to one’s life. With teens, such an activity might take the form of volunteering in future political campaigns or volunteering for organizations that improve the lives of others such as food banks. Young children can accompany their parents in delivering meals for people who find it very difficult to leave their homes.

The uncertainty (or, for some, the certainty) of what will transpire when the new administration takes office on January 20 will continue to produce anxiety even as we attempt to use a problem-solving approach and provide time to enrich the lives of others. However, we must never lose sight of Frankl’s perspective of personal control and realize that even small steps can lessen a feeling of helplessness and reinforce a sense of empowerment, especially in improving our community, even in our small corner of the world.

A Concluding Remark

Regardless of our political leanings and what candidate we voted for, I think it’s crucial that we avoid “demonizing” those who have a different political view than ours. In subscribing to a realistic optimism position, I believe that the vast majority of people desire to see a reduction in the current divisiveness and polarization that dominate our world. Although it might sound like a platitude, the more we can attempt to be empathic and see the world through the eyes of others, the greater the possibility of strengthening our compassion and understanding.

The day after the election, I spoke at The Children’s School, a small independent school in Stamford, CT for children ages three to eight. I have spoken at this very welcoming school on a number of occasions, always with teachers in the afternoon and parents in the evening. I found it comforting, given the strong post-election emotions, to have an opportunity to share my thoughts about nurturing caring, self-discipline, and resilience with such attentive audiences.

Last night, I received a thank you letter from Maureen Murphy, the Head of School, who serves as a wonderful model of compassion and caring and respecting and nurturing the hearts and minds of young children. In her letter, Maureen wrote that she saw a social media post by psychologist Adam Grant that resonated with my theme of empathy. I will end this article with Grant’s quote; it would be encouraging if we all adopted Grant’s perspective, especially those in positions of power. I look forward to sharing additional thoughts about supporting realistic optimism in next month’s article.

Grant wrote:

My new favorite word: sonder. It's the profound awareness that every person you encounter has experienced a lifetime of hopes, fears, loves, and heartaches that you'll never know. Each moment of sonder is a reminder to appreciate how little we truly grasp about others' lives.

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