

Managing the post-election letdown

By Steven Hendlin, Ph.D.

Finally, after all the anticipation, the election results are in. But keep your seatbelts fastened, folks, because the frenzied ride isn't over yet: Here comes your post-election let-down. Even if your candidate won, you may be affected, as sometimes the only thing worse than not getting what you want, is getting it.

Political pundits, talking heads of all persuasions, and the electorate all perceived high stakes in this election. All around town I heard people concerned about the outcome at national, state and local levels. With the political sleaze-ball tactics spiking off the Richter Scale, and the polemics reaching an unusually feverish pitch, we were reminded repeatedly how our polarized electorate held our future in their balloting hands.

Whether it was who's sitting in the Oval Office, the chance of third strike offenders being freed from prison, or what to do with the prime Marinapark land on Balboa Island, this time, they told us, we're playing for keeps. We've been deluged by the media, unable to escape the message that terrible things *can* and *will* happen if the "wrong" man wins. This was punctuated by doomsday threats from Osama bin Laden and his cohorts. Lions and tigers, and bears—oh my!

You know the litany: The economy, terrorism, taxes, health care costs, gay marriages, illegal aliens, Supreme Court appointees, secure borders, better schools, stronger defense, and preserving Social Security. Not to mention a nasty foreign war, in which they got the "rockets red glare and the bombs bursting in air" part right but miscalculated picking up the pieces after the destruction. The world agrees: We're between Iraq and a hard place.

Typically mild-mannered and rational voices from coast to coast were caught in the fray. They created an uproar, telling us one candidate was is an incompetent cowboy intent on making up for his father's lack of follow-through while the other was into exaggerating his courage and heroics while he rides on the (mink) coattails of his fabulously wealthy wife. Many voters have had definite opinions, while others remained ambivalent. But hardened voters who have seen it all think the differences between the candidates are substantial, even if more apparent than actual.

From my view as a psychologist, this looks like the perfect set up for an emotional crash. Big expectations lead to big disappointments. If you've got a lot invested emotionally in winning and "your" candidate lost, get ready for your post-election emotional let-down—and maybe even a short-term depression.

What can you do to manage your post-election let-down? First, accept that it is a normal reaction to bitter disappointment, especially if you care deeply who wins the race and believe that your own life will be drastically altered by the outcome. Expect to feel irritation and anger, which, if you are not careful, may be displaced onto those around you at work and at home. Try to identify this anger as being related to your disappointment reaction and not something that is caused by other people.

You may get anxious and feel dread if you believe that your personal world is going to be negatively impacted because of who won. And you may even experience a depressive reaction lasting days, weeks or longer, where you ruminate on the miserable long-term consequences of the next four years with the "wrong" man.

You may be preoccupied for the next few days or even weeks with election-related thoughts, doomsday scenarios, disgust for the system or fantasies about wanting to escape to Canada or the South Pacific. Let all of these thoughts and fantasies come and go, not feeling the need to obsess on any of them. Remember that having the thought does not make it real.

Challenge your all-or-nothing thinking that the next four years will determine the future of the country or deeply impact the rest of the world. It's rarely been true before—only when great leaders collided with the destiny of circumstance and opportunity—and it won't be true now. Recall that the three branches of government were created to insure checks and balances and that many attenuating factors limit the power of one man or administration to dictate policy.

We know that no matter who's in office, decisions may always lead to unintended consequences. The spiraling out of control of the Iraq war is but one example of this doctrine. Also, keep in mind that our system tends to force consensus and slows down change so that wild political swings are unlikely.

Your individual life will most likely *not* be irrevocably shaped by the decisions of the wining candidate for the next four years, no matter what the pundits try to convince you with their rhetoric. Keep your perspective by remembering the non-political things in your life that really matter.

Try not to jump too far into the future with catastrophic thinking about all the things that go wrong because of one administration's decisions. When you find your thoughts off into the future and filled with dread, bring yourself back to the present and go about the daily business of finding meaning in your own life and the lives of those you care about.

To manage your post-election let-down, make sure you get enough sleep, watch your diet, and don't forget to exercise to help deal with your anger, irritation, anxiety, and despair. Lastly, make your thoughts and feelings about the election known to others by writing letters, talking to friends and family, and doing your best to gain the larger perspective that *this too, shall pass*.