

# What we have to fear is fear itself

As a psychiatrist, my job is to help people reduce their pain. In my practice and with family and friends, I am currently seeing people who are experiencing a specific kind of pain: pain caused by fear. We are amid what appears to be a massive shift in how our government operates. The Trump administration's jarring policies have not only left us all politically unsettled and worried about our democracy; they have also tanked the American stock market in a historic tumble that some economists fear is plunging us into a recession, or worse. For most people I encounter, these developments engender terror, and its companion emotions, sadness and anger.

For this article, I interviewed people from across the political and socioeconomic spectrums about how they are coping with the turbulent emotions that arise in response to feelings of helplessness and loss of control. For some, a healthy response came last weekend, with people taking to the streets across the country and right here at Five Corners to shout to President Trump and Elon Musk: "Hands off!"

The protest may have been communal, but the news cycles are, for many people, debilitating. One person put it this way: "When I think about it, I am in a state of high alarm. So I hide away from the news. It is overwhelming and heartbreaking. The immigrants, some LGBTQ people I know are so frightened, it seems that people have been given permission to let out their meanest instincts." She now gets most of her news from humorous late night TV. The humor leaves her feeling less overwhelmed.

Martha Beck, the sociologist and anxiety expert, writes about the dangers of watching "the weasel dance." Apparently, weasels mesmerize rabbits by doing a bizarre and clownlike dance, eventually dancing right up to the confused rabbits, which they then kill and eat.

Beck compares the weasel dance to the way being flooded with confusing and bizarre news can leave us stunned and passive. "Weird political events unfold by the hour," she writes. "Follow the news, but don't stare at the dance."

Another popular strategy is focusing close to home. A healthcare administrator told me that he shuts out the sense of helplessness by focusing on the ways he can be productive: "I focus on the things that I can control, because all of these things in the world that I am anxious about are completely out of my control. I run toward embracing and conquering the things at work that I have been avoiding. It is enormously satisfying to take control where I can have an impact."

An 88-year-old math professor and staunch conservative told me this: "When you get older, you don't worry about the things that you used to. There are baroque concerns and real worries. A real worry is that there is a leak in my roof. A baroque concern is, 'The Chinese have nuclear weapons.' With baroque worries, you are not in control of what will happen. And you can't predict what will happen. So I focus on the things that are real concerns in my life." Watch here:

## Stoat Hypnotizes Rabbit | World's Deadliest



Some find it helpful to take action where they can to address the issues that concern them. I spoke, for example, with a year-round Islander and activist who worked in the Clinton and Obama administrations. While she describes herself as “heartsick over the very real, immediate and frightening destruction of our government,” she finds that she feels better if she takes at least one action daily to push back against what she describes as “a coup bolstered by lies.”

She signs petitions, gives money, makes phone calls, writes letters, and supports resistance efforts like the “national economic blackout,” and she was among those Islanders who gathered at Five Corners for a protest last weekend. She thinks about the risk of getting herself targeted as an enemy of the state, and then reflects, “If I don’t take risks, I can’t expect others to take risks. And I want judges, politicians, lawyers, and everyone else to take the risk of taking a stand. I won’t give in to passivity and depression.”

I am reminded of what FDR said in his first inaugural address: “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” And in this era, the fear seems to permeate deeply, among immigrants in particular.

At Martha’s Vineyard Community Services, we assure all of our clients that protecting their confidentiality is paramount, and we do our best to alleviate the fear they have of enrolling in programs or accessing medical services. We assure them that we are bound by HIPAA in our clinical services, which means that we cannot disclose that any person has accessed services without their written consent. Documenting the legal status of immigrants is not part of any medical record. No nonpatient is allowed to go beyond the waiting room at Island Counseling Service without explicit permission or a judicially approved search warrant.

The immigrant community, estimated at 20 percent of the Island’s year-round population, is currently particularly prone to fear and sadness. Many of those I’ve spoken with are U.S. citizens, and still feel relatively safe. But almost all have family and friends who are undocumented and experiencing terror. Recent rumors that ICE raids on the Island were imminent prompted many immigrants to stay home from work and

school; many didn't show up for appointments at Community Services and doctor's offices, and generally kept off of the roads. I was told about a child who was so frightened that she stayed up most of the night crying.

One immigrant, a professional who arrived here just after 9/11 in 2001, told me that it was even more frightening then than it is today. ICE set up roadblocks, and if a person were caught, there was a likelihood of being sent immediately to an immigration center. Just seeing a police car or even an animal control vehicle could send his fellow immigrants into a state of panic. After 14 years in limbo, he is now a citizen. He reminds himself and frightened members of the immigrant community that none of us know what the future will bring. He believes that immigrants need to decide either to return to a country where they feel more comfortable, or just learn to live with the threat without letting it dominate their lives. Living in a constant state of fear he says, is annihilation.

He shared a Portuguese saying with me: "We kill a lion today, and we tie up the bear to worry about tomorrow." In other words, every day has its own problems, and we don't need to add to them by worrying about tomorrow. He added, "The real issues that we face every day are the same as they have been since the day that I arrived here — finding jobs, housing, taking care of our children and families. I only worry about what is in front of me and give the rest to God. I can't do anything else." He advises his fellow immigrants, "Go back to doing the hard work that our community is known for. Keep doing your part to make the world a better place."

A colleague on Nantucket had a refreshing perspective. "Faith sustains me," she said. "Faith that everything that is occurring is part of a natural cycle of the ebbing and flowing of the human condition. Look at the natural world. It is all about violence and survival. When we mammals are in a state of terror, we are relieved when we take action, and demand control. As a species, we are incredibly resilient. We went through two world wars, and we learned from them. It plays out in the world over and over again. My goal is to stay awake and learn what I need to learn; to connect to my values of empathy and universal compassion."

From my perspective as a psychiatrist, it is clear that there is nothing good about being in a state of high alert, except in rare circumstances. If you have a history of trauma, especially early-life trauma, you are vulnerable to going into a fight-or-flight mode. Once you are in that state, the parts of the brain that are engaged in reason, learning, self-care, planning, and pleasure become inactive.

Many of us are grieving an attack on our democracy and the loss of truths we held to be self-evident. We sense that the country we love is changing right before our eyes, and fear that the values we share as fellow Americans are eroding. But we cannot become incapacitated by the fear and sorrow that arise from these events; we must all find ways to stay strong and continue moving forward.

### **Suggested steps to managing fear**

Many Americans are grieving the loss of the country as they knew it, and the collective ideals held in common with fellow Americans. It has been suggested that there are seven stages that people go through as they grieve: shock, denial, anger, bargaining (or looking for a way out), depression, testing solutions, and acceptance. While these stages ebb and flow, and are often intertwined, in healthy grieving there is a general movement toward testing solutions as the pain, anger, and shock subside. It is good to remember when you're feeling despairing, hopeless, and terrified, that these feelings will pass. And meanwhile, there are many ways to take control of your life.

Here are eight concrete suggestions:

- Take a deep breath, and then run toward the monster that has no teeth. Or, as the Rev. Cathlin Baker, minister of the First Congregational Church of West Tisbury, has advised congregants, “Do the good that is yours to do.”
- Sing and dance and find sources of awe, such as stargazing; ocean, desert and mountain walks; and forest bathing. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/12/well/take-a-walk-in-the-woods-doctors-orders.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CForest%20bathing%2C%E2%80%9D%20or%20immersing%20yourself%20in%20nature%2C%20is,a%20way%20to%20combat%20stress%20and%20improve%20health>. And while you’re at it, consider “soft rebellion” by practicing joy and refusing the script of fear.
- Spend time with kids and pets. Connect with friends, and accept that you are unable to impact a crisis alone.
- Be kind and help others. Especially, be kind to yourself. Have compassion for the parts of you who are frightened. Listen to others with respect, and treat everyone with the dignity that we all deserve. If it doesn’t feel overwhelming, be curious about the perspectives of others, even if their opinions are different from yours.
- Limit or eliminate social media (even if it is sympathetic to your point of view.) And limit exposure to horrible news — 15 minutes of headlines daily, max (or none). Get news from as unbiased, noninflammatory sources as possible. Try to focus, for example, on the food, science and wellness sections of the paper each morning.
- Remember that throughout human history, governments and political movements come and go. Nothing is permanent. Work on accepting that the future is always uncertain.
- Monitor your level of alarm. If you are in a state of alarm, change your internal channel. When political discussions send you into a state of distress, change the subject.
- If you are an immigrant, know that much of what you hear may be bluster or misinformation. Consider talking with an immigration lawyer who can gum up the deportation process if need be. Know your legal rights. Get a “red card.”

See [https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/23/us/immigration-red-card.html?campaign\\_id=2&emc=edit\\_th\\_20250224&instance\\_id=148291&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi\\_id=26530256&segment\\_id=191765&user\\_id=8f7c46ed55802c359158ec6824d3be13](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/23/us/immigration-red-card.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20250224&instance_id=148291&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi_id=26530256&segment_id=191765&user_id=8f7c46ed55802c359158ec6824d3be13)

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