

A SPIRIT THAT IS NOT AFRAID



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Auburn students and the mental tolls of the polls



Aubie speaks with a mental health professional, via the Student Counseling and Psychological Services website. Photo by [Ethan Stamper | Campus Reporter](#) | The Auburn Plainsman

By [Ella Walton | Newsletter Editor](#) and [Sam Vise | Assistant Culture Editor](#)

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As Auburn students prepare to populate the polls, many are feeling stressed about the upcoming election. The pressure to be informed, navigate differing opinions and avoid tensions all while still managing academic responsibilities has left many feeling overwhelmed.

According to "[Stress in America 2019](#)," a report by the American Psychological Association on the different sources of Americans' stress, 56% of U.S. adults cited the 2020 election as a stressor more than one year before the election.

Stressful situations cause physical changes in one's brain. It can negatively impact the brain's frontal lobe, which is the largest part of the brain that controls thought, action and emotion.

"For people that are experiencing stress, what ends up happening is that there's kind of a lowering of the capacity within the executive functioning area," said Michael Wells, a senior staff clinician at Student Counseling and Psychological Services. "I'm not trying to say that somebody is becoming intellectually defective – that's not what

I'm saying at all. What I'm saying is that [the] individual, they start to kind of not see things that they can do [to support themselves in the moment] or [struggle to] process information in the right way.”

Wells explained that when in stressful situations, the body produces cortisol, also known as the stress hormone. While cortisol can be helpful in fight-or-flight situations, the constant production of this hormone only causes more stress.

Elections can be stressful for many reasons. Wells observed that logistical challenges, such as figuring out how to get to the polls, can be a source of stress for some voters. This can be true for out-of-state students who may not be registered to vote in Alabama.

He added that a significant source of stress is the realization that candidates' policies could have a direct impact on one's well-being.

“[SCPS] has definitely worked with individuals who've come in talking about their fear about the upcoming election, regardless of whatever the outcome may be. They're afraid of it. And there have been people that have mentioned that they're kind of afraid of all the worldly conflicts that are happening and how that could influence our election, or influence how we view our election,” Wells said.

Wells' tips for staying mentally well during election season include practicing healthy coping skills, such as nature walks or box breathing.

Chris Correia, the department chair for psychological sciences at Auburn, shared similar sentiments regarding the stress of election season and tips for staying well.

“Elections can be really exciting and interesting, but they can also be very stressful. [Elections] are worth thinking about and kind of worth preparing for in some ways, the same way you might prepare for any stressful event,” Correia said.

He believes it is important to prioritize one's mental health during elections or any stressful situation. He emphasized the importance of maintaining healthy eating, sleeping and exercising habits, which all play a key role in mental well-being.

Elections and politics in general are polarizing and can cause a rift amongst people. Correia urged students not to let political differences get in the way of their relationships. He suggested setting boundaries between peers and family members.

“[Elections] can be one of those things that brings out the worst in people. So just keep that in mind, that people are more than just their political views,” Correia said.

He also suggested setting boundaries with oneself.

“On the one hand, you might want to get really involved. You want to vote, you want to be curious, you want to do research, you might want to volunteer, you might want to attend political events – and that's all great if that's what you're interested in,” Correia said. “It's also perfectly fine to say, ‘I'm just not going to pay that much attention to this.’”

He believes it is important to decide how much election content one wants to consume and then set boundaries around that.

Like Correia said, it is up to the individual to decide how involved they want to be.

Natalie White, senior in psychology, described the sense of urgency many feel when it comes to the election. She recalled the feeling of realizing that the election does affect her now, as she is an adult able to cast her vote.

“It's not just like a hypothetical that my parents talk about now. You're like, ‘Oh, wait. This is gonna affect me too. I need to be well informed,’” White said.

She noted that the upcoming election is a source of anxiety for many students who are voting for the first time.

“The stress of a political event like that, especially when you have a voice. A lot of it is kind of just sitting back and watching it unfold, so you don't have that much control over it. Events where you don't have that control are even more stressful, which I mean, on top of school, can be a really negative source of stress in students' lives,” White said.

Jordan Burko-Macatee, the assistant director of the Auburn University Psychological Services Center, wants to normalize a wide range of election-related emotions and emphasize that many students are experiencing the same feelings.

“People can experience a really wide range of emotions in response to a major event, or something like the election. So on one end, I think there's people that might experience a lot of worry, sadness, even despair, concern, frustration — and then on the other end, we might also have people experiencing excitement, like feeling inspired or feeling hopeful or feeling really passionate, and it's really common to experience a lot of these different emotions,” Burko-Macatee said.

Burko-Macatee noted that, because people know in advance that this season will be a stressful time, it allows everyone the opportunity to practice preventative self-care, whether that means being intentional about media consumption or scheduling time for oneself to disconnect.

“We can plan in advance for it,” Burko-Macatee said. “We can be really mindful and thoughtful about what we're going to do to take care of ourselves, rather than this being something that's just coming out of the blue.”

For students feeling stressed and seeking support, [Auburn University's Student Counseling and Psychological Services](#) offer free individual sessions, group sessions and a variety of other resources.

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