

# How to Stay Sane if Trump is Driving You Insane: Advice From a Therapist



[Robin Chancer](#)

Behavioral Specialist, sensitive social worker, immigration enthusiast, ready to laugh and cry at a moment's notice.

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“I feel like I’ve lost faith in humanity, in our country, in myself,” a client told me recently. “Is this depression, or is this the election?”

“Good question,” I replied. The truth is, individual psychology is hugely influenced by political realities. Many of us feel insane right now because our world is not sane. Current events are very much at odds with our natural optimism, and our belief in human goodness and progress.

What made us so optimistic in the first place? Our nation was founded on idealistic, positive principles: human worth and dignity, the inevitability of progress, and the goodness of the human collective. Alex de Tocqueville in the early 19th century [described Americans’ remarkable optimism](#) with interest. As [an article in the Atlantic](#) described in 2015, Americans have maintained our unusually sunny outlook even through our darkest

hours. If we have a national ideology, it could be encapsulated in Obama’s farewell address, with the assertion, “I truly believe we are going to be okay.”

From such elevated hope has come a long, hard fall. We find ourselves in a darkening political climate in which corruption, hatred, exclusion, and paranoia are prominent. Many are experiencing despair and anxiety like never before, judging by the [increase in calls to suicide and crisis hotlines](#), and [anecdotal reports from therapists](#). A national trauma, just like a personal one, is as disorienting as it is terrifying. It makes us question everything we thought we knew. Two questions must be answered in order to heal:

1. How can we integrate this crisis into our understanding of the world?
2. What do we do now?

Our anxious minds are caught in the dissonance between our belief in progress and our current political hellscape. We must understand that **the belief in human progress is a myth, with historical and religious context, and it is no longer serving us**. Its roots trace back to [Enlightenment philosophy](#), whose major thinkers believed civilization would progress toward perfection if humans were free to use their reason.

Optimism is also a coping mechanism. It can buoy us from the dark waters of suffering. When harsh reality is too much to take, clinging to a better future can help us carry on.

Our [American brand of Christianity has adopted this narrative](#) as well. Many grow up hearing statements like, “People are inherently good.” “Everything happens for a reason.” “Do the right thing, and everything will work out.” “God has a plan. I can leave everything in God’s hands.”

Such statements are offered as a salve for life’s inevitable pain, but they have downsides. How many of us have wanted to punch a wall after a statement like, “He’s in a better place”? Positive thinking, when misplaced, is infuriating and unhelpful. **Believing that “everything will be okay” sets us up for despair, because each new time things are not okay, we feel beaten down again.** [Optimism is not always healthy](#). It can make us [complacent, fatigued](#), and [detached from whole of our psyches](#).

There are times when optimism is not appropriate or possible, and this is one of those times. Our President is delusional, lying, or ignorant; disastrous climate change and war with North Korea loom; marginalized people in our society are suffering. **Faced with these calamities, catastrophic thinking is a rational response.** History teaches us that many arcs of history did not [“bend toward justice.”](#) The 65 million people currently displaced worldwide are tragic examples. We need only speak to a Native American to understand that collapse is entirely possible.

Instead of blind faith in progress, I offer a specific, practical system useful for maintaining mental health in a paranoid, post-positive world.

## **STEP 1: RADICAL ACCEPTANCE AND DIALECTICAL THINKING**

“The path out of hell is through misery. By refusing to accept the misery that is part of climbing out of hell, you fall back into hell.” – *Marsha Linehan, founder of Dialectical Behavior Therapy.*

[Radical acceptance](#), as understood [in Dialectical Behavior Therapy](#) (DBT), distinguishes between pain and suffering. Pain cannot be avoided. Fighting against pain, however, is what drives the majority of our suffering. Painful reality can be fully (i.e. “radically”), non-judgmentally accepted. When something terrible happens, our natural reaction is to fight against it: *“This should not have happened! I can’t believe it! I would do anything to go back in time.”* Fighting our agony won’t change it, however. We are better served by accepting what happened, allowing it to change us, and working with what is left.

In response to our current nightmare, we can wish it were different and stay miserable, or we can accept our new world. **To be clear, this does not mean condoning what happened. It simply means coming to terms with what is, and with what we cannot control.**

Of course, some circumstances can be changed with the right tools. There is much we cannot change, however. We cannot change that Donald Trump was elected. We cannot change that he is (very likely) [pathologically narcissistic](#). We cannot change that many Americans are loyal to him in spite of his hatred, or even because of it. We see more clearly the greed rampant in the GOP establishment. We do well to accept these truths so that we can move forward, rather than paralyzing ourselves with shock and outrage.

You might be wondering, “*How can I just accept these things? They are not okay!*” Remember that acceptance is not condoning. **To accept is not to say, “*This is okay.*” It is to say, “*This is what is.*”** Notably, radical acceptance often drops us into a state of grief, as we come to terms with hard realities. We may find ourselves in a place of deep sadness. If so, allow time to feel and honor it.

**We do well to accept that Trump is as bad as we think.** He consistently demonstrates mental instability, greed, and aggression. I continue to hear responses to his policies such as, “How could he do this? I can’t believe it.” [Interviewers continue their efforts to get him to say rational things](#). His Tweets are re-Tweeted with rebuttals and indignation. **This is energy wasted.**

Don’t allow his Tweets to play over and over in your mind. If you read them, register them as insane, and move on to the next moment. Even better, pay little attention to his stunts. Don’t waste your energy getting riled up. Once we fully accept that Trump does evil, unhinged things (strategic lying, degrading/exploiting people) because he is evil and unhinged, we can get beyond his antics, anticipate them, and have a clear mind to plan our next move.

**Acknowledge that greed and racism are part of our nation’s fabric.** We cannot wish them away. We cannot choose blindness disguised as positive bias; giving Republican politicians the “benefit of the doubt” has allowed them to get away with murder. Expect to find white rage in any discussion about immigration or discrimination, for example. Anticipating it will help us stay calm and focused. Once we accept that, we sharpen our focus to guard against their insidious infections. We focus on the work of fighting for human rights and accountability.

How do we do this, practically? The “dialectic” piece of DBT can help us get there.

### **Three truths of dialectical thinking:**

1. *People are complex webs of goodness, love, selfishness, and aggression.* Allowing the co-existence of opposites is the essence of dialectic. Individuals are not selfless *or* selfish; they are selfless *and* selfish. Our political terrain includes progression *and* regression. DBT maintains that mental health requires a paradox of acceptance *and* change. We accept what is and we work toward change, in a dynamic, continually evolving process. Embracing ambivalence, paradox, and shades of gray promotes a sense of wholeness and

flexibility. We become less outraged when circumstances don't fit within our rigid expectations.

2. *We do good things because they are good, but results are not guaranteed.* Sometimes circumstances work out as we hope, sometimes they do not; most often they are too complicated to understand fully. This mindset lets go of cause-effect thinking: "If I do x, then y should happen," which sets us up for frustration when results don't turn out as planned.
3. *We are responsible for our world.* Believing in some mysterious force called "progress" absolves individuals of responsibility. Similarly, faith that "God has a plan" can promote complacency. Compassion, love, and affirming values exist because people intentionally work toward them. Claiming responsibility focuses our attention on what we can do to improve our world.

## STEP 2: ATTENTION IS EVERYTHING

[Mindfulness](#) — essentially, the art of shifting attention — is revolutionizing mental health care. Current research in mental health demonstrates [enormous benefits to mindfulness practice](#). In order to promote well being, we can learn to practice mindful attention both to the present moment and to the good as we understand it. Faced with a frequently depressing, maddening world, this can mean focusing intently on the inspiring work going on around us in a multitude of spheres. Each time you feel hopelessness creep in, focus your attention on the kindness, generosity, and good will around you. We are witnessing an unprecedented blossoming of activism. If our eyes are tuned to the light, we will find the light — in the surge of donations to ACLU, in churches offering sanctuary to immigrants, in town hall meetings packed with civically engaged citizens — everywhere.

Each time the tapes of despair and anger play in your mind, doggedly shift your focus. The mind will wander, again and again. Each time it happens, we notice the anxious thoughts, and shift our focus back. The anxious mind will scream, "*How could our President cut Meals on Wheels? What a monster! Those poor people!*" Then, shift focus back to the good, "*The program has seen a [500% increase in volunteers](#) since the cuts were proposed. Maybe I could get involved!*"

You may object, "*But I can't just forget all the terrible things going on!*" You are right. Mindfulness is not about forgetting. It is about shifting focus to what is most immediate and most helpful. **We help no one by staying in our anguish for long.** Bernie Sanders said it best: "Despair is not an option."

## THE SYSTEM AT WORK

Here is how this could play out in our minds, using an example from my life recently.

**Anxious mind:** \*reads news about the travel ban\* *No! Our leaders are disgusting!* \*imagines crying children separated from their mothers\* *I can't believe this.* \*pit in stomach\*

**Radical acceptance:** *Yes. This is our reality now. Our nation is rife with corruption and people are hurting. My heart goes out to all those in pain.* \*pit in stomach softens, feels heavier\*

**Grief that follows:** *I need to grieve this. The pain is real.* \*deep breath, moment of silence\*

**Mindful attention to the good:** *How can I support Muslim people in my community?* \*searches online\* *There is an Islamic Society nearby. I will contact them.* \*calls and emails\*

I received an email in response, indicating that many others had reached out as well. “Greetings of peace to all of you. I have been overwhelmed with your kindness in my reading of each of your emails and letters. . . . In an effort to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart, I would love to extend a humble invitation to each of you on behalf of the Islamic Society.” The Society hosted an event to bring us together in dialogue, and it was one of the most heart-warming, inspiring experiences I have had all year. I learned more about Islam and visited a mosque for the first time. I looked in people’s eyes and asked them questions and felt something sacred among us.

**Despair shouts back:** *But this is a drop in the bucket compared to what our government is doing! What if it’s all useless?*

Pessimism is not helpful either. Both optimism and pessimism require future-oriented thinking. They exist in the hypothetical, the imaginary. Mindfulness involves shifting our attention — repeatedly, resolutely — back to the present moment. We do not know the future. We cannot fully know the impact of any particular action. We must focus on what we can do, right here and right now. Bring the mind back from its runaway worries and future predictions. Focus that energy on concrete action, and the rewards will feed your soul.

We are traveling a long road toward change. At times, the pain will be so intense that these skills may not serve us fully. In those moments, allow yourself breaks. Care for yourself. If you find you are struggling to function normally, you may be experiencing more serious depression, anxiety, or trauma symptoms. Reaching out to a professional can help. When I need strength, I re-read the note from the Islamic Society: “Many thanks for your support, encouragement, and efforts done to assist our community during this difficult time.” I remember the humility and kindness in that room. No one, not even Donald Trump, can take that away.