

Strengthening your emotional health during overwhelming times

A [Census Bureau study](#) released in late 2020 showed that the number of Americans reporting feelings of anxiety and/or depression had nearly quadrupled between June 2019 and late 2020. There are certainly a number of factors at play into that increase but living through a pandemic in an increasingly divided society seem to be two major factors. The pandemic has cut us off from one another in important ways and left us vulnerable to our fears.

Stress and anxiety are responses to perceived threats. If the threat seems mild, the response is usually mild. If it's extreme, the response is often extreme as well. Mild stress can be helpful because it encourages us to focus on the task at hand and to perform well. But an extreme stress response shifts our focus to fight or flight in response to the perceived threat, and we have fewer resources for thorough, rational thinking, according to [Harvard researchers](#). So, we risk responding from a place of strong emotions rather than well-reasoned thoughts.

This is unfortunate because as a species, we accomplish the most when we acknowledge both our **competing and shared needs**. The awareness of shared needs allows us to collaborate and compromise for the good of everyone. But the pandemic has limited our options to interact with people in person and given us all sorts of time to organize with like-minded people online. These **groups are often organized around shared goals and fears**, meaning both are amplified. Rather than addressing those fears or working to tamp them down, the political and media echo chambers have fed us a steady diet of information affirming our particular worldview. This unbalanced media diet turns mild threats into extreme ones, and our response is to treat people who disagree with us as potential threats. **We react emotionally rather than thoughtfully.**

So, what can we do? We know that perceived threats lead to stress, which provokes an emotional response. So, if social media algorithms are designed to keep us engaged and clicking, then one of the best ways to curb their effect is to **take a break** from them. This opens space for the second action: **start talking to people**. The time away from social media will likely give us more opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations with neighbors, family, co-workers and friends. Once we stop reading about perceived threats and start re-engaging with real people, we'll likely be able to think more clearly and decide how best to address the issues that are important to us.

At Learn to Live, we know that emotional health issues can affect us all, no matter our opinions, demographics, or political views. We also know that our emotional health is stronger when we focus on our shared experiences and connect during life's challenges. That's why we designed our programs with a special feature called **Teammates**. It allows you to identify someone to support you as you work through your program learning to address your emotional health. So, while the world may feel overwhelmingly divided at times, **we can work against that trend by addressing our emotional health and connecting with one another**. To learn more about the Learn to Live programs and our Teammates option, visit learntolive.com/partners enter **GUSTAVUS**.