

## America Needs Therapeutic Intervention

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During the 2020-21 academic year, Vanderbilt University launched a project dedicated to unity and American democracy in attempts to alleviate political tension and instigate practices of understanding, acceptance, and listening on campus and nationally. One facet of the Unity & American Democracy project includes newly designed courses specifically addressing national polarization. The project's first year, a course called Elections was its corresponding offering, and during Fall 2022, Vanderbilt offered the titular PSCI 4444: Unity & American Democracy.

My course cart was brimming on the last registration day and all of my hours were already occupied, so I didn't sign up for the highly sought-after class, co-taught by Jon Meecham, Samar Ali, and John Geer. Thankfully, the majority of my friends are political science majors, so instead, I've kept in touch with the class's discourse and content through several of them. Recently, Vanderbilt undergraduate students in Democracy were posed with the task of constructing "an argument about how to advance unity in the United States." After mulling over the essay prompt with a pal of mine, I started asking every student I knew in the class to present their proposal to me. While policy implementation plans varied across papers, each person identified the same cause of divergence in America: people will not listen to each other. We continually lack empathy, patience, and open-mindedness with one another, and this sentiment is widespread.

The past five years in the United States have been marked by political upheaval like never before. Party loyalty is further forcing a schism, and the growing disunion is stifling our democracy. Common ground between party lines is faint; identifying bipartisan issues is nebulous, political discourse is wrought with logical fallacies, and political actors fail to properly persuade the general public, typically working only to dominate the support of their party's constituents. It seems that the only thing Americans can agree on is that we cannot agree, reflected during the 2020 presidential election cycle when [3/4 of each candidate's voter base](#) maintained the position that the opposing constituency had dissimilar conceptions of national purpose.

So, if Americans comprehend that we are starkly divided by party lines and have a general understanding that the disconnect between the Right and the Left is at least in part due to this deepening inability to listen to each other, why don't we simply *start listening*? It seems painless enough, but how do we initiate this?

Currently, I'm in a Psychology course titled Depression (sounds fun, right?) with Professor Stephen D. Hollon. In a [2019 study](#), Hollon describes that people with depression, though it may be unintentional, tend to worsen their own symptoms. He also denotes that rumination, characterized in a *Psychology Today* headline as "Problem Solving Gone Wrong," increases risk of depression. Women, who ruminate more than men, are two times more likely to experience unipolar depression than men, and when rumination is controlled for, the gendered difference in depression rates level. I suppose the ol' adage that women overthink more than men actually has scientific backing, after all.

[Rumination](#) is a symptom of depression that causes one to experience intense, permeating thoughts about a negative situation. Hollon describes that from an evolutionary biological perspective, rumination allowed our ancestors to focus inward on an interpersonal problem to work through it, ultimately reaching a solution. In hunter-gatherer societies, failure to address interpersonal problems within the community could lead to displacement of the individual from their group, which was often a death sentence. This theory is called the analytical rumination hypothesis. In a time when much of the individual's energy was dedicated to finding sustenance,

shelter, and avoiding imminent threats to human survival, rumination forced the individual to dedicate otherwise unavailable mental energy to alleviating the issue at hand. When the part of the brain charged with distributing the neurotransmitter serotonin fires, it exhausts the area of the brain responsible for rumination. Insufficient levels of serotonin, the primary function of which is to allocate energy, and other neurotransmitters are linked to depression. Current psychological research suggests that insufficient levels of the neurotransmitters dopamine, norepinephrine, and particularly serotonin, the primary function of which is to allocate energy, cause depression.

America is depressed and ruminating, caught in a vicious negative thought cycle. The American people have labelled the problem--*we disagree*--though limited tangible progress has been made regarding this persistent separation. Our labeling of our politics as divisive, while accurate, is a symptom as much as it is a diagnosis. Negativity is insidious, though, and its cyclical nature is one that can only be disrupted by insertion of *other* thoughts.

To treat unipolar depression, research has shown that Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) both serve as [equally effective therapeutic intervention approaches](#). As per psychologists Jessica Levenson and Ellen Frank, IPT is a therapy style centered around the relationship between interpersonal affliction, which is an inherent part of the human experience, and psychological symptoms. Through IPT, patients identify difficulties in interacting with others and work on reframing some behaviors, ultimately alleviating some of their psychological symptoms due to improved interpersonal functionality. Similarly, [CBT](#) allows patients to transform dysfunctional thought patterns and behaviors that negatively impact psychological wellbeing. Developing these skills allow the patient to cope better with chronic psychological issues and ones that may arise later, providing the individual the tools to notice faulty thought or behavioral patterns of their own, on their own. Upon identifying these patterns, like ruminating, for example, the individual can actively choose to redirect said patterns. Psychological symptom improvement in both forms of therapy require active practice, as breaking our psychological status quo requires repetition and time, but they demonstrate effectiveness and can improve quality of life.

So, I say, America needs therapeutic intervention. We can utilize many of the skills necessary for IPT and CBT to improve interpersonal interaction and communication. It is time to break free from the shackles of national rumination, and empower ourselves to harp less on what, why, and how we disagree and put some of that energy into finding bipartisan solutions. While finding political common ground right now may be a strenuous task, it is vital to our nation's continuity. Only through identification of some of our shared goals can we discover more.