

Cultural Daily

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Political Stress: Being an Empath in Uncertain Times

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, August 30th, 2017

The other day in Zumba class, I almost broke down in tears. It wasn't because the steps were too difficult or I sprained my ankle. Rather, I was flooded with a wave of cultural nostalgia for my family, my home town, and the extended family culture in which I spent much of my childhood. You see, even though I pass as white, I am Latina — one of those curious specimens of “mixed-race,” as some say, who looks like a “gringa.” However, my mother was born near Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, and my father was born in Alliance, Ohio, so that technically makes me Latina — though the census still records my “ethnicity” as Mexican-American/Hispanic and my “race” as white (whatever that means).

Another reason I almost teared up had more to do with the fact that, although I felt strangely at home in a room filled with other Latinas, I couldn't easily commiserate with them. I couldn't really explain, in one sentence, why I secretly chuckled at the inability of some of the more pale women to get the moves down, right away. It was probably because they hadn't been taught how to dance salsa and merengue and cha-cha and all those Latin dance styles at an early age — though, to be fair, there were a couple women in the room, including the instructor, who were killing it — both more Caucasian looking than the majority of the class. They must have spent time learning how to salsa dance. Of course, it's also true that some people have rhythm and some just don't.

I've always struggled to be more coordinated. My hand-eye coordination usually leaves something to be desired — especially when playing most team sports involving a ball. Music, however, is something else entirely. I've always felt more comfortable singing onstage than socializing at a party. I suppose dancing is a bit like that, as well: though I may not be the quickest one to pick up dance moves at the gym, I have a good sense of rhythm and can carry a tune — whether with a piano or my voice.

But How Is This Related to Politics?

The day I attended Zumba class for the first time was also the day I'd learned more details about the atrocities in Charlottesville. More importantly, I was still grappling with #45's backtracking comments justifying the sickening behavior of the white supremacists and claiming there had been “[very fine people](#)” on both sides.

As an empath, I had enormous difficulty wrapping my head and my heart around this particular soundbite. The next day, after watching [the Vice documentary](#) showing what had happened, on an up-close-and-personal level — well, I could barely concentrate on anything but the hatred and extreme violence that was so blatantly exposed. Having seen the way my mother was treated by

some of her employers in a well-to-do part of California; having had half of my family labeled “criminals and rapists” — well, it was all simply too much to take.

As artists — especially artists who are intuitive and empathic — we must shield ourselves from too much exposure to news, politics, and social media. This is not in order to live in a bubble or fantasy land; rather, it is to prevent negative information from affecting our health. Empaths are especially susceptible to toxic stress levels that can affect our mental and physical well-being. If we are subjected to severe psychological stress often enough, we become vulnerable to conditions like high blood pressure, hypertension, and heart disease — not to mention side effects like [skin rashes](#), anxiety, and depression.

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What We Can Do

It’s crucial for highly sensitive, empathic, and intuitive people (many of whom are also artists and writers) to seek out physical outlets for stress like vigorous cardiovascular exercise, and well as more contemplative [mind-body interventions](#) such as meditation, yoga, and walking. Left untreated, high stress levels can lead to excess weight, causing additional problems such as [GERD](#) or adult-onset diabetes.

However, it’s also important to remember that being heart-healthy and being thin can be mutually exclusive states. In fact, going back to the issue of genetics, the Body Mass Index (BMI) has been [widely criticized](#) for having been originally determined by a Belgian mathematician, for statistical purposes, rather than a physician. As problematic as stereotypes about ‘race’ and differing cultural norms may be, it’s generally true that most German and Mexican women I know don’t look like typical waif-thin models. However, we are pressured to use this standard as our baseline, in typical media outlets (though this is slowly changing). Some have even argued that the BMI is [racist](#), since it privileges typically Norse and Caucasian body types over, say, Southeast Asian, African, or South American body types.

If you have found yourself affected by recent news and current events — especially stories of a cultural or political nature — seek outlets for relief. In addition to creating more art, try journaling or free writing, meditating, or counseling. Oftentimes, empaths make some of the best [counselors](#), as well — but be careful to reserve plenty of time and energy for yourself, if you go this route, and work on establishing boundaries with friends, family, and employers before taking on clients of your own.

People with natural intuitive abilities often find themselves called upon to share their gifts and talents with others. However, it takes practice and self-awareness to master the art of balancing the personal and the professional. As with many “helping” professions, it’s definitely possible to give too much to others without reserving enough energy for oneself. Whether it relates to politics, work, or personal relationships, it’s crucial to cultivate what some call “radical self-care” in order to maintain balance and remain grounded, in the midst of unsettling situations.

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Are you an empath or highly sensitive artist or writer who has found yourself deeply affected by recent news and current events? What advice do you have for fellow creative types hoping to find

positive ways to express themselves, in the face of difficult societal problems?

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