



# Vote like your mental health depends on it.

Mental Health Voter Guide 2024



## **With mental health care on the ballot – through party platforms and candidate positions – it is more important than ever for the mental health community to be involved in this year’s election.**

Voters in 2024 will not only decide the next U.S. president, but will also choose more than 30 senators, all 435 members of the House of Representatives, 11 governors, and many, many more state and local officials that are critical to advancing, or reversing, mental health care trends in your communities.

Mental Health America prepared this voter guide so that mental health advocates and people affected by mental health and substance use conditions feel empowered and able to vote; candidates at the federal, state, and local levels hear the concerns of the mental health community; and all voters are able to **vote with mental health in mind**.

### **In this guide, you’ll find information on:**

- Voter registration
- Your voting rights
- Elections action checklist
- Questions for candidates
- Writing a letter to the editor
- Major party platforms
- Sharing on social media
- Additional election resources
- Caring for your mental health at election time

# Voter Registration

**The first step to voting with mental health in mind is registering to vote.**

Registration deadlines before primary and general elections vary state to state, so don't wait to find out the cutoff date. You can use any of the following resources to find state-specific information on registering to vote, re-registering, voting methods, deadlines to register, and more.

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## Election Protection

This resource provides registration information and has a telephone line to answer questions you have about protecting your right to vote.

**[866ourvote.org](https://www.866ourvote.org)**

Call: 1-866-OUR-VOTE

Text: 866-687-8683

[Hotlines in Spanish, Arabic, and Asian languages.](#)

## Rock the Vote

This resource shows a list of your current elected officials and offers educational information on the democratic process.

**[rockthevote.org](https://www.rockthevote.org)**

## Project Vote Smart

This resource displays a list of all the candidates and ballot measures up for consideration in your area.

**[votesmart.org](https://www.votesmart.org)**



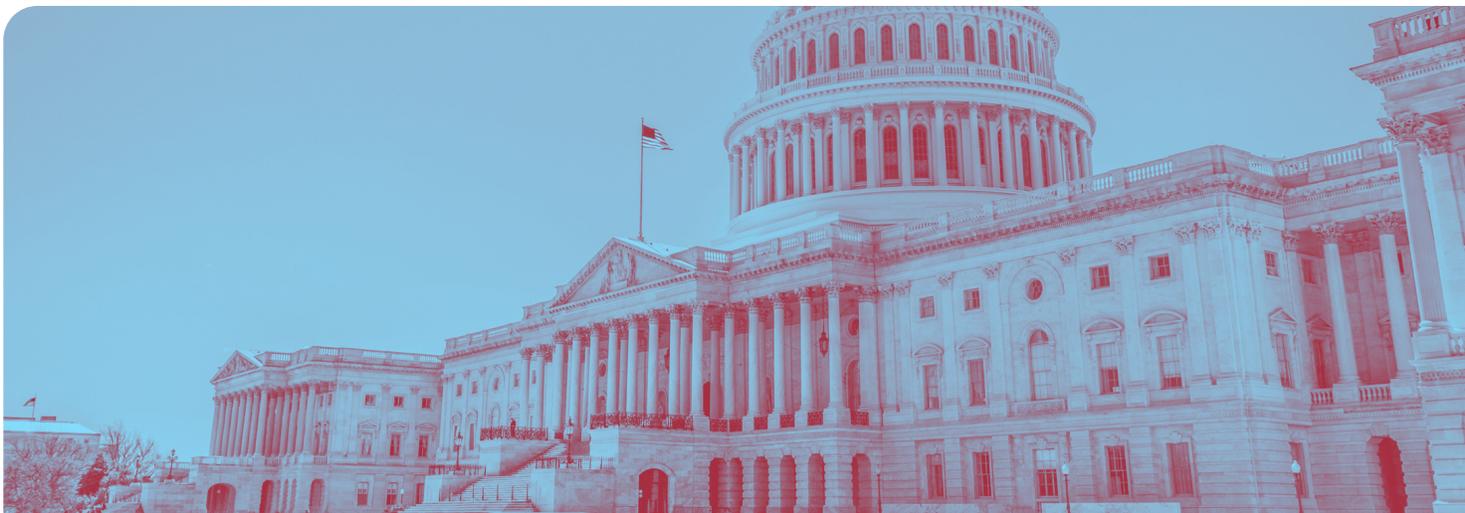
# Know your rights!

**While many states in the past few years have passed laws making it easier to vote, other states have passed legislation making it harder for people to cast their ballots.**

There are two types of laws to know about when it comes to your voting rights: voter identification laws and laws concerning individuals living with mental and physical disabilities.

## **Identification laws**

Many voting laws deal with what types of identification can be used to vote. Know what forms of ID are accepted for your state before Election Day by checking the chart on [Ballotpedia](#). First-time voters in some states may need to provide additional information, such as proof of address on a piece of mail.



# Know your rights!

## Laws concerning individuals with mental and physical disabilities

More than 1 in 5 Americans experience some type of mental health condition, and it is crucial that all members of every community understand that individuals with mental health conditions, substance use conditions, and other disabilities have the right to vote and have the right to assistance.

Find more information about the assistance that must be made available to you or people you are supporting using these resources.

### **Bazon Center for Mental Health Law Voting Guide**

This resource was created for people living with psychiatric disabilities and autism. It includes information on state laws and direction about legal competency and guardianship.

### **SABE's GoVoter Project**

This resource offers accessible trainings on how to exercise your rights as a voter with a disability and includes information for caregivers.

### **Your Vote Counts**

This resource from the Autistic Self Advocacy Network is a voting toolkit with easy reading and plain language editions.

### **The National Disability Rights Network**

This organization offers the ability to connect with others through a [Power at the Polls](#) page and helps clarify questions around help for voting tasks in a [memo on the right to assistance](#).

# Know your rights!

For the latest information on  
voting laws in your state:

## The Fair Elections Network

[fairelectionscenter.org](https://fairelectionscenter.org)

## Vote411.org

[vote411.org/voting-rules](https://vote411.org/voting-rules)

## Voting Rights Lab

[tracker.votingrightslab.org/states](https://tracker.votingrightslab.org/states)

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Learn more about voting rights for  
all with [this guide from the ACLU](#).

# Action checklist



It is vitally important that the mental health and addiction communities, and their advocates, make their voices heard during the upcoming elections. Use this checklist to ensure you are taking advantage of the opportunity to vote in 2024's local, state, and federal elections and make sure you vote with mental health in mind.

If you are a representative of a 501(c)(3) organization, make sure that as you consider this checklist, you are extremely careful to remain nonpartisan when representing your organization.



## Register to vote.

In 2022, 69% of U.S. voting-age citizens were registered to vote. If you are among the 31% not registered, have previously registered but moved since the last election, or are unsure of your registration status, use the links below to register or find out your status. If you are already registered (and have confirmed your status), get five other people to register!

- [Election Protection](#)
- [Project Vote Smart](#)
- [Rock the Vote](#)
- [Vote411.org](#)



## Learn about the candidates and issues.

Visit candidate websites to read about their views on mental health, health care reform, social drivers, and other key issues of importance to the mental health and substance use disorder communities.

## Action checklist

### ✓ **Ask questions at candidate forums and town hall meetings.**

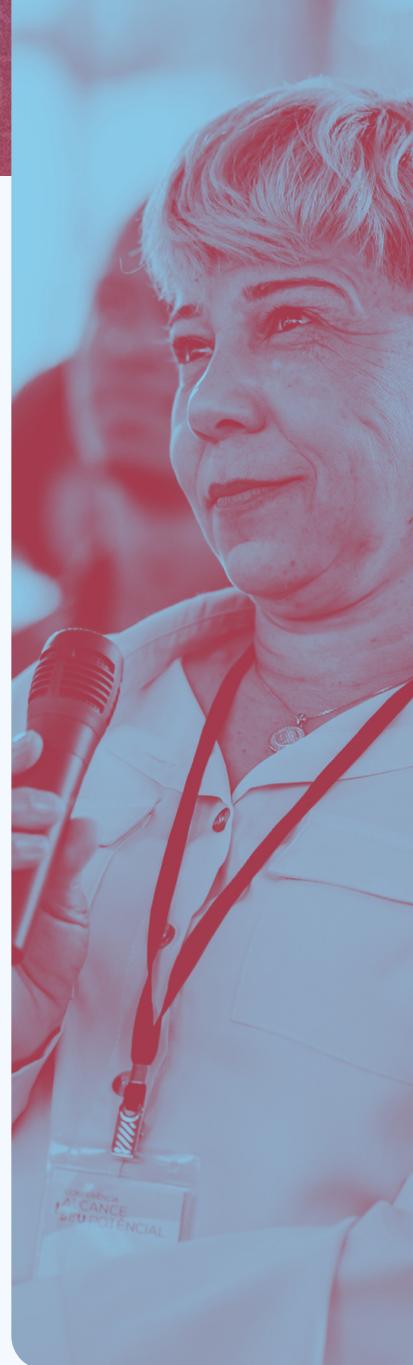
The simple act of asking a question at a town hall meeting is a great way to make candidates go “on the record” with their views on important mental health issues. [See a list of questions](#) you can ask to help you learn more about their mental health positions. Check your local paper, online news source, or a candidate’s website for scheduled events.

### ✓ **Host a candidate forum or town hall with a local group or organization.**

Candidates take opportunities to speak in front of large crowds of potential voters. Consider using this guide to host a forum where candidates can join and answer both pre-planned questions and on-the-spot questions. This activity is best planned in partnership with others in the community as it is a heavier lift than asking a question at a forum.

### ✓ **Write a letter to the editor or call talk radio shows.**

Use the power of mass media! Letters to the editor are among the most widely read parts of newspapers and magazines. The most effective letters are no more than 250 words, to the point, well-supported, and, most importantly, from the heart. Calling local radio talk shows or speaking on podcasts is another great way to help get your message to thousands of listeners. Use the [writing tips](#) and [questions for candidates](#) in this guide to get started.



# Action checklist



## Email the candidates.

Most candidates allow you to email them and include an address or contact form on their campaign or political office website. Sending an email only takes a minute, and as a constituent, they want and need to hear from you on issues you consider important.



## Create a voting plan for the day you plan to vote.

The simple act of voting is one of the most empowering actions you can take to make a difference in the future of America's overall mental health and wellness. Plan the time of day you will be able to vote in person. Consider peak traffic times, work responsibilities, and caregiving duties that need to be accommodated before the day you plan to vote. Know that most states offer early voting at various locations up to six weeks before the general election date. Early voting can be lower stress as it sees shorter lines than on Election Day. If planning to participate by mail, mark the date on your calendar that you will drop off your ballot in the mail or at a voting location.



## Talk with your friends and neighbors.

Have a healthy dialogue with your friends, family, and neighbors about why mental health is so important to any candidate's health care platform. Speak up about your concerns and be sure to listen to theirs. Watch the debates with others and talk afterward about what you agreed with and didn't.



# Action checklist



## Raise awareness online.

Social media sites can connect you to the candidates, and can also give you opportunities to raise the profile of mental health in the 2024 presidential, gubernatorial, congressional, and local elections. Social networking sites can help you share with your friends the importance of supporting the mental health community when casting their vote. Post about campaign issues that affect individuals with mental health conditions.



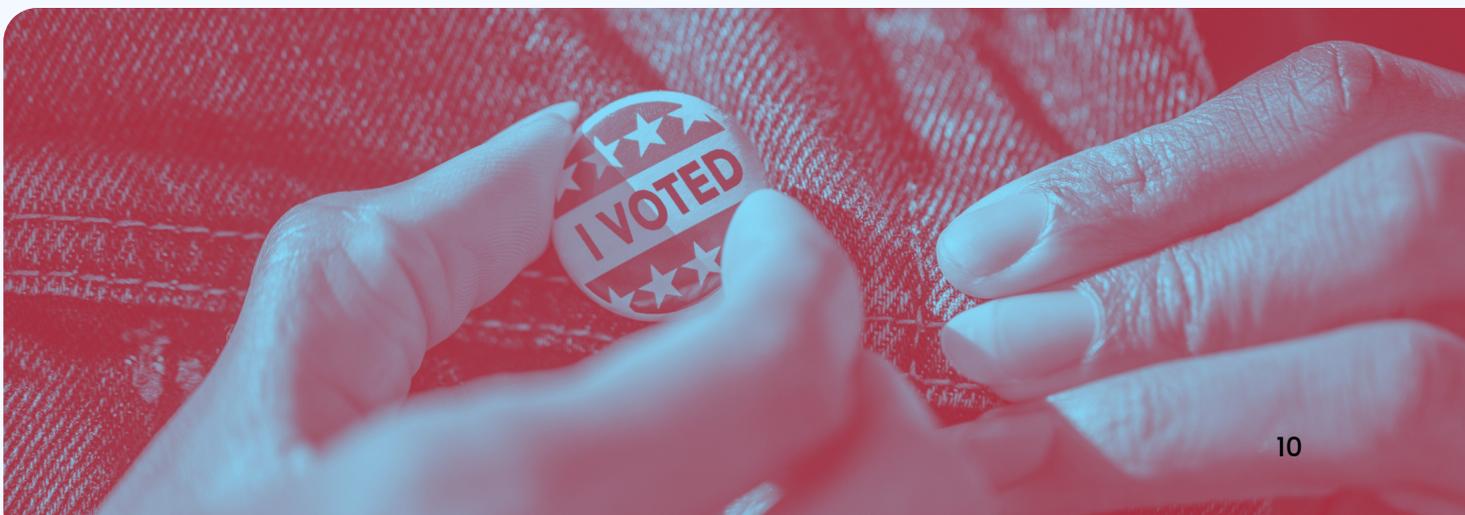
## Empower others to vote.

Work with other community stakeholders to empower mental health consumers to exercise their right to vote. Individuals with mental health conditions may be reluctant to vote because they believe they are not allowed to do so, because they are simply afraid of registering, or for other personal reasons. Helping just one person understand that they are allowed to vote and their vote matters is a worthwhile endeavor.



## Stay informed.

[Sign up to receive future MHA action alerts](#) and help MHA send advocacy letters to current elected officials asking them to support or oppose important mental health changes to laws or funding.



# Questions for candidates

## in forums and town hall meetings

Asking a question at a town hall meeting is a great way to make candidates go "on the record" with their positions on important mental health and substance use disorder issues. Candidates rely on their constituents to bring up the highest priority community issues, so asking a question whenever you can will help them remember to keep mental health top of mind.

Check your local paper, online news source, or candidate websites for scheduled candidate forums and town hall meetings and plan to bring up these topics and questions. If you cannot ask a formal question, wait in line to talk to the candidate or raise it when they are shaking hands with attendees. Any way you can get their attention on mental health is helpful. Events for members of Congress may occur when they are not in session ([find the session calendar here](#)) and in their home districts and states campaigning.



# Suggested candidate questions on mental health topics of high importance

## **Importance of addressing the mental health and substance use crisis**

It is important to let candidates know why you care about this issue, so very briefly tell them about your background as a person with lived experience, or as a family member, friend, or provider. Then ask what they are going to do to address the mental health and substance use crisis. Asking a broad question will allow you to see if they have really thought about this and evaluate whether you think their plan would help in your community.

**Question:** I am a(n) [advocate, person living with a mental health or substance use condition, family member, or friend]. I see a tremendous need for mental health care in my community and know people who cannot get help for mental health and substance use conditions when they need it. If elected, what will you do to address this unmet need and how will that make a difference in what we are seeing every day in our community?

## **Access to mental health and substance use care and supports**

Because insurance coverage is critical to accessing mental health and substance use services, ensuring health insurance policies cover as many people and services as possible is key. This is especially critical as the public health emergency expired and Medicaid programs are disenrolling hundreds of thousands of people. Some candidates support very limited plans that don't offer mental health and substance use services so be sure to try to find out whether the coverage they support will include mental health and substance use care.

**Question:** Having health insurance coverage is really important to getting access to mental health and substance use services and supports, but there are too many people that do not have plans with adequate coverage, or any plan at all. How will you make sure people have health insurance coverage that will give them access to mental health and substance use care and supports?

## **Unhoused and involuntary hospitalization**

Many people who lack housing are living with mental health conditions and substance use disorders. Some states and municipalities have been focused on involuntarily hospitalizing people to help address the homelessness crisis. But such practices have both ethical and practical problems, including constant cycling in and out of hospitals because of poor discharge planning and lack of housing and support. Instead, evidence shows that resources would be better spent on upstream preventative measures, such as housing, community-based assistance, and peer outreach.

**Question:** We have many people in our community who lack housing and who have mental health and substance use conditions. What is your plan to provide greater access to housing and supports, such as peer support services?

## **Workforce and access for all**

Many communities face a shortage of mental health providers. Because of this workforce shortage, many people cannot access the supports and services that they need. Other supports, like peer services and telehealth programs, are also not widely available. In addition, it is very difficult to find providers that reflect underserved communities and understand the unique barriers of race, language, and disability.

**Question:** What policies do you hope to enact that will address the severe workforce shortage of mental health and substance use providers in our community/state/country?

**Question:** My community has great difficulty finding mental health and substance use providers that reflect our community members. How will you address that issue and help grow a workforce that can serve everyone?

## **Crisis care and the new 988 system**

In July of 2022, [the nation launched 988](#) — a new number for mental health, suicide, and substance use crises. Two years later, people still do not know about the number, call centers do not have enough resources, and local capacity for mobile crisis interventions is limited.

**Question:** The new 988 suicide and mental health crisis hotline holds a lot of promise, but people still don't know about it, the local call centers need greater capacity, and mobile crisis services are missing in many communities. How will you support and grow capacity for 988 and a comprehensive crisis system?

## **Youth issues**

Only half of youth who need mental health services actually get them. Often, youth receive these services only very late. Two places where young people can get better access to services are in primary care settings and schools.

Social media has also become a pressing issue affecting youth mental health, yet some tech companies have spent millions to successfully lobby against any new regulations to make their platforms safer. There are currently state and federal laws being proposed to hold tech companies accountable.

**Question:** The Surgeon General and leading youth mental health organizations have declared a national emergency in youth mental health and we know that only half of youth who need help actually get it. How will you ensure that youth will have better access to mental health care in their communities – in schools and in pediatrician’s offices?

**Question:** We know social media platforms are designed to make money, not to promote mental health, and this affects young people who spend many hours online. What will you do if elected to make social media safer and more responsive to the needs of young people and their families?

## **Parity (fair coverage)**

Even after the passage of the federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008, insurance coverage for behavioral health care is still discriminatory and more restrictive than coverage for other medical care. Federal and state enforcement of this law has increased significantly in recent years and numerous violations have been found.

**Question:** In my experience/community, it is very hard to find mental health and substance use providers who take insurance because insurance companies pay them low rates and deny their prior authorization requests. How will you hold insurers accountable for providing the mental health and substance use care that we are paying for with our monthly premiums?



## **Veterans**

More than half a million Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans have not sought care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), even though 20% of veterans live with PTSD or depression, and another 20% report a traumatic brain injury (TBI) during deployment. Cumulative deployments also have contributed to more mental health diagnoses among military spouses and higher rates of emotional difficulties for children of service members.

**Question:** What are your plans to make sure we fulfill our duty to our military service members, families, and Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who are in need of mental health services?

## **Other issues that affect mental health**

We all care about issues that are not directly about mental health, but they have an impact on mental health. Here are a few, but this is not exhaustive:

**Climate change:** Many people are increasingly anxious about climate change and a hotter planet has been shown to contribute to mental health conditions along with physical health implications.

**Reproductive rights:** Lack of control over when, whether, and how to have a family is affecting mental health.

**Restrictions on gender-affirming care or other restrictions affecting LGBTQ+ populations:** Many state laws have placed restrictions on gender-affirming care, access to restroom facilities, or other services. Research has shown that such restrictions are having a negative effect on the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals who have high rates of suicidality and depression due to these barriers and others.

**Question:** I am very concerned about [climate change, reproductive rights, access to health care for transgender young people, etc.] because of the devastating effects of this issue on mental health. What will you do to address the issue and how will your solution also address the mental health consequences of current policies?



# Write a letter to the editor

"Letters to the editor" are commonly read by policymakers, legislators, and engaged community members. The most effective letters are no more than 250 words, to the point, well supported, and, most importantly, from the heart. Below are some tips for writing an effective letter. Use the topics in the "Questions for candidates" section for examples of original talking points you can use in your own statement. If your letter gets accepted, let us know by emailing [info@mentalhealthamerica.org](mailto:info@mentalhealthamerica.org).

## **Where to send**

Start by determining where to submit – such as your town/city, regional, or state newspaper. You can usually find an email address or online form to submit your letter to the opinion or editorial section. Call the newspaper if you can't find where to submit online or want to mail a paper letter (although electronic submissions are usually preferred).

## **Check the requirements**

Determine the newspaper's submission guidelines, as there may be word limits. Always include your first and last name, address, email, and phone number. Newspapers will often contact you back to confirm that you want your comments published. Note: Your address, email, and/or phone number will never be published or printed.

## **Make your point**

Feel free to use the talking points included in this guide, but tailor them to the audience and community. Here are some other tips:

- If you have personal involvement or experience specific to the issue you are writing about, mention it to make your points.
- Use short sentences to make sure your argument is clear.
- The most impactful letters stay on topic and focus on just a few points.

## **Follow up**

Newspapers receive many letters, so don't be disappointed if your letter is not published. You can also follow up with the editor to ensure they received it and get a sense of whether they may use it. If the editor indicates that it will not run, ask why, as it may just need some reworking. You can also try submitting the letter to another newspaper.

# Letter example #1



Under federal law, everybody has the right to health benefits, including mental health care. Parity laws require health plans to pay for mental health services on the same terms as surgical and other medical care. Yet, many states don't enforce these laws, making it difficult for individuals to access essential services.

*[Option to include a short personal story/anecdote or issue in the community impacted by the topic.]*

Almost half of all Americans will be diagnosed with a mental health condition at some point in their lives, so it's important that everyone can access the type of treatment and supports they want when they need them. We must vote for candidates who promise to push for enforcement of these parity laws, which will save lives and money down the road.

**Your Name**

City, State

## Letter example #2



Experiencing homelessness can exacerbate mental illness, which is why policymakers should consider evidence-based supportive housing policies. When people have a safe place to live, they are highly likely to engage in treatment services that help them stay in the community.

*[Option to include a short personal story/anecdote or issue in the community impacted by the topic.]*

Peer support specialists and street outreach should be prioritized over law enforcement encounters and coercive measures. Peers are specially trained individuals who share experiences, such as living with a mental health condition or having experienced homelessness. Peer support specialists offer connection, provide emotional support, teach skills, provide practical assistance, and introduce people to resources and other support communities.

The model of using peer support has proven to better engage people in resources that meet their mental health needs and lessen the number of readmissions and overall days an individual spends in a hospital. It also frees law enforcement officers for other duties, and empowers people experiencing homelessness to reclaim their lives. We must vote for candidates who understand that evidence-based supportive housing policies like this serve people better than involuntary hospitalization.

**Your Name**

City, State

# Share on social media

Social media is a great way to share why you are voting with mental health in mind in the 2024 elections.

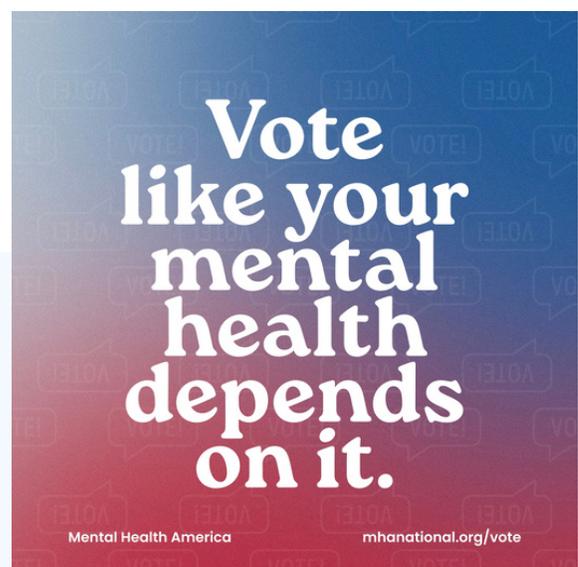
Here are some ideas:

- Post about the election on Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn.
- Write and share a blog post about campaign issues impacting individuals with mental health conditions.
- Share the graphics in this section or use one as your profile picture.
- Follow national and local mental health advocacy and policy organizations to get the latest on current issues.
- Get your friends/followers to register to vote by sharing the links in this guide.

Be sure to post from personal accounts and note on your page that views and opinions expressed are your own and not of your employer or other organizations you belong to. Many employers will take issue with individual opinions from employees via company emails or platforms.

[Download social assets](#)

[mhanational.org/vote](https://mhanational.org/vote)



# Shop mental health voter merch from Mental Health America

100% of proceeds support our mission



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[store.mhanational.org](https://store.mhanational.org)

# Additional resources

## Presidential candidate websites

- [Joe Biden](#)
- [Donald Trump](#)

## Local and state candidates

- [Project Vote Smart](#): Enter your ZIP code or address to be directed to information on the candidates that will be on your ballot.
- [Ballotpedia](#): Enter your address to see a sample ballot.

## Read up on health policy

- [Kaiser Family Foundation](#)
- [Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease](#)

## Major Party Platforms

- [Democratic Party Platform](#)
- [Republican Party Platform](#)

## Voter registration information

- [Election Protection](#)
- [Project Vote Smart](#)
- [Rock the Vote](#)
- [Vote411.org](#)
- [Vote.org](#)

Monthslong campaign rhetoric, in addition to passionate voices for and against candidates, can be overwhelming. While Mental Health America encourages voting and learning about the issues, it is also important that individuals take care of their well-being and check in with themselves often – especially amid other concurrent world events. Consider taking an [MHA screening](#) or using these resources:

- [How to Cope with Election Stress \(Crisis Text Line\)](#)
- [Tough News: Caring for Your Mind](#)
- [How Can I Be Okay When the World Is Terrible](#)
- [Taking Good Care of Yourself](#)
- [Helpful vs. Harmful Ways to Cope With Emotions](#)
- [I'm Feeling Too Much at Once: Dealing with Emotional Overload](#)
- [Social Media and Mental Health](#)
- [The Do's of Social Media](#)
- [Mental Health During Global Conflict](#)
- [I'm Angry About the Injustices I See Around Me](#)



[mhanational.org](https://mhanational.org)

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