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Opinion: The importance of psychological safety when we come together

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In the many post-election articles, analyses, and opinion pieces I have read since November 8th, I have not seen much discussion about the importance of coming together. Not just coming together in politics, but coming together as families, as communities, and as a society.

Being accepting of others, embracing diversity rather than divisiveness in our private and public lives, and putting aside differences so we can move forward as a nation and as a people, are not only important for our future, but also for our mental health.

It's important to acknowledge that we can celebrate and be thankful for the privilege we have to be part of a democracy. The general election that just concluded may have been heated and contentious, and the frequency and tone of television ads bordering on unbearable, but in the end, the system that allows all citizens to engage in the process worked. The vast majority of candidates who were not successful accepted the results graciously and will learn from the experience. Recounts here and across the nation have taken place in a civil manner, even where there have been loud disputes and challenges. There was no violence; I believe that was a victory.

Yet, the undercurrent of divisiveness, and the stress and anxiety that it produces, remain. Unfortunately, this divisiveness, stress, and anxiety is not only present in politics, but also within our families and personal lives. This is often noticeable during the holiday season, which is already upon us, when many people experience stress and anxiety about the prospect of simply sitting down for dinner with family members. Even the most seemingly happy families have disagreements and differences of opinion, and many have even deeper divisions. But listening more and looking for what holds us together rather than what separates us can help to shift the focus and make holiday gatherings less stressful.

Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, defines psychological safety as “a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes” and that the environment is safe for “interpersonal risk-taking.” While her work is focused on the psychological safety of teams and the workplace, there is much we can learn about not just the importance of coming together, but also the “how” of coming together that will allow us to move forward in ways that embrace differences, rather than contribute to further divisiveness.

According to theories of psychological safety, in order to let go of the fear of being marginalized or punished for speaking up, we need to feel included and believe that we are in places where it is safe to learn, contribute, and bring up ideas that challenge the status quo. In work environments, we look to leaders to create these conditions by leading with authenticity, identifying and leveraging employees’ strengths, and embracing a culture consistent with a learning organization.

It is important to recognize that we can also take some steps personally to contribute to psychological safety for ourselves and others. We can resist the urge to isolate and focus on increased connections. We can consistently work to let go of judgments, both of ourselves and others, recognizing that each person’s identity is much more than their beliefs on any one topic. And we can be aware of the impact of our own identification with any perspective that doesn’t leave room for others.

As we come together as families, friends, and communities throughout this holiday season, how might we promote psychological safety for all? Perhaps we can remember that the outcome of a holiday gathering is not to win an argument, gather votes, or impress others. Perhaps we can pause and be grateful that we have an opportunity to gather at all — something that many of us often took for granted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps we can focus more on asking questions and learning about others than on asserting our own opinions. Perhaps we can follow the sage advice of Stephen Stills and simply “love the ones you’re with.”

Creating more psychologically safe spaces, both in our personal lives and in the next legislative session, where people feel included, have opportunities to contribute, and know they can make mistakes and learn without fear, will lead to improved mental health for all. Let’s not just talk about coming together, but let’s do it in ways that promote psychological safety and embrace diversity.