Has everyone lost their minds? Pursuing civility in a crazy world

NEW YORK — Did you know that 63 percent of Americans are stressed about the future of this country? For the first time, this concern beat out work and financial stress in the annual nationwide American Psychological Association survey.

Kristen Soltis Anderson, ABC news contributor and pollster, discussed how we can be more civil in Thursday's Inman Connect discussion, "Has everyone lost their minds? (Pursuing civility in a crazy world)."

Soltis Anderson describes herself as a Republican who is very critical of the president. And she questions whether we are able to have the important conversations necessary to solve the problems stressing us out in the first place if we don't shift our perspectives. She pointed to studies, surveys and polls showing the extreme polarization of our current climate in which Americans have a hard time even respecting others who voted for the candidate they oppose.

Solving the civility problem doesn't mean we'll all agree at the end of the day. However, there are several things that we can do to try and understand one another and resolve conflict in our personal lives.

'Talking past each other'

Soltis Anderson pointed to a recent story from The Washington Post that covered the Trump administration banning seven words from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), including "transgender." She said it was actually CDC employees, rather than Trump appointees or the Trump administration, who had suggested not using those seven words in the style guide in order to improve their chances of securing funding with conservatives.

The initial story went viral, however, and the follow-ups weren't as highly publicized. "Make sure we take a step back, we breathe, and we make sure that this story, what's under the headline is truly worthy of the outrage we give it," she said.

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We share things that impassion us. But we don’t always share things that make us think. Social media is optimized to show us posts that will strike emotion — to make us feel.

If we are always outraged, we won’t be able to discern the times when we should be truly outraged or concerned.

Realize that when you consume news these days, we aren’t all seeing the same news. It’s personalized, customized for you. “All too often, it is very easy for us, in a world where we’re consuming content digitally, to just consume a small piece of it and not consume the whole story, and to therefore consume something that is a really twisted version of the what has actually been said,” Soltis Anderson said.

‘Never question people’s motives’

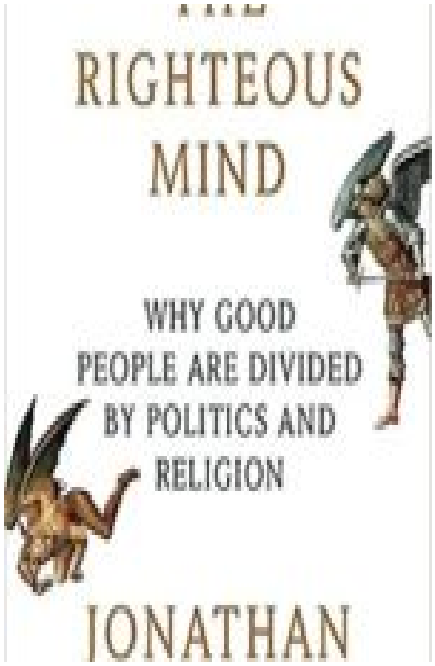
Soltis Anderson told the story of Joe Biden, who early in his career was trying to pass a law for individuals with disabilities. He found himself up against the conservative North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms.

Biden couldn't fathom someone opposing this type of law, and thought that those on the other side of the debate must be morally bankrupt. He was pulled aside by one of his colleagues who informed him that this "terrible" person, Senator Helms, had just adopted a 9-year-old boy with disabilities.

From that moment forward, Joe Biden has said that a mantra he lives by is: "Never question people's motives, question their judgement, but don't begin by questioning their motives."

And all too often in so many of these debates that's where we begin, she said.

"We talk past each other," she said. "We assume the other side wants something horrible. Rather than wanting something good that may have some unfortunate side effects."



The Righteous Mind

She pointed to a book by Johnathan Haidt called "*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion."* In it, Haidt explores "moral tastebuds."

For instance, liberals tend to ask themselves questions about harm, fairness and equality when determining their stance on an issue:

- Is it right?
- Is it fair?
- Is it harming anyone?

However, conservatives ask other questions that have more to do with purity, loyalty, authority and patriotism. Research shows that double-dipping between the liberal and moral tastebuds is more offensive to conservatives, and that's believed to be rooted in their dedication to purity.

Take the issue of kneeling during the National Anthem in the NFL: someone on the left might see the injustice of racism and a peaceful protest, and be supportive. However, for someone on the right, it might be an issue of disrespect for authority, or it might be seen as unpatriotic.

"If you don't ask the same moral questions as [people on the opposing side] do, and you can't fathom that someone would have a different moral framework, it's hard to have these [civil] discussions," she said.

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