

# As a clinical psychologist, I believe free speech, not censorship, benefits mental health: Here's why

By

[Chloe Carmichael](#)

December 6, 2022 7:51pm

[Updated](#)



Twitter users are concerned about Elon Musk's approach to allowing free speech even if it's harmful. Getty Images/Chesnot

**I** sparked a firestorm of conversations about mental-health issues related to hate speech and bullying. Cries for cancellation, deplatforming, content-throttling and other stifling measures are often made in the name of “trust and safety.”

But these conversations rarely consider free speech’s mental-health *benefits*. As a clinical psychologist, I believe that freedom of expression far outshines [censorship](#) in terms of well-being. Here are three reasons:

## 1. Free speech promotes learning and growth.

Humans develop ideas based on social feedback. Free speech facilitates this by aiding the exchange of information and a healthy separation between people’s beliefs and their core self. Our thoughts and beliefs are *part* of who we are, but a healthy person can retain a stable sense of self despite changes in his or her beliefs. When we can separate our beliefs from our core identity, we set the stage for growth. Conversely, if we experience them as synonymous with our core identity, we can become rigid and inflexible.



Free speech promotes growth by allowing healthy self-reflection and authentic change. Getty Images

Learning to discard maladaptive beliefs is key to mental health. Sometimes, simply hearing ourselves say something aloud — and realizing how foolish it sounds — helps generate a fresh perspective! In addition to hearing ourselves, it can be helpful to listen to others: Exposure to diverse viewpoints furthers growth.

## **2. Free speech *helps* safe spaces.**

Censorship doesn’t squash hateful viewpoints; it merely subverts them. This makes it *harder to trust* that we’re accessing others’ *true* views — ironically undermining the concept of a “safe space.” But when “haters” share openly, we can see them clearly — rather than constantly second-guessing ourselves and each other.

00:00 01:27

Free speech also helps “safe spaces” because security increases when people realize they are *actually* safe — even when hearing abhorrent viewpoints. Teaching people that “Words are violence” is *disempowering* because it stimulates an unwarranted fight-or-flight reaction rather than an intellectual response.

It is my legal duty to alert the authorities if a patient is at imminent risk of harm to self or others — yet it would be a gross breach of confidentiality if I did so because a patient intended to vituperate his neighbor. The essential distinction is that physical harm is on a completely different level from nasty words.

### **3. Free speech may reduce anxiety and depression.**

Free speech might boost resiliency against anxiety and depression in several ways:

- **Verbalizing our internal life increases our sense of control.** Putting our thoughts and feelings into language increases our sense of control and self-efficacy, both of which are protective factors against anxiety and depression. Labeling feelings also helps prevent the amygdala from “hijacking” our thought process, setting the stage for more clear-headed thinking.
- **Authenticity facilitates social support.** Social support is a known protective factor for mental health. When we are forced to hide significant parts of ourselves, we feel inauthentic and isolated. Fears of being “canceled” over open dialogue can degrade our social support, thereby increasing vulnerability to anxiety and depression.



Free speech facilitates aiding the exchange of information and a healthy separation between people's beliefs and their core self. Getty Images

- **Free speech may increase self-awareness.** Self-awareness is essential to mental health. When we habitually hide our thoughts from *others*, we can become less aware of them *ourselves*. We are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression when we lack self-awareness due to suppression, repression or denial.

As a clinical psychologist, I understand that free speech promotes growth by allowing healthy self-reflection and authentic change — rather than creating pressure to *pantomime* change by parroting politically correct talking points for fear of being canceled. Mental wellness and resiliency require the ability to examine and withstand challenges and even grow from them. A society that permits open dialogue facilitates this process.

What do you think? [Post a comment.](#)

Mental wellness also requires healthy boundaries. If I encountered a client who expected it was the role of others to stop *having thoughts* he disliked or that it was the role of the public square (a.k.a. [Twitter](#)) to *eliminate* voices he disliked, I would help him build a sense of personal agency, boundaries and resilience for *his own benefit*.

There are situations when certain dialogue is inappropriate, but excessive restriction causes unhealthy levels of suppression and repression. As a clinical psychologist, I believe we would be a richer, healthier, more intelligent society if we welcomed more diversity of thought.

*Chloe Carmichael, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist, is the author of "[Nervous Energy: Harness the Power of Your Anxiety.](#)"*