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Climate anxiety: Is hopelessness preventing us from confronting our biggest challenge?

by [Lucienne Cross](#)

Every day, news reporters circulate the latest climate studies that seem to prove the world is ending. The reports appear to be working — if the goal of environmental journalists is to inform people of our existential crisis and create panic. Amidst the current fervor of political discontent, scores of people hit the streets for climate protests and [evidence suggests that the marches are working](#) — again, to inform and worry people. Since the release of a U.N. report claiming we have just 12 years to address climate change before it's too late, hundreds of people have showed up in therapists' offices with palpable symptoms of what practitioners are now calling "eco-anxiety" or "climate anxiety."

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What is eco-anxiety?

The term eco-anxiety entered the lexicon after Psychology Today described the phenomena as "a fairly recent psychological disorder afflicting an increasing number of individuals who worry about the environmental crisis." In 2017, a report by the American Psychological Society went viral and described the term as a "chronic fear of environmental doom."

Climate or eco-anxiety are new terms and no licensed doctor will explicitly diagnose you with it, but it is increasingly discussed with patients, especially among younger patients. As a result, the American Psychological Association published a lengthy manual about climate change to help practitioners guide patients through their anxiety surrounding the climate crisis.

Anxiety doesn't discriminate

Overwhelming feelings of hopelessness in the face of environmental threats around the world and at your doorstep are not specific to any one kind of person. It is not, though it may seem, only for those with enough time to read all the doomsday news, nor only for those who can afford therapists and college counselors. Those directly impacted by climate-related disasters, which are happening every week, experience "profound negative impacts" on their mental health. Disaster survivors have increased risk of depression, anxiety, anger issues, grief, post-traumatic stress disorders and even suicide.

Related: Climate change will push 120 million into poverty

Young people are panicking

Youth in particular are stressed out about climate change, so much so that students in more than 70 countries across the world walked out of their classrooms and participated in Youth Climate Marches. Bombarded with messages about climate catastrophes for the entirety of their short lives, the youngest generation has only experienced a world where global warming is a known fact, yet adults don't seem to be taking it seriously. Young people overwhelmingly feel despair that they will be left with a dysfunctional world, inherited from careless generations before them.

This year, Harvard reported that 46 percent of people between the ages of 18 to 24 believe climate change is a crisis that requires urgent action, and this conviction is simply not mirrored by those in power. This discrepancy leads young people to feel hopeless and powerless in the face of such a large and impending catastrophe. The American Psychological Association reported that 58 percent of people born after 1995 feel stressed when they see news coverage about climate change.

Is anxiety useful, though?

How much is climate anxiety is "normal" or at least inevitable? After all, shouldn't we be

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enraged by injustice? Shouldn't we be sickened by the declining health of the planet? Aren't these visceral reactions part of the process and a catalyst for change? The answer, experts say, depends on how debilitating the emotions are. The difference is between letting your anxiety prevent you from taking action or even living your daily life versus using it to fuel personal and political changes.

Doctor's orders: how to use your climate anxiety for good

Below are a few tips for finding meaning, hope and progress despite what might seem like an overwhelming and unsolvable crisis.

Start with yourself

Even when you feel powerless, you still have the authority to make your own choices and adjust your personal behaviors. Audit your own energy and consumption patterns, and make small changes that help you feel more in control and more sustainable. Consider following a vegan diet, biking to work, refusing single-use plastics or selecting more sustainable shipping options when shopping online.

Related: The pros and cons of online versus in-store shopping

"Firstly, make climate change a factor in the decisions you make around what you eat, how you travel and what you buy," said Duncan Greere, editor of the American Psychological Society report on eco-anxiety. "Secondly, talk about climate change with your friends, family and colleagues. Finally, demand that politicians and companies make it easier and cheaper to do the right thing for the climate."

Join a climate action group

There are environmental and climate action groups everywhere. Research those in your areas and attend a meeting. Not only will you find solace among others who are similarly concerned, but together you can take small steps that contribute to a larger push toward sustainability. Not all groups are on the front lines protesting; there is diversity in the work that needs to be done, including contacting your representatives, planting trees, organizing beach clean-ups, advocating for plastic bans and much more.

Participate in a clean-up activity

Plastic pollution is one of the biggest environmental issues of our time, but there is something you can do about it now. Seeing the change you've made by way of a hefty trash pile properly sorted, recycled and sent to the right place can help calm your anxiety, even if just temporarily. Beach and river clean-ups are often organized by neighborhood and community groups or nature conservation groups and can be fun social activities that encourage people to get outside.

Focus on local policy

If you are feeling hopeless because the national government isn't doing enough — and sometimes is doing more harm — focus on making changes at the state or local level. Oftentimes, home-grown legislators are better able to understand the local environment and can make more effective policies.

For example, while the Green New Deal proposal was causing a ruckus at the national level, New

[York City passed its own](#) Green New Deal. City and state governments have a better idea about specifically what ecosystems need to be protected, which infrastructure needs to become more resilient and how to pass plastic foam bans without hurting local businesses.

Stay informed about solutions

It's great to stay informed and up-to-date with the news, but learn to step away from your computer, TV or newspaper when you start to feel overwhelmed or depressed. Seek out sources that provide positive news about people working toward solutions.

See a therapist

If your anxiety or depression is disrupting your life and [mental health](#), don't hesitate to seek out professional help. No, climate-anxiety cannot be diagnosed, but it manifests similarly as general anxiety, and therapists are well-equipped with tools to help you cope and overcome.

Via [The Washington Post](#)

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