



Illustration by Annie Zhao

'Climate Despair' Is Making People Give Up on Life

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In the summer of 2015—**the warmest year on record at the time**—it was the literal heat that got to Meg Ruttan Walker, a 37-year-old former teacher in Kitchener, Ontario. "Summers have been stressful to me since having my son," said Ruttan Walker, who is now an environmental activist. "It's hard to enjoy a season that's a constant reminder that the world is getting warmer."

"I think my anxiety just reached a peak," Ruttan Walker continued. It felt like there was nowhere to go, and although she had spoken to her primary care doctor about anxiety, she hadn't sought help with her mental health. Suddenly, she was contemplating self-harm. "Though I don't think I would have hurt

myself, I didn't know how to live with the fear of... the apocalypse, I guess? My son was home with me and I had to call my friend over to watch him because I couldn't even look at him without breaking down," Ruttan Walker said. She eventually checked herself into an overnight mental health facility.

Her case is extreme, but many people are suffering from what could be called "climate despair," a sense that climate change is an unstoppable force that will render humanity extinct and renders life in the meantime futile. As **David Wallace-Wells** noted in his 2019 bestseller *The Uninhabitable Earth*, "For most who perceive an already unfolding climate crisis and intuit a more complete metamorphosis of



the world to come, the vision is a bleak one, often pieced together from perennial eschatological imagery inherited from existing apocalyptic texts like the Book of Revelation, the inescapable sourcebook for Western anxiety about the end of the world."

"Climate despair" has been a phrase used at least as far back as Eric Pooley's 2010 book, *The Climate War: True Believers, Power Brokers, and the Fight to Save the Earth*, but it's been in wide circulation for perhaps as little as two years. In more progressive Sweden, the term *klimatångest* has been popular since at least 2011 (the year a Wikipedia article with that name was created). In *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Wallace-Wells notes that the philosopher Wendy Lynne Lee calls this phenomenon "eco-nihilism," the Canadian politician and activist Stuart Parker prefers "climate nihilism," and others have tried out terms like "human futilitarianism."

Whatever you call it, this is undeniably a real condition, if not one with a set of formal diagnostic criteria. (It may reach that status—it took decades for "burnout" to be declared an official "occupational phenomenon" by the World Health Organization.) It's impossible to know how many people like Ruttan Walker have experienced climate despair as a mental health crisis, but despair is all around us: in our own momentary but intense reactions to the latest bit of climate news, in pitch-black memes and jokes about human extinction, even in works of philosophy and literature. There is now a fringe group of scientists and writers who not only take our imminent doom as an article of faith, but seem to welcome it.

This despair could be a consequence of climate change being on more people's minds than ever before. According to social scientist and psychology scholar Renee Lertzman, author of 2015's *Environmental Melancholia*, large numbers of people have recently come to the realization that climate change is real, scary, and not being addressed. "It's a surreal experience because we're still in the same system, so walking around, people are driving, and everyone's eating a lot of meat [and] everyone's acting like that's normal," she said. For

some people, that feeling is incompatible with carrying on with the business of everyday life.

But climate despair goes far beyond a reasonable concern that a warming planet will make life more difficult and force humanity to make hard choices. Instead of rallying us, climate despair asks us to give up. In a 2009 study in the UK by researchers Saffron O'Neill and Sophie Nicholson-Cole, climate-related data visualizations were presented to test subjects who were urged, in fear-based terms, to take action or else. Most of the time these appeals produced "denial, apathy, avoidance, and negative associations." Ultimately, the researchers concluded, "climate change images can evoke powerful feelings of issue salience but these do not necessarily make participants feel able to do anything about it; in fact, it may do the reverse." In other words, if you tell people *something must be done or we're all gonna die*, they tend to take door number two, however irrational that impulse may seem.

Experts say now is precisely the wrong time to greet doom with open arms. According to Andrew Dessler, professor of atmospheric sciences at Texas A&M University, certainty about human extinction is not accurate, nor is it "a particularly helpful point of view." Dessler explained to me in an email that "we are still (mostly) in control of our fate."

"This is painful," Lertzman said. "It's super painful to be a human being right now at this point in history." Nonetheless, she added, "We need to translate our concern—our despair, our anger our feelings—into action."





From a distance, climate despair may seem like ordinary anxiety and depression in patients who happen to be fixating on climate, but it's hard to deny the unique effect **climate change is having on mental health**. On May 5, a group of psychologists and psychotherapists in Sweden published an **open letter to their government** that noted the perverse status quo of climate change—the concern wasn't so much that the environment is breaking down, but that nothing was being done about it.

Specifically, the letter noted that children are aware that the grown-ups are leaving them a shitty world, and that's a really messed-up thing to be aware of when you're a kid. "A continued ecological crisis without an active solution focus from the adult world and decision makers poses a great risk that an increasing number of young people are affected by anxiety and depression," reads the letter, in Swedish.

Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish climate activist who led the **recent worldwide school strikes**, said in her 2018 **TED Talk** that knowing about climate change was hell on her young psyche. "When I was 11 I became ill. I fell into depression. I stopped talking and I stopped eating. In two months, I lost about 10 kilos of weight." She would later be told she had Aspergers, OCD, and was selectively mute. Then she came out of her despair, and found a voice when she decided to strike—refusing to go to school until the world demonstrated that it's getting its shit together.

Simply reading facts about climate change can produce reactions not too dissimilar to Thunberg's. *The Uninhabitable Earth* calls climate change "the end of normal," explaining, "We have already exited the state of environmental conditions that allowed the human animal to evolve in the first place, in an unsure and unplanned bet on just what that animal can endure." Last year's UN report on humanity's **probable failure** to stop warming short of the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold had a similar message, as did the one **from May** about how 1 million species are on track to go extinct due to human-caused environmental degradation, assuming we don't

change our course and stop generating greenhouse gases (alongside other forms of environmental havoc). Also in May, **an Australian think tank called climate change** "a near- to mid-term existential threat to human civilization."



These warning signs undoubtedly help spread awareness, but for some that awareness can breed hopelessness. Maisey Rohrer, a 22-year-old developmental researcher at New York University, has been struggling to cope with climate change for years. "I guess the despair started when I was 18, and I began learning about how much the earth was changing, and I'd have full-blown panic attacks about the arctic sea ice melting, and the polar bears starving, and I'd call my mom telling her life was pointless," she said. She believed at the time that the human race "should be wiped out."

"I became very suicidal, and a large part of my justification for feeling like I'd be better off dead was that humans are hurting the Earth so much, and I as one person [couldn't] make enough of a positive impact so it would be better if I were not around to cause any more damage," Rohrer said.

Even those who don't have thoughts of suicide can be affected in profound ways by climate despair. Brooke Morrison is a 26-year-old radio host in North Carolina who chatters about pop music enthusiastically when she's on air. Off-air, her world isn't so bright. "I feel like I'm already grieving my life and my future," she said. Even her life plans—she wants to move to Los Angeles—are colored by her pessimism. "I 100 percent believe that the West



Coast will be underwater soon, and I'd like to experience it while there's still time left," she said.

There are various "levels," as she calls them, on which she struggles with the coming ecological horrors: "Feeling as if I've already lost. Feeling out of control. Feeling like I can't start a family, so I talk myself out of wanting one or to even get married. Just giving up. Then still trying to maintain a will to keep moving forward. Trying to hold on to some form of hope."

But when she says "hope," she doesn't mean hope for the planet. She told me in no uncertain terms that she does not place any value whatsoever in humanity's attempts to mitigate climate change: "I think it's too late."

These feelings can be powerful, but they aren't grounded in hard science. Michael Mann, the Penn State climatologist often credited for helping bring the public's attention to the historical trends that are central to our understanding of climate change, calls this perspective "doomism," and he wanted to make it clear the evidence doesn't support it. "Unfortunately there's some bad science behind much of the 'doomism,'" he said. "There is no need to exaggerate or misstate what the science has to say."

Here's what the science has to say: Models that use the status quo—a.k.a. "not changing anything" as a baseline—show that we're headed off a cliff in terms of planetary habitability. But these models are probably overstating humanity's inaction. Entire (small) countries have no-bullshit plans to decarbonize quickly, and larger ones are making no-bullshit progress, just not nearly fast enough. Following these trends, it's possible to imagine humanity will achieve relative climate stability, even as the already-baked-in effects of our greenhouse gas emissions—some of them horrible—keep rolling out, perhaps for thousands of years. That would be better than never decarbonizing, and never achieving any semblance of stability ever again.

Dessler puts it this way: "I think it's clear that emissions will come down to zero and stabilize the

climate sometime this century. But taking 50 years to do that will yield a different world than if we do it in 20 years. It's up to us to decide which of these worlds we want to live in."

Humanity clearly needs to treat climate as an urgent problem, and as Wallace-Wells notes in *Uninhabitable Earth*, it's important to discuss extremely pessimistic possibilities as long as they are in fact possible, because "when we dismiss the worst-case possibilities, it distorts our sense of likelier outcomes, which we then regard as extreme scenarios we needn't plan so conscientiously for." But the intellectual thrust of climate despair takes this further, insisting that *only* the worst-case scenarios are worth serious consideration.

This is a worldview that has blossomed on places like the /r/collapse subreddit, which curates news events in such a way as to demonstrate that the world is coming to an end. Authors Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine put the term "solutions" in scare quotes in their 2014 *Dark Mountain Manifesto*, which, while mostly a literary call to arms, is also an embrace of society's "unraveling." And there are scientists who have marketed themselves as doomsaying prophets, only for their prophecies to be disproved. Among them are the notorious melting sea ice exaggerator Peter Wadhams and the ecologist and the-end-is-nigh-fabulist Guy McPherson.

But nothing compares to the intense viral bleakness of *Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy*, by Cumbria University professor Jem Bendell, a 2018 paper that Bendell self-published after an academic journal declined to publish it. The paper argues that total societal collapse is on its way, and describes life in the midst of that collapse with vivid sentences like, "You will fear being violently killed before starving to death." The paper was so powerful that people have credited it for sending them to therapy or quitting their jobs to live closer to nature.



But *Deep Adaptation* has been pilloried as an **all-around shoddy piece of work by academic standards**. I showed *Deep Adaptation* to the **anthropologist Joseph Tainter**, the foremost scholar I could find on the topic of societal collapse, and he told me this: "I find Bendell's paper to be simplistic and superficial. Since it is also alarmist, I will also call it irresponsible. After reviewing environmental trends related to climate change, he fails to demonstrate how these lead to 'starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war.' Climate change might lead to some or all of these things, but in such a paper one needs to demonstrate how." (In response to Tainter, Bendell told me his paper didn't explain the mechanism of collapse because it "was already long, given the summary of climate science and of processes of denial," and said the paper "was speaking to my professional field of sustainability management and not to other fields, such as those who study the history of societal collapses.")

Anyone who follows climate change knows how devastating the consequences will be. But there's concern among academics and activists that perspectives like Bendell's do more harm than good. Mann, the climatologist, thinks even Wallace-Wells goes too far. In a response to the 2017 *New York* magazine article Wallace-Wells's book was based on, Mann **wrote**, "Fear does not motivate, and appealing to it is often counter-productive as it tends to distance people from the problem, leading them to disengage, doubt and even dismiss it."

Taking it a step further, British writer and climate activist George Monbiot sees succumbing to despair as a moral failure. "By throwing up our hands about the calamities that could one day afflict us, we disguise and distance them, converting concrete choices into indecipherable dread," Monbiot **wrote in April**. "We might relieve ourselves of moral agency by claiming that it's already too late to act, but in doing so we condemn others to destitution or death."

If despair breeds inaction, that's obviously a problem. But others think a certain amount of dread could be helpful. In an **essay by four sociologists**

(Kasia Paprocki, Daniel Aldana Cohen, Rebecca Elliott and Liz Koslov) published in May, the authors argue for something called "useful discomfort." They write that they couldn't help but notice that their colleagues in the physical sciences are having a tough time dealing with "overwhelming evidence of an apocalypse," and that they're "largely despairing both because of what they know, and how they are being ignored, dismissed, and even outright threatened." However, they write, "We believe that our discomforts are productive. They allow us to reject catastrophism and clarify possibilities for better futures."

In fact, as despair has ramped up, Americans' view of climate change seems to have shifted. In February, **Yale** published a survey of attitudes about climate change and noted an 8 percent spike in Americans "alarmed" by climate change over the course of a single year. That survey was conducted just after the autumn release of the UN's blockbuster 2018 special report (by which time Wallace-Wells's *New York* story had also circulated). The Yale survey doesn't connect those dots, and correlation doesn't mean causation, but it's tempting to think *something* shook a whole lot of people out of their complacency—at least momentarily. Politicians are also increasingly talking about climate change, with the left **lining up behind the Green New Deal framework** and even some Republicans **willing to consider climate policies**.



That's likely not much comfort for those already struggling with mental health issues that the dialogue around climate change can worsen.

"I felt like every meal I ate and every coffee or drink I had with a straw was going to be more detrimental



than was probably true, and that led me to stop eating enough and to make some other decisions that hurt my overall health," said Rohrer. "And this in turn fed into my depression more because of lack of nutrition and sleep, and that increased my paranoia and panic about the climate. It was just a really vicious cycle."

Katerina Georgiou, a London therapist, told me in an email that climate despair is "usually connected to clients who present already with [a] diagnosis of anxiety (generalised, health, or OCD)." Georgiou explained that these patients are suffering "a lot," but in her assessment, "it's less to do with the topic itself and more to do with the pattern of how anxiety works. Climate change just happens to be where the fixation is, but it's the fixation that is the symptom."

When I asked what coping strategies she suggests, Georgiou's answer was simple: "Reduce amount of time watching the news and being on social media."

But many of the people I spoke to who suffer from climate despair didn't want their fixation on the future of the planet to be treated as a symptom. For these patients, one important first step seems to be simply finding a therapist who acknowledges upfront that climate change isn't a manifestation of mental illness.

Rohrer was relieved to eventually find someone like this. "She heard me out, let me rant for over two hours on our first intake appointment, and then basically said we needed to put things like my specific despair about the climate on the back burner and wrangle in my tendency to catastrophize everything... At first I was really annoyed," Rohrer told me. "But once she explained why, and we made a plan which included coming back to it I felt understood, which helped."

According to Ruttan Walker, the activist who had the crisis in 2015, the perfect therapist would recognize that yes, mental illness is the problem at hand, but would simultaneously recognize the "enormity of the climate crisis." She told me this would also need to be "someone I could work with long term, because I still have to live in the world and the climate crisis

isn't going away. Getting stuck in despair isn't an option for me as a parent or activist."

Lertzman thinks therapists have to change, because "what we're talking about is in fact new and unprecedented, and that we need new practices for addressing this," although she added, "that doesn't mean we're starting from scratch." She said one way or another, we need to have a whole lot of no-holds-barred conversations about how we feel about climate change, where no emotion is wrong.

"When there's a crisis going on in our lives—like a job loss, or losing someone, or a divorce, or upheaval, or now increasingly displacement from natural disasters and flooding and fire—we need to be able to process our experience, usually by talking with people," Lertzman said. "Then we can be more capable of actually moving forward. This context is no different."

For therapists, Lertzman suggested a practice called motivational interviewing (M.I.), pioneered by the psychologists William Miller and Stephen Rollnick. Motivational interviewing is meant to steer people toward difficult but necessary behavioral changes by asking them questions. "It takes time to have a 10-minute conversation or a 15-minute conversation using M.I. versus a five-minute interaction where you just tell someone, 'Here, you need to eat this,' or, 'You need to exercise more,'" Lertzman said. She added that "respecting our experience as valuable and full of wisdom," is the most important part of an M.I.-derived therapy for climate despair, and that specific techniques gleaned from M.I. include "sitting in circles talking, creating safe spaces to be honest and vulnerable, [and] sharing our stories."

Even if therapies like these could unfailingly turn people's despair into helpful action, it seems like a slow process to undergo at a time when, as Bill Nye recently **pointed out**, *the world is on fire*. Still, Lertzman told me, sometimes we have to slow things down in order to move forward. "There's a phrase in M.I.: 'We don't have time not to take the time,'" she said.



But if learning to motivate people sounds time-consuming, there's another, much older and simpler way to process despair. Give into it for a moment. Cry it out. Let yourself acknowledge how fucking bad it all is, and how a lot of it is never, ever getting better. In short: grieve.

Ruttan Walker told me she often uses grief as a way to process her emotions about climate. "We have to acknowledge that we've changed our planet. We've made it more dangerous and we've done harm," she said.

Lertzman co-signed this approach. "It's healthy to grieve," she said. "We need to actually pause. We need to honor and engage with how we are feeling. That's not the same as wallowing. It's not the same as going into a hole hold you never come out of."

"Grief is a process. A recognition," Ruttan Walker explained. "But you can still move on."

*Mike Pearl is the author of the forthcoming book **The Day It Finally Happens Alien Contact, Dinosaur Parks, Immortal Humans—and Other Possible Phenomena**. Follow him on **Twitter**.*