

Got Climate Anxiety?

There's an antidote for that. Read on for how to turn fear and paralysis into motivation that'll help your mental health — and the planet.

by MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU

No doubt you've had your share of middle-of-the-night wake-ups lately:

Between the usual pressing work deadlines, kid drama and (oh, right!) a global pandemic that keeps resurging, anxieties are running high.





But on top of these day-to-day concerns, there's another big pot of worry simmering, and it's moving off the back burner: anxiety about climate change. "Nature always seemed like a literal rock in an otherwise crazy and unpredictable world," says Katy Romita, a 45-year-old meditation instructor in Mamaroneck, NY. While she'd been aware of climate change for a long time, it felt far away. Then last fall her neighbors lost homes, possessions and their sense of security after the ferocious Hurricane Ida struck; that brought her worries closer to home. "This was something I was used to seeing on the news, not in my own town," Katy says.

While the increase in climate-related catastrophes and calls for action will hopefully galvanize communities and countries to mitigate climate change, it may make your anxiety worse—especially if you're directly affected: After Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in 2017, researchers estimated that nearly half the city's population had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an extreme form of anxiety. Being impacted more than once can push you even further. "If you experience two 100-year floods in a few years, your capacity to cope is going to be depleted," says Christie Manning, Ph.D., director of sustainability at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN.

The worry alone is a big stressor, especially for women and marginalized people. Women are often responsible for helping the elderly and children through a weather event, and research shows that

people of color are more likely to be impacted. Decades of discrimination by banks and governments pushed poorer communities into lower-altitude areas with fewer parks and trees, or close to highways and airports, making them more vulnerable to flooding, pollution and heat.

Fortunately, there are ways to get a handle on it. "The antidote to climate anxiety is action, and we can't solve the problem alone," says Katharine Hayhoe, Ph.D., chief scientist for the nonprofit The Nature Conservancy and author of *Saving Us*. Step one? Understanding where we are.

OUR MENTAL HEALTH CLIMATE

Scientists have long understood how the climate crisis—caused by all the greenhouse gases we've pumped into the atmosphere since the 19th century—affects us physically. Rising temperatures

result in dehydration, heatstroke and heart disease as well as causing warm-weather conditions like Lyme disease and allergies to linger. Extreme weather events, such as the California wildfires and floods in the Midwest, put people at risk of injury, and they also can hamper access to medical care.

But the notion that climate change affects our psyches is a more recent one. "Even 10 years ago, the idea that climate change has mental health impacts was something most people didn't think about—including me," says Susan Clayton, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the College of Wooster in Ohio and coauthor of a 2021 report by the American Psychological Association and the nonprofit EcoAmerica. These effects include stress, anxiety, depression and PTSD, among others.

Research is ongoing, but it's clear that our angst is rising, says Clayton. More than three-quarters of Americans understand that the planet is warming, according to the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, with a majority believing it will harm their own communities. This may be why 70% of us are at least somewhat worried, with 35% "very worried." Google searches for terms like "climate anxiety" and "eco-anxiety" have skyrocketed in recent years, found a study by Kelton Minor at the University of Copenhagen.

Parents are especially uneasy. "I hear from people a lot that they're worried about the world they're leaving their children," Clayton says. In a large international study Clayton coauthored in 2021, 45% of teens and young adults said their climate stress affected their daily lives. "After we see a climate disaster on the news, my 8-year-old son peppers me with questions on what we will do if it happens here. I can see the anxiety on his face," says Ricki Weisberg, a 42-year-old public relations executive in Ardmore, PA. Compounding her own worry is that she can't say honestly that it won't—tornadoes in her area were previously rare, but several struck a nearby city last year.

Anxiety involves feeling tense and fearful when we ponder something that might happen in the future. Often the negative outcome is unlikely and the fear overblown, but climate anxiety is unique in that there's good evidence that what we are worried about may well come to pass. "Climate anxiety is not a mental illness, because it's rational to be concerned," Clayton says.

What that means is that the things you might normally do to calm your fears—talking to a friend or a therapist—are not enough. Climate shifts are here to stay even if countries around the world take steps to curtail them. "Anxiety is a sensible response to what we're facing, but we must address it through action," says Hayhoe.

FROM OVERWHELMED TO OPTIMISTIC

For some, climate anxiety is a good thing, calling attention to a problem they need to prepare for, psychologists say. But many of us feel paralyzed, not motivated, says Renée Lertzman, Ph.D., a consultant whose TED Talk has been viewed over 2 million times. “There’s a myth that people don’t care about the climate. But many feel conflicted about how to respond, so they numb out,” she says. Let’s say you understand that flying, driving and eating meat contribute, but you like having those things in your life—this may cause you to freeze instead of taking individual action, she says.

And because we need widespread changes to systems, the kind that must involve all of society, governments and corporations, it’s easy to feel helpless, says Manning. “Not many of us feel like we have the training, skills, influence or time to know how to get elected officials and corporations to listen and make changes,” she adds.

So what helps? Building a sense of optimism. When 5,000 people were asked how they felt when they thought about taking a climate action, people who felt most hopeful were more likely to want to act, while anxious but unhelpful people were not as motivated, a study published in August in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* found. ★



7 WAYS TO FEEL MORE IN CONTROL

Whether it's concerns about climate or other world issues, anxiety feels terrible. Try these steps to calm your mind.

List what you love about your life.

This “meaning-focused coping” helps to calm your brain and allows useful ideas to come to you, says Christie Manning, Ph.D., director of sustainability at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN. Think about what you appreciate in your career, in your family or in the natural world around you.

Look at history.

Women’s suffrage. Gay marriage. An end to apartheid in South Africa. “Those didn’t happen because an influential person decided it was time, but because ordinary people like us decided the world had to be different and they used their voices to start the change,” says Katharine Hayhoe, Ph.D., chief scientist for the nonprofit The Nature Conservancy and author of *Saving Us*. “We often picture

climate action as a giant boulder at the bottom of a hill with a few hands on it, but when we look at what so many people and groups are doing, we realize the boulder is at the top and rolling down, and it has millions of hands on it that we can join,” she says.

Find your people. “If you have deep concerns about the climate, it’s really important that you have people who take those concerns seriously and don’t gaslight you,” Manning says. Plus, joining forces amplifies solutions. There are national organizations like the Sierra Club and niche groups like the nonpartisan Protect Our Winters for those who enjoy snow sports. Groups in your own community can work on local solutions—more green spaces to help with cooling, say, or bike

lanes to reduce driving. Besides, being part of a group is itself a stress reducer.

Know that you don’t have to be perfect. Every step you take (using a colder wash cycle, driving an electric car) has merit. Last fall Katy Romita started onesmallstone.net, which offers online meditations to others seeking to calm their climate anxiety.

Ease your kids’ angst. Involve your children in climate solutions in a fun way, such as volunteering to plant trees or joining the NASA-sponsored GLOBE Program, in which parents and kids collect information about trees and clouds to support our understanding of the environment, suggests Sandi Schwartz, author of *Finding EcoHappiness*. Actions like these help children feel empowered.

Don’t argue with deniers.

Only 7% believe strongly that global warming is not happening. “If that’s your family member, say ‘I love you, but you’re wrong’ and move on. Don’t try to have a productive conversation or tell them they should care for the same reasons you care,” Hayhoe says.

Get help if you need to. Find support online at climatecafes.org or Good Grief Network (goodgriefnetwork.org). And remind yourself that your community can bounce back from climate damage. “Resilience is the ability to function and thrive in the face of negative events,” and humans have this resource in spades, Clayton says. As we tackle climate change, that’s something to feel good about.