

Combating Climate Anxiety: How Young Activists in California Are Taking Care of Themselves, and Each Other



Students of Long Beach Unified School District rally for their campaign at Martin Luther King Jr. Park in Long Beach in 2021. (Courtesy of Diana Michaelson)

[Gabriella Frenes](#), Jan 6,

From [wildfires threatening scenic areas](#) like Lake Tahoe to an everlasting [statewide drought](#), California continues to see the destructive effects of climate change increase each year. The devastation also can take a huge toll on mental health. According to a recent study that surveyed 10 countries, about [60% of young people feel worried](#) or extremely worried about climate change. And more than half of the respondents

relayed feelings of fear for their future and hesitancy when thinking of major life decisions like having children.

Some young people now feel pressure to take climate action, since it seems like their future is at stake. In California, there are many young activists who are channeling their climate anxiety into action.

Diana Michaelson is a 16-year-old junior at Long Beach Polytechnic High School who has been

worried about climate change since her first year. That's when she learned her hometown of Long Beach would be facing serious sea level rise by the time she's 25.

'Young people are going to be impacted for the majority of their lives by whatever climate is to come or is happening right now.' *Nik Evasco, youth climate organizer and program manager, 350 Bay Area*

"I've always been told to do it for your children, save the future for the next generation," said Michaelson. "And what I've realized is, at this current rate, there's no saving the next generation. We're seeing the effects right now."

Michaelson is leading a [student initiative](#) to transition her school district off fossil fuels to

100% renewable energy by 2030. A similar campaign has already been passed by the Los Angeles Unified School District: Since their commitment in 2007 to becoming an environmentally friendly urban school district, they've decreased their electricity, natural gas and water use and have developed more green spaces across the district.

Michaelson says she was able to connect with a few of the leaders from LAUSD's campaign, which pushed her to begin her own in Long Beach. But, while she's passionate about her activism, she also says her parents and many of the adults involved in the campaign just want her and her peers to have a normal teenage life.



Students of LBUSD meet via Zoom to discuss the 100% renewable energy campaign in 2021. (Courtesy of Diana Michaelson)

"What I'm realizing is this isn't normal," she said. "This shouldn't be normal. We shouldn't have to be rallying for a future."

But the fact is, it's hard to ignore these issues when the stakes around climate change feel so urgent.

In the Bay Area, leaders like Nik Evasco act as mentors to support young organizers as they continue to grow as climate leaders. Evasco is a youth climate organizer and program manager with [350 Bay Area](#), a nonprofit organization that focuses on fossil fuel resistance. They lead the youth mobilizing team on local and statewide campaigns.

"Young people are going to be impacted for the majority of their lives by whatever climate is to come or is happening right now," Evasco said. "So there really is this kind of shift that I've noticed where it's put youth in front, of course. You can't have a movement that's not being led by directly impacted communities."



Members of 350 Bay Area's youth mobilizing team push for fossil fuel resistance on the day of President Biden's inauguration on Jan. 20, 2021. (Courtesy of Nik Evasco)

But, Evasco points out, these communities often don't have the resources they need to push through sustainable changes at a higher level, which can foster feelings of frustration and burnout for many of these young activists. Evasco coined this idea as the "youth hope industrial complex."

"It's kind of like a double-edged sword of, you bring us all the solutions and then you take the lead, and then the flip side of it is that there's no payoff in the political or policy sphere," Evasco said.

While on-the-ground activism is important, it's also just as crucial to take time to process setbacks. 350 Bay Area organizes frequent social events to create a space for young climate advocates to talk about how they're feeling with their work.

"Because if you don't, if you're just fueled by pure optimism, rage or just one emotion in your activism work, it can be really detrimental," Evasco said.

Advocates who've been working in the climate justice field for a while are aware of the emotional toll it can take. They want to be there for this new generation of activists and push them to pursue outlets, other than just advocacy, to process their anxiety.



Members of 350 Bay Area march on the UC Berkeley campus during the November global day of climate action on Nov. 6, 2021. (Courtesy of Nik Evasco)

That's what inspired Yvonne Cuaresma to create her company, the [Climate Journal Project](#). She guides students in California from elementary school to college age on adopting a journaling practice to help them cope with their environmental anxiety and grief.

"The climate crisis is such a big issue that's not going to be solved overnight," said Cuaresma. "Being able to find a safe space for that through journaling and through community has been extremely rewarding."

Cuaresma was reminded of how writing can be used as a form of therapy when she moved back home to Glendale at the beginning of the pandemic. During this time of hopelessness, she dug out her old diaries and realized how others could benefit from a writing practice as well.

“Planetary healing actually starts with internal healing, so we can only be the best advocates and leaders that we can be if we are really true and doing the work internally,” Cuaresma said.

And it’s clear from youth activist Diana Michaelson’s experience that these internal reinforcements are important, because the responsibility she feels as an activist is continuing to grow.

“I think that over time, I’ve learned in becoming more educated about the climate crisis and energy sustainability, I’ve seen adults take us more seriously,” she said. “I’ve definitely also felt this change and this shift in view from little, innocent kids to young adults who are inheriting this Earth and who will become the leaders.”

In the meantime, Michaelson has been meeting with environmental lawyers who are helping her construct a resolution to present to her school district. She feels optimistic that Long Beach Unified School District administrators will commit to move forward with a 100% renewable energy plan by next month.