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Climate anxiety is a normal response to an abnormal situation. Here's what to do about it



(Patrick Hruby / Los Angeles Times) By [Laura Newberry](#) Staff Writer Oct. 4, 2022 11 AM PT

If I'm being totally honest, writing this week's newsletter has made me edgy. It's about something so big, so consequential, that I really don't want to get it wrong. It's a topic that I routinely avoid because confronting it feels about as comfortable as staring into the sun.

But climate change is impossible to avoid. Last week, Hurricane Ian made its way across my home state of Florida, and like many other Americans I waited to learn more, including whether my parents' home was safe. Meanwhile, here in sunny Los Angeles, we've experienced a dangerously hot September. At any moment, we could see a wildfire engulf the hillsides, ripe for burning after another year of drought.

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That is really just the tip of my climate crisis anxiety iceberg, an anxiety that you probably feel on some level, too.

So, if you will, please put on your polarized sunglasses and stare into the sun with me today as I answer this question, sent to us by Mari in Sherman Oaks: ***"How do I address climate anxiety? I recently started online therapy available through my health insurance, but this problem still keeps me up at night. I am terrified about the future and my adult children's futures."***

Los Angeles Times

Like I said, a biggie.

But I so appreciate this question, because acknowledging climate distress is the first step in doing something about the much larger issue of global warming. Let's get into it.

What is climate distress?

Climate distress can look like anxiety, grief, despair, panic, anger, powerlessness and hopelessness.

Like our reader Mari, it can look like parents losing sleep because they're worried about their kids' futures. It can look like preoccupation with climate collapse and reading every article you can on the issue, or avoiding climate news altogether. You might feel immense guilt over how the industry you work in, or the companies you buy from, contribute to global warming. You might mourn the fact that your hometown is getting hotter, or more vulnerable to flooding, and you aren't sure whether you can live there long term.

"A lot of anxiety comes from assessing a problem and trying to solve it, but feeling like there isn't anything you can do — so your mind just circles back to the problem," said Andrew Bryant, a psychotherapist in Seattle and creator of [Climate & Mind](#), a website that aims to improve the ways people cope with climate change.

There are millions of people globally who have no choice but to confront climate change right now — like those whose cultures and livelihoods depend on the land ([including Indigenous tribes and farmers](#)), [climate refugees](#), those who've had their lives upended [by fire](#) and flood, and the many who live in [urban areas with little tree cover that are much more vulnerable to heat waves](#). It's a privilege — and for many, a source of deep guilt — to think about climate change as tomorrow's problem.

But part of that avoidance is human nature.

Our brains are wired to respond to immediate threats and things we can see, said Barbara Easterlin, a Bay Area psychologist who developed [a training program](#) that helps psychotherapists incorporate climate psychology into their practices.

"We're wired to get food on the table and the kids to school — problems we can solve right away," Easterlin said. "Climate change isn't like that. It's large, complex and won't be solved tomorrow."

Humans also don't like uncertainty, so instead of sitting with the complexity and immensity of the climate crisis, we split off into these extreme poles. We either dismiss how dangerous it is, or we believe that societal collapse is inevitable, said Britt Wray, a postdoctoral fellow at the Stanford Center for Innovation in Global Health whose research focuses on the mental health effects of the ecological crisis.

"Climate denialism isn't as much anymore that people don't believe in climate change, though of course there are some people out there who don't. It's more like: I can see what's happening, I'm just not going to look there," Easterlin said.

Or we rationalize, believing we're doing enough by driving a hybrid and recycling. "All of these things are normal and natural defenses, but it's a barrier to engaging with the problem," Easterlin said.

But in our inaction, we suffer more. A recent poll [conducted by the American Psychiatric Assn.](#) found that 67% of Americans are somewhat or extremely anxious about the effects of climate change on the planet. Nearly half of young people ages 16 to 25 reported [feeling distressed or anxious](#) about the climate in a way that was affecting their daily functioning, according to a 2021 [scientific study on climate anxiety](#). Three-quarters agreed with the statement "The future is frightening," and, incredibly, 4 in 10 said they are hesitant to have children because of the climate crisis.

Los Angeles Times

“People have been preoccupied with COVID,” said Robert Feder, a New Hampshire psychiatrist on the American Psychiatric Assn.’s committee on climate change and mental health. “But in the last six months, therapists are noticing the climate crisis being brought up more and more as a source of anxiety and depression.”

What you can do

How can we turn denial, despair and hopelessness into meaningful action?

First, we should recognize that our climate distress isn’t dysfunctional. It’s an alarm system that’s meant to move us out of complacency, Wray told me. These difficult emotions are vital to “figuring out one’s role in productive responses to the climate crisis,” she said.

Unmanaged, though, climate distress can become overwhelming to the point of paralysis. The trick is to balance hope and fear, experts say. Keep your eyes open to the realities of global warming, but also the beauty that still exists in this world.

“I’m increasingly convinced that we need to go from this deficit model of thinking only about the nightmare and scary future we want to avoid,” Wray said, “and move to a place of understanding how we can flourish and uphold our sense of well-being, joy, satisfaction, connection, love, meaning and purpose in our experience of the climate crisis.”

The following suggestions won’t simply help you calm your nerves while the world around you burns. This is also a structural, collective problem and demands collective solutions. But we still have to deal with our own stuff. That’s where we’ll start:

- **Sit with your feelings.** You may want to immediately channel all of this anxious energy into a PhD in atmospheric science or joining Greenpeace, but wait a sec. Jumping into action without untangling your emotions first is just another form of avoidance, Bryant said.

Paying close attention to your feelings may be overwhelming at first. Start by thinking about the smaller consequences of climate change and tune into what that brings up for you, Easterlin suggested. Notice how bothered you are by the fact that you haven’t been able to water your plants this year, and now they’re dying. Notice how anxious you get when you’re staying at a hotel and they give you two plastic water bottles.

“Nobody wants to have bad feelings about anything — but we do, and if we keep defending against them, we will feel helpless,” Easterlin said.

- **Share those feelings with others.** Don’t work through these feelings alone. “A lot of people are worried about this, but it can feel isolating,” Bryant said. Bring up climate change at a dinner party and notice how quickly the crickets start chirping. People are scared to talk about it.

Luckily, there are spaces where people are eager to be in dialogue about the issue. [Climate Awakening](#) offers online sharing and listening sessions that aim to break the “spiral of silence that exists around the climate emergency.” Good Grief Network facilitates [eco-distress support groups](#) (modeled off 12-step programs) across the U.S.

- **Find your niche.** The best way to deal with your climate anxiety — once you’ve started working through your feelings and difficult emotions — is to do something about the problem that’s causing it.

You could join a local environmental group, like the Sierra Club’s [climate action team](#) in Los Angeles, or Marin County’s [Resilient Neighborhoods](#).

Whatever you choose to do, you’ll want it be enjoyable. Otherwise, you’ll burn out. Think about your strengths, skills and resources, but also what gives you energy and satisfaction.

Los Angeles Times

Then look at where there's need. "That's the sweet spot — something we can commit to for the long haul," Wray said.

This method is borrowed from marine biologist and policy expert Ayana Elizabeth Johnson. In a [TED Talk](#), Johnson talks about how her mother, a retired English teacher, played a "small but mighty part" in New York state's fracking ban and converted her lawn into a model for small-scale, regenerative farming. Psychotherapists like Bryant and Easterlin looked at how they could shift their own practices to help people deal with climate distress.

- **Enjoy nature.** Last but not least, spend time outside. Hike, kayak, ski, take a walk in your neighborhood and smell the flowers. It'll help you manage stress and remind you of what you're working so hard to protect.

"I've worked with people who are really passionate about the issue, but they spend a ton of time online reading newspaper articles and don't get outside very much to get a breath of fresh air," Bryant said. "They can lose touch with what brought this passion and care into them in the first place."

Interviewing people so in touch with their feelings around climate change helped me realize how far I have to go in processing my own hopelessness around the issue, but it's been cathartic and energizing to share this road map with you all. The next step is to follow it.

See you next week,

Laura

If what you learned today from these experts spoke to you or you'd like to tell us about your own experiences, please email us and let us know if it is OK to share your thoughts with the larger Group Therapy community. The email GroupTherapy@latimes.com gets right to our team. As always, find us on Instagram at

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More perspectives on today's topic & other resources

Britt Wray's excellent ["Gen Dread" newsletter](#) provides a nuanced perspective on the psychological impacts of global warming and tools for how to cope with this reality. Wray's book on the topic, ["Generation Dread,"](#) was also published earlier this year.

[Climate Awakening](#) is a series of ongoing sharing and listening sessions that anyone can drop into virtually to process their feelings around global warming.

The All We Can Save Project offers resources for [building community around the climate crisis](#) — specifically how to facilitate a "circle," meetings that are designed to nurture connection, encourage dialogue, and seed action for climate solutions.

Climate & Mind provides an [extensive collection of resources](#) related to the climate and mental health, including research, recommended reading, how to talk with kids about global warming and where to seek help.

The Climate-Aware Therapist Directory aims to connect people with [mental health professionals](#) who recognize that the climate crisis is "both a global threat to all life on Earth and a deeply personal threat to the mental and physical well-being ... of each individual, family, and community on the planet."

Other interesting stuff

Los Angeles Times

Why Korean Americans are seeking more mental health help, from [BTS to Zoom therapy](#) — by my colleague Jeong Park.

Does anyone else feel as if they're drowning?

In her introduction to our [How to Save a Life](#) project, my friend and fellow Times writer Deborah Netburn muses on what it means to be a human in these extraordinarily stressful times, and how we can begin to help ourselves and others.

How to sort through the thicket of 10,000 (and counting) [mental health apps available online](#), from a University of Connecticut professor.

My anxiety meter runs hot; VR meditation helped me relax, [a piece by my colleague Todd Martens](#) about how he believed meditation wasn't for him — until he picked up his VR headset.

Group Therapy is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional mental health advice, diagnosis or treatment. We encourage you to seek the advice of a mental health professional or other qualified health provider with any questions or concerns you may have about your mental health.



[Laura Newberry](#) Laura Newberry is a reporter with the mental health initiative at the Los Angeles Times and writes Group Therapy, a weekly newsletter. She previously worked on The Times' education team and was a staff reporter at both the Reading Eagle in Eastern Pennsylvania and MassLive in Western Massachusetts. She graduated from UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism in 2018 and is currently pursuing her master of social work.