



CLIMATE ANXIETY

Navigating Our Emotions as the Planet Changes

by Sandra Yeyati

Amid a record-breaking hurricane season, out-of-control wildfires and a deadly pandemic, many of us are anxious and fearful, prompted by the growing realization of being in a state of environmental insecurity. These inklings of impending doom are nothing new for members of the youth climate movement—kids in their teens or younger—succumbing to hopelessness, anger and rage as they learn the science and watch leaders do nothing to address it.

Hardest hit are “marginalized communities, including indigenous people, climate refugees, farmers struggling with drought and communities of color, who disproportionately suffer from the health effects of polluting industries,” says Jennifer Atkinson, associate professor of environmental studies at the University of Washington-Bothell.

Some of us are affected in more subtle ways. Perhaps we’re noticing slow-moving changes around us, like the gradual loss of bees or a disappearance of trees, and we develop a sense of loss the philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined “solastalgia,” which plays on the concept of nostalgia—a longing for a time or place we can’t go back to.

Or, we’re standing in front of a package of blueberries at the grocery store feeling confusion and ambivalence. A desire to be healthy and adopt a sustainable, vegetarian lifestyle is playing tug-of-war with the news that these blueberries were flown in from South America, are wrapped in plastic and were grown in a monoculture that depletes the soil. It’s hard to know whether to eat or boycott them. “The greater this dissonance grows, the more likely we’ll tell ourselves that the problems are too big. We decide that we can’t make a difference, so why try? We check out,” says integrative psychotherapist Leslie Davenport, author of *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change*.

The first step to alleviate this anguish is to validate and normalize the dark feelings. “It’s important to remember that there’s nothing wrong with you. What’s happening is actually painful and difficult; there’s a lot of loss involved. Eco-anxiety is a natural response to having your heart and mind open, being an attentive and caring person, if you tune in to what’s happening in the world,” says Davenport, adding that good self-care, including mindfulness practices, will expand our tolerance for

dealing with tough times.

Another powerful antidote can be found in community, according to Sarah Jaquette Ray, associate professor of environmental studies at Humboldt State University, in Arcata, California, and author of *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*. “People feel like they can’t impact the world because they’re only one person. But when they start to shift the lens toward the collective, it allows them to realize that the positive things that are happening in the world are actually happening at scale, and it allows them to feel like they’re part of some larger purpose,” says Ray.

As we accept climate-related anxiety and seek the company of like-minded people to affect change, surprisingly positive emotions will arise, including joy, laughter, dancing and camaraderie at street protests. “Those positive feelings help us process grief and anger, engage us in the work long term and help us maintain the stamina we need for sustained work,” Ray says.

“Think of climate anxiety as a kind of superpower, a signal that goes off to tell us something’s wrong and needs to be addressed,” says Atkinson, the creator and host of the climate-anxiety podcast *Facing It*. She points to grief as a compelling motivator. “You can’t feel grief without love,” she explains. “Grief is an expression of compassion and connection to others and to the pain we feel when those lives are destroyed. Love is far more powerful in motivating us to fight than any other affect. There’s no limit to the lengths we’ll go to protect what we love.”

We are only limited by a lack of ecological imagination, Davenport proposes. “Our contemporary Western culture emphasizes the rational, cognitive way of thinking, which is linear and analytical. But another part of the brain—the imaginative, creative and intuitive part—views the world synergistically and holistically. If we open up to this ecological imagination, we can have a visceral knowing of interconnectedness, making it simpler to act in a way that’s beneficial to all of us.”

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