

'Climate Grief': Fears about the planet's future weigh on Americans' mental health

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Therapist Andrew Bryant says the landmark United Nations climate report last October brought a new mental health concern to his patients.

"I remember being in sessions with folks the next day. They had never mentioned [climate change](#) before, and they were like, 'I keep hearing about this report,' " Bryant said. "Some of them expressed anxious feelings, and we kept talking about it over our next sessions."

The study, conducted by the world's leading [climate scientists](#), said that if greenhouse gas emissions continue at the current rate, by 2040 the Earth will have warmed by 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit (1.5 degrees Celsius) above preindustrial levels. Predictions say that increase in temperature will cause extreme weather events, rising sea levels, species extinction and reduced capacity to produce food.

Bryant works at North Seattle Therapy & Counseling in Washington state. Recently, he said, he has been seeing patients with anxiety or depression related to climate change and the Earth's future.

Often these patients want to do something to reduce global warming but are overwhelmed and depressed by the scope of the problem and difficulty in finding solutions. And they're anxious about how the Earth will change over the rest of their or their children's lifetimes.

Although it is not an official clinical diagnosis, the psychiatric and psychological communities have names for the phenomenon: "climate distress," "climate grief," "climate anxiety" or "eco-anxiety."

The concept also is gradually making its way into the public consciousness.

In a June 23 episode of the HBO series "Big Little Lies," one of the main character's young daughters has a panic attack after hearing about climate change in school.

Other recently released TV shows and movies have addressed the idea.

An April survey by Yale and George Mason universities found that 62% of Americans were at least "somewhat worried" about climate change. Of those, 23% were "very worried."

Both younger and older generations express worry, although younger Americans generally seem more concerned: A 2019 Gallup poll reported that 54% of those ages 18 to 34, 38% of those 35 to 54 and 44% of those 55 or older worry a "great deal" about global warming.

There is no epidemiological data yet to show how common distress or anxiety related to climate change is. But, people say these feelings are real and affect their life decisions.

Los Angeles residents Mary Dacuma, 33, and her husband decided not to have children because they worry about how difficult the world might be for the next generation.

"The general anxiety about climate change made that decision for us, and now we can plan for that," said Dacuma, who works in public relations. "Having it already decided has helped to ease my state of mind."

Alyson Laura started seeing a counselor for anxiety and depression in college. Eventually, she began working in building sustainability, where she helped businesses reduce their energy and water consumption.

But, a few years ago, she began talking to her therapist about the contradictions in her life.

"I saw corporations destroying the environment, but I was working for them, and I knew what they were doing was wrong," said Laura, 36, who lives in Atlanta. "It was causing me mental anguish. My therapist advised me to take action on what I could control and try to find another area of

work. I just couldn't work in an industry that was harming the Earth."

So how do people alleviate feelings of stress, anxiety or depression surrounding the planet's fate?

Bryant, the Seattle therapist, said the No. 1 action he recommends is sharing these concerns with others, whether a counselor, psychiatrist, family, friends or an activist group.

"There is a lot of underlying worry, but not a lot of dialogue or discussion, and so people feel isolated," Bryant said. "Talking about it makes you feel less isolated, and it's also a way to relieve the tension, find a pathway forward and find a purpose."

In that vein, Dr. Janet Lewis, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester in New York, recommends building relationships within a like-minded group. That could involve group therapy, environmental activist groups or online communities.

For Laura, becoming involved with the international activist group Extinction Rebellion has helped her build a network of people who share her values and made her feel as if she's making a positive contribution to society. With the group, she has participated in nonviolent protests and is organizing the Atlanta chapter's first grief circle, where people can share their anxiety and grief about the destruction of the Earth.

"Activism is also therapy for me," said Laura.

Personal action is a way to take control of a situation in which you feel powerless, said Dr. Elizabeth Haase, a psychiatrist at Carson Tahoe Health in Carson City, Nev.

"Small gestures, such as taking fewer airplane rides or buying local

produce, can actually make a difference," Haase said.

Susan Clayton, a psychology professor at the College of Wooster in Ohio, said one way to tackle the uncertainty of environmental change is learning how it might specifically affect your community by viewing climate model predictions.

"If you know what you're going to face, it's not quite as scary," said Clayton, who also co-authored the American Psychological Association's 2017 report on how climate change can affect [mental health](#).

Lewis said it's also crucial for people to remember that their mental response to climate change is often valid.

"Most of the kinds of pathologies that we're accustomed to treating in psychiatry, they tend to be out of proportion to whatever is going on. But with [climate](#) change, this is not inappropriate," she explained.

"The goal is not to get rid of the anxiety. The goal is to transform it into what is bearable and useful and motivating."

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