

There's actually a word for the climate change-induced despair you've been feeling

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In a sunny Australian city known for being one of the world's largest coal export ports, an environmental philosopher would often field pleading calls from residents.

As they spoke, their distress over the sheer scale of the impacts from open-pit mines and other heavy industry in the area was palpable.

Sitting at the dinner table with his wife, the philosopher struggled to characterize the specific nature of their pain—a pain "experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault."

Glenn Albrecht, the philosopher in question, and his wife, Jill, first thought of the concept of nostalgia—because, as Albrecht writes, the term was once linked to "a diagnosable illness associated with the melancholia of homesickness for people who were distant from their home."

But the distressed residents of Australia's Hunter Valley weren't emigres in exile longing for home. Quite the contrary, they had remained in place, even as the landscape that had once brought them solace became unrecognizable.

Eventually, Albrecht coined the term "solastalgia"—a neologism that combines the words nostalgia, solace and desolation—to describe their profound sense of loss and isolation, and the overwhelming feelings of powerlessness that came with it.

Solastalgia, as Albrecht defined it in a 2004 essay, is "manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation." In short, it is "a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home.'"

It's a word that has started to be used more frequently in recent years, particularly in the context of [climate](#) change.

Perhaps it describes some of the destabilizing sorrow you've experienced as the ash rains down and fire burns in every direction. Californians have long defined themselves against an unforgiving landscape of grand beauty and destruction. But it's never been quite like this before.

On Thursday, the massive August Complex fire burning in and around Tehama County officially became the largest blaze in California history—meaning the first, third and fourth largest fires in California history are all burning right now. It's difficult not to wonder what our state will look like when and if the flames subside. Or if we will ever feel fully safe here again.

"We have relationships to places," explains Dr. Susan Clayton, a professor of psychology and environmental studies at the College of Wooster in Ohio. "They're very significant to our history and our sense of who we are."

Clayton studies the psychological effects of climate change. It's a relatively new area of focus in the field of psychology, which makes it difficult to speak definitively about the longer-term impacts. But researchers believe that climate change will have both chronic and acute impacts on mental health.

According to a 2017 American Psychological Assn. report Clayton coauthored, the acute impacts will probably include more trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder in the wake of climate change-induced extreme weather and other major destabilizing events. Chronic impacts could manifest as a heightened sense of helplessness, hopelessness or fatalism as people reckon with profound changes to their environment or what they see as their lack of control over what's happening.

But Clayton says some of the more incremental impacts of climate change could damage our psychological well-being.

"There is very good evidence that, for example, hot weather actually is bad for our mental health," she explained. "You see increases in suicide rates, increases in aggression and increases in psychiatric hospitalization."

The overhanging existential threat of climate change can also create a background level of worry, often referred to as "eco-anxiety" or "climate anxiety." As Clayton explains, some level of anxiety can be a motivating force, spurring action and change—but too much can be debilitating, paralyzing us.

Humans are creatures capable of incredible levels of cognitive dissonance. We light cigarettes knowing smoking kills, rebuild homes in burn zones and wake up every morning knowing that someday—several billion years from now—the sun will likely engulf the earth. The question has always been what we can bear to ignore, and what kind of dissonance actually behooves us. The inevitable fate of our solar system surely falls into that latter category. But the ravages of [climate change](#) are here now.

So what is the middle ground between sticking our heads in the sand and becoming psychologically overwhelmed by what we know? Say you are lucky enough to be outside the path of acute danger, at least for today. How can we lead a meaningful life with these threats looming, knowing so much is beyond our control?

"For all of us, we need to find this way of thinking—There is something I can do," Clayton said. Maybe you can't save the world, but you can exert some small sense of control over your corner of it, even with something as simple as readying your own evacuation plans. She also mentioned pressing local officials on certain issues, or voting to address the matter at hand.

I worry that invoking these small steps might sound glib or Pollyannaish, particularly in the face of such flagrant destruction, made possible by so many years of greed and ineptitude. We obviously need large-scale, sustained action from every level of leadership. But if you are feeling profound grief and despair, personal action can at least help repair your own sense of powerlessness.

Writing recently about his own reckoning with climate despair, my colleague Sammy Roth, an energy reporter at The Times, quoted a line from the rabbinic teachings of Pirkei Avot that I have thought about often in the weeks since: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either."

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