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# From Climate Anxiety to **CLIMATE ACTION!**

*How a growing sense of anxiety is fueling the environmental justice movement.*

**February 2023**  
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# PART 1: UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE ANXIETY

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*Climate anxiety is shaping the life experience of young people in the United States and around the world. In this three-part article, we will unpack the concept of climate anxiety, particularly its impact on the younger generations in America. Part 1 will discuss what climate anxiety is and who it affects. In Part 2, we'll look at different ways people are coping with climate anxiety and the actions they are taking. And Part 3 will provide supporting resources for climate anxiety and collective climate action.*

## What is Climate Anxiety?

Before jumping straight into the definitions, I should first disclose that I am not a psychologist, psychiatrist, or medical professional. Instead, my specialty is communication. And as part of this discipline, I study the human experience through the lens of science, observation, discussion, and data. That said, let's take a look at some official definitions of climate anxiety and related concepts.

**CLIMATE ANXIETY** "Distress relating to the climate and ecological crises." ([The Lancet](#))<sup>1</sup>

**ECOANXIETY** "Chronic fear of environmental doom." ([American Psychological Association](#))<sup>2</sup>

**ECOLOGICAL/CLIMATE GRIEF** "Grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change." ([Nature Climate Change](#))<sup>3</sup>

**SOLASTALGIA** "Distress or desolation caused by the gradual removal of solace from the present state of one's home environment." ([Climate Change and Human Well-Being](#))<sup>4</sup>

*For this series, "climate anxiety" will encompass all climate change related distress.*

# PART 1: UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE ANXIETY

## Who Climate Anxiety Affects

More than two-thirds of Americans are anxious about climate change, according to a 2020 poll by the [American Psychiatric Association](#).<sup>5</sup> However, some communities are more vulnerable to climate anxiety than others.

### YOUNG PEOPLE

Although every generation is affected, younger people consistently experience the highest levels of anxiety compared to other age groups.<sup>6</sup> In a recent global survey of 10,000 young people (ages 16-25), more than 75% reported being frightened about the planet's future, and almost half of all respondents said their climate anxiety negatively impacts their daily lives and functioning.<sup>7</sup>

"Growing up knowing that climate change is a problem that would absolutely fall onto my generation made me constantly nervous about not only my future, but the future of literally everyone and everything else," said Jael W.K. (18), a first-year college student in California. "We, as Gen Z, have kind of internalized this belief that we had to be great because the world depends on us."

Alex J. (19) often finds himself troubled by the sheer magnitude of climate change and its consequences. "So many essential societal functions are going to be interrupted, getting worse and worse over time, and we just don't have the resources to support that," he said.

**67%**  
**Of Americans  
are anxious  
about climate  
change.**

[APA, 2020](#)

**75%**  
**of young people  
are frightened  
about the  
future.**

[The Lancet, 2021](#)

***"Growing  
up...constantly  
nervous about  
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everything else."***

*Jael W.K. (age 18)*

# PART 1: UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE ANXIETY

## HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED PEOPLE

Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as women, low-income people, and gender-nonconforming people, are more likely to be affected by environmental distress and injustice than nonmarginalized (privileged) people. Intersectionality – belonging to more than one of these historically marginalized communities or identities – further compounds the experience of anxiety.<sup>8,9</sup>

It is critical to understand that people can use different terms for expressing climate anxiety. And some may not single it out as a distinct concept apart from other long-standing existential threats and inequities impacting communities of color.<sup>10</sup>

“We [Black and Indigenous people] are not only disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, but we carry a pain that comes from a long history of racial terror,” explains [Nylah Burton](#), a Washington D.C.-based journalist who writes about the intersection of mental health, climate change, and race.<sup>11</sup>

***“We [Black and Indigenous people] are not only disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, but we carry a pain that comes from a long history of racial terror”***

*Nylah Burton, 2020*

# PART 1: UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE ANXIETY

## Is Climate Anxiety a Disorder?

Unlike other common anxieties such as agoraphobia (fear of open or public spaces) or claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces), climate anxiety is not classified a mental health disorder by the [American Psychiatric Association](#).<sup>12</sup> This is *not* to say that climate anxiety isn't real, or to minimize the impact it can have on a person's well-being. The reason it is not considered a pathology is because anxiety is seen as an appropriate, rational response to the enormous threat of climate change.<sup>13</sup>

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***Anxiety is an appropriate, rational response to the enormous threat of climate change.***

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In the same way intense fear would be a normal, healthy reaction to being attacked, and grief is a natural response to losing a loved one, climate anxiety is considered a proportional response to the environmental dangers and social inequities we are living through today.

# PART 1: UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE ANXIETY

## Words of Warning

Mental health experts warn that the chronic stress of ongoing climate anxiety can increase the risk of developing other disorders such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse – especially for young people.<sup>14</sup> Surviving an extreme weather-related event (such as a flood, hurricane, or fire) can also trigger mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>15</sup>

Even though climate anxiety itself is not considered a disorder, it is still important that you do not ignore your experience, especially if it starts to feel unmanageable. It's best to get support *before* climate anxiety grows into something more general or debilitating.

If you ever feel like you need to talk to somebody urgently, 988 – the national suicide and crisis lifeline – offers free, confidential support (phone, text, and online chat) for people in distress. [988Lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org)<sup>16</sup>

### ***National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988***

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***Up Next:*** In Part 2, we'll discuss how to cope with climate anxiety, and Part 3 will focus on collective action and resources.

## PART 2: COPING WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY THROUGH ACTION

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*In Part 1 of this series, we discussed how more than two-thirds of people in the United States are anxious about climate change. We also examined how climate anxiety disproportionately affects young people, people of color, and other historically marginalized communities. Here, we'll look at different ways people cope with their anxiety.*

### Coping with Climate Anxiety

“It’s hard not to be anxious when this crisis is happening right in front of us, and it seems like very little is being done to stop it,” says 23-year-old Jess M., a recent college graduate who lives in California.

Everybody reacts differently to climate change. In fact, some people find that their own feelings can change drastically from day to day, or even by the hour.<sup>17</sup> And it’s not unusual to hold multiple, seemingly contradictory thought processes at the same time (such as fear and empowerment). Also, not everybody feels climate anxiety, and that is okay, too!

***“It’s hard not to be anxious when the crisis is happening right in front of us, and it seems like very little is being done to stop it.”***

*Jess M. (23)*



## PART 2: COPING WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY THROUGH ACTION

### Three Common Coping Methods

#### #1 CLIMATE ACTION

Many people find that participating in climate action helps them cope with their feelings of anxiety and helplessness. This can involve a single or ongoing action of any size that is intended to make a positive difference in climate change or its impacts. Climate action can help us feel more empowered, strengthen our sense of community, and shift the focus onto what we can control, instead of what we cannot.<sup>18</sup>

It's important to note that climate action does not always eliminate or even reduce climate anxiety. For some people, climate action is not meant to *resolve* anxiety, but rather it helps *redirect* that energy in a more positive direction.

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***Climate action is a single or ongoing activity of any size that is intended to make a positive difference in climate change or its impacts.***

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Unfortunately, not all coping mechanisms take the form of positive action. The next two reactions, overoptimism and ecoparalysis, are common responses to climate anxiety that can sometimes have harmful impacts on mental health.

## PART 2: COPING WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY THROUGH ACTION

### Three Common Coping Methods (continued)

#### #2 (OVER)OPTIMISM

Some people respond to climate anxiety by painting an overly rosy picture of the future. Although this degree of optimism may be without merit, it is often part of a well-meaning effort to help others feel better about climate change.<sup>19</sup>

To be clear, hope and optimism do play a valuable role in managing climate anxiety.<sup>20</sup> However, unrealistic confidence can rise to the level of **“toxic positivity,”** where instead of reducing anxiety, it makes it worse.<sup>21</sup> Over-compensating with excessive positivity can (a) invalidate another person’s experience, (b) reinforce concerns that climate change is being minimized or ignored, and (c) erode trust in the optimist’s ability to be a safe source for information or support.

#### #3 ECOPARALYSIS

***“Too much emphasis on ‘doom and gloom’ can backfire and perpetuate anxiety and paralysis.”***

*Jennifer Mooney, Licensed Mental Health Counselor<sup>22</sup>*

Sometimes, climate anxiety can be so overwhelming that it actually *inhibits* action. Feelings of dread, helplessness, uncertainty, and hopelessness can lead to a type of inaction known as ecoparalysis.

This coping mechanism is frequently mistaken for apathy, detachment, or disengagement. But in fact, it’s quite the opposite! Ecoparalysis is a defensive response to emotional overload, and it’s often a sign that the person cares so much that they have had to shut down for self-preservation.<sup>23</sup>

## PART 2: COPING WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY THROUGH ACTION

### Three Common Coping Methods (continued)

Both ecoparalysis and overoptimism provide a layer of emotional protection against the overwhelming nature of climate change. They can stem from a genuine desire to feel better about the future, or to help others feel better. While this is a form of denial, it should not be confused with classic “climate denialism.”

Rather than being a response to climate anxiety, classic climate denialism – denying the reality of anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change – is usually a product of scientific misunderstanding. It can be a result of misinformation and/or misguided feelings of loyalty to others who refuse to acknowledge the climate crisis.<sup>24</sup>

Of the three coping methods discussed here (action, overoptimism, and ecoparalysis), climate action is the only one that is known to have a positive impact on both climate anxiety and climate justice.<sup>25, 26</sup>

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***Climate action is known to have a positive impact on both climate anxiety and climate justice.***

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## PART 2: COPING WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY THROUGH ACTION

### Climate Action Stories from Gen Z

#### FROM UNCERTAINTY TO PURPOSE

Ruipeng Yukiya (22) describes how he transformed his feelings of uncertainty into a strong sense of purpose by expanding his knowledge about climate policy. He now owns and operates Climate Ingenuity, an online platform where he plans to make all the helpful climate-policy resources he has compiled over the years accessible to everyone.

“At times I felt so overwhelmed as if I somehow needed to carry the weight of the whole world on my shoulders *alone*,” Ruipeng writes in the [Climate Ingenuity newsletter](#).<sup>27</sup> He now considers his level of climate anxiety “very low,” and he believes **his focus on climate action has had a significant positive impact on how he feels about the future.**

#### CHANNELING CLIMATE ANXIETY INTO ACTION

New York resident and climate activist Madeline Dyke (23) still experiences climate anxiety to this day. But she has also found power in climate action, unlocking the secret to influencing state and federal policymakers (hint: talking to them works!). This is why she created [Climate Changemakers](#), an online platform where people can connect and get more involved in climate policy actions in their own communities and states.<sup>28</sup>

***“If you want to use your anger and anxiety to get ambitious climate policy passed, march in the street and then call your representatives’ office.” Madeline Dyke (23)***

*Up Next: Part 3 includes resources to help turn climate anxiety into action.*

## PART 3: TAKING COLLECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION

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*In Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we explored how climate change is causing distress in many people, and how pro-environmental activity can help reduce or manage climate anxiety. Although individual action can positively impact mental health, collective action may have even greater effects on the human psyche. This third and final part of the series concludes with a list of resources to find support and connection during this transformational time of climate anxiety and action.*

### Collective Climate Action

As defined by [Root Cause](#), ***“Collective action is the action taken together by a group of people who share knowledge, resources, and effort to achieve a common purpose.”***<sup>29</sup>

Collective action is not only imperative for fighting climate change, it can also have a powerful impact on individual and community well-being.<sup>30</sup> So whether you start a small environmental club at school, participate in a local climate action group, or join a global environmental justice movement, sharing that experience with others can help generate a stronger sense of hope, purpose, and connection.<sup>31</sup>

### 3 Key Takeaways

- ✓ *If you're worried or have anxiety about climate change, you are not alone.*
- ✓ *Many people manage their climate anxiety by participating in climate action.*
- ✓ *Collective action can provide help and healing – for you, your community, and the planet!*

## PART 3: TAKING COLLECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION

### Climate Action Resources

The following resources offer information, community support, and opportunities for learning and participating in climate action.

*\*Indicates a youth-led or youth-centric resource.*

- **[350 Sacramento](#)** [or your local [350.org](#) chapter]  
Grassroots climate justice organization focused on collective action, community, and policy at the local level. [350sacramento.org](#)
- **[Action for the Climate Emergency \(ACE\)](#)**\*  
Educates and supports young people who want to take strategic climate action. [acespace.org](#)
- **[Climate & Mind](#)**  
Online resources about climate change and thoughts, emotions, and behavior. [climateandmind.org](#)
- **[Climate Awakening](#)**  
Small-group peer conversations about climate and emotion, guided by a clinical psychologist. [climateawakening.org](#)
- **[Climate Café](#)**®  
Informal gatherings where people get together to talk about climate change. [www.climate.cafe](#)
- **[Climate Change Resources](#)**  
Online collection of resources to help people learn about climate change and take action. [climatechangeresources.org](#)
- **[Climate ChangeMakers](#)**  
Online platform where people get together weekly for an “hour of action” to make an impact on climate change. [climatechangemakers.org](#)

## PART 3: TAKING COLLECTIVE CLIMATE ACTION

### Climate Action Resources (continued)

- **[Climate Reality Project](#)**  
International movement aiming to stop climate change and promote the transition to clean energy. Program started by Al Gore. [climaterealityproject.org](https://climaterealityproject.org)
- **[Commons Social Change Library](#)**  
Online repository of 1000+ resources in different formats aimed to help people make social change. [commonslibrary.org](https://commonslibrary.org)
- **[Fridays for Future](#)\***  
Youth-led global climate movement started by Greta Thunberg. [fridaysforfuture.org](https://fridaysforfuture.org)
- **[Generation Dread Book](#)**  
Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in the Age of Climate Crisis (Britt Wray, PhD.). [brittwray.com/books](https://brittwray.com/books)
- **[Student Environmental Activist Training \(SEAT\)](#)\***  
Presented by 350 Sacramento, the SEAT program is designed to help young people gain the tools they need for climate activism and community organizing. [350sacramento.org/seat](https://350sacramento.org/seat)
- **[Sunrise Movement Sacramento](#)\*** [or your local [Sunrise](#) chapter]  
Youth-centered movement to fight climate change, end fossil fuel dependence, and create good climate jobs. [hubs.sunrisemovement.org/sacramento](https://hubs.sunrisemovement.org/sacramento)
- **[Sustainability Stories \(Netflix\)](#)**  
Collection of films on Netflix relating to sustainability topics. [netflix.com/browse/genre/81588405](https://netflix.com/browse/genre/81588405)
- **[Work On Climate](#)**  
Online community where people can share or find opportunities for sustainability-related jobs and internships. [workonclimate.org](https://workonclimate.org)

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## 350 Sacramento

### **LOCAL ACTION FOR A GLOBAL CLIMATE MOVEMENT**

350 Sacramento is a grassroots, climate justice organization focused on collective action to create a safe global climate. Learn more at [350Sacramento.org](https://350Sacramento.org).

### **STUDENT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST TRAINING (SEAT)**

Student Environmental Activist Training (SEAT) is a youth training program hosted by 350 Sacramento, open to middle and high school students in the Sacramento area. Learn more at [350Sacramento.org/SEAT](https://350Sacramento.org/SEAT).

## Author Bio

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### **FROM CLIMATE ANXIETY TO CLIMATE ACTION**

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