

MEERTALK



FACING OUR CLIMATE ANXIETY HEALTH CRISIS

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SUMMARY

Dr. Wray's research focuses on the emotional responses to climate change. The first step in describing these responses is to define terms that capture the experiences of those living in a warming world. Eco anxiety describes a chronic fear of environmental doom. Solastalgia refers to the emotional distress created by environmental change, particularly when that change renders environments formerly associated as being part of one's home unrecognizable.

Despite the obvious relevance of these terms, there is an entire bouquet of emotions stirred up by the climate crisis, many negative but also some positive, when they inspire us to take action. According to Dr. Wray, we can feel proud of these emotions and view them in lots of different ways. The key is to allow the whole gamut of emotions to be felt for what can be called "psychoterratic" states.

In "Earth Emotions," Glenn Albrecht offers the following description of psychoterratic states: As damages ramp up due to economic systems that value profit over life, "the truth about fiscal irrationality and the insanity of deliberative climate warming will shock all the generations, and they will enter all forms of negative psychoterratic states. It will shake the foundations of current human identity to its core."

Many have developed various coping mechanisms for this hard truth. While outright denial is increasingly rare (although predatory delay is unfortunately not), many participate in a form of soft denial. Soft denial



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involves disavowal, or opening one eye to admit negative, sometimes scary information about climate breakdown while closing the other and refusing to believe that something so awful could come to pass. This bubble of psychological denial is inflated by short sightedness, selfishness, and held up by people in power with perverse incentives to make climate-destructive practices seem like the only possible way. The necessary effect of this is to cause us to detach from any form of responsibility for this collective issue.

The bubble of climate denial is popping. More and more people are witnessing the effects of climate change. Dr. Wray experienced her own bubble burst in 2017 when she and her partner were discussing whether or not they wanted to get pregnant and risk creating another life that would experience suffering from the climate crisis. According to her research, 78% of Generation Z doesn't want to have kids. Other movements, such as Birthstrike, have members who have taken vows not to reproduce until politicians, many of whom have exacerbated climate breakdown, make the future less disastrous for the generations to come.

To say that the phenomenon of climate anxiety is an overwhelmingly white phenomenon is an important cultural critique. In particular, it speaks volumes about the subsets of people who have long experienced environmental catastrophes as a result of neocolonialism and extractivist industries. Bearing this important critique in mind, a study that she conducted found that 45% of young people globally felt that thoughts and feelings about the climate crisis were impairing their normal functioning. Disruption was higher in countries that were less resilient. More than 50% of 16- to 25-year-olds feel that humanity is doomed. While these feelings are especially pronounced in young people, they are felt across the population (including in climate professionals).

One of the key takeaways from her research is that if you are feeling depressed and alone from thoughts about the climate crisis, you are not the only one. So many of us feel alienated and isolated, as though we have the weight of the world on our shoulders and we are walking around in a sea of apathetic humans. In many cases, that apathy is not a product of not caring, but rather the inherent difficulty of making participatory demonstrations of change. In many cases, it is possible to slip into feelings





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of climate doom, which – if an exceedingly negative place to be – at least has some certainty to it, unlike our present circumstances where the situation is bad and getting worse, but still has plenty of openings to mitigate or avert harm.

In order to begin to deal with these emotions, we must move away from a positivist psychological framing that tells us that happiness, strength and courage are the only things we can be proud of, and that other negative emotions must be suppressed. If we can learn to accommodate and integrate those negative emotions and see how they move through us, we can improve our mental health. In particular, Dr. Wray highlights the importance of working through tough, unspeakable emotions with validating, permission-giving humans who won't try and minimize or assuage one's concerns. Communal emotional dwelling is key for the apocalyptic feelings that people sometimes have. She highlights a variety of resources to assist in this process, including: climate awakening, climate cafe, good grief network, climate psychology alliance and the climate psychiatry alliance.

She quoted recent research from the Lancet on ecological grief and anxiety: "Recognizing that emotions are often what leads people to act, it is possible that feelings of ecological anxiety and grief, although uncomfortable, are in fact the crucible through which humanity must pass to harness the energy and conviction that are needed for the lifesaving changes now required." Ultimately, valuing eco-distress is a pathway to political change which is absolutely necessary; the climate crisis is a political problem that demands a political solution.



AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

Q What type of devices do you bring into conversations to bring accountability into conversations so that colonialism through time is dealt with?

A: This is a hard question because neocolonialism is so pervasive and often forces low income countries to bear the hardest burden. The question of climate reparations in particular is an important one of what is owed. Acknowledging dangers and harms is especially important as we look outward.

Q How do we have a fruitful conversation about root causes as well as assess the situation while keeping our heads cool?

A: Invite communities that have been fighting for environmental justice for decades. Invite those who understand what it is to be a climate migrant. Flesh out the narrative by not just relying upon yourself.

Q How do you address climate change with your students in a kind and truthful way?

A: Engage in an open, validating and accepting dialogue while moving away from ideas of pathology. Narratives are key, which is why she has a memoir section of her book.

Q In examining the emotional problems and issues that people are dealing with, is there anything that stands out - examples of how climate warming represents something significantly different from the other social ills that we have?

A: The response required for the climate crisis is very different from the nuclear threat, for instance. The fact that we all contribute to the problem that makes us feel unsafe makes the problem much more challenging.

Q How can the political change be implemented? Is that through bringing younger leaders into politics?

A: Vulnerable groups need to be the ones coming up with solutions and be empowered to implement them. We have evidence that climate anxiety is not widespread in the adult population, but is much more widespread in the younger generation. We absolutely need more women and young people working on these problems in positions of power to help ensure that political change is implemented.



AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

Q As a researcher, why did you choose to carry on your academic career as opposed to going the non profit route?

A: While she was writing the book and interviewing hundreds of people, she realized that people do not feel prepared for the scope of damage that the climate crisis is causing. She saw a need that was calling out to be addressed and thought that academia would be the best pathway forward.

Q What about the idea of promoting a new hero mentality and promoting those people who are necessary to promote transition?

A: Those people are her heroes, too. She thinks this is very important.

Q Is there a guide to download about organizing climate café workgroups that you could point us, so we can begin organizing these?

A: Climate cafes are truly decentralized; anyone can set one up. The climate psychology alliance has also started training those who want to get training. If you write them and explain that you aren't a mental health professional, they will sometimes let you participate.

Resources mentioned by Britt Wray

Gen Dread article:

<https://gendread.substack.com/p/resources-for-working-with-climate>

Existential Toolkit:

<https://www.existentialtoolkit.com/>

Climate Awakening:

<https://climateawakening.org>

Good Grief Network:

<https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org>

Climate-aware therapy:

<https://www.climatepsychology.us/climate-therapists>

Climate Cafe:

<https://www.climate.cafe>

Climate Psychology Alliance:

<https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org>

Climate Psychiatry Alliance:

<https://www.climatepsychiatry.org>



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