

The end of the world

Therapists report a surge in cases of eco anxiety – but how do we deal with a worry that can't be addressed in the conventional way? Suzy Bashford confronts her fears

Watching footage of bush fires ripping through Australia, my stomach tightens and I feel a wave of emotions barrel over me. Guilt: I should be doing more; fear: is it the beginning of the end?; grief: will our collective inaction mean my kids won't enjoy the beautiful world the way I have?; anger: why aren't I doing more? Why isn't *everyone* doing more?; and despondency: is there any point anyway?

This is not the first time I've been flooded by these feelings. It's a frequent occurrence, triggered by anything that reminds me of the climate crisis, from forgetting to put out my recycling to getting on a plane. And, while my response may seem disproportionate, University of Bath teaching fellow and climate psychology therapist Caroline Hickman assures me that it is a normal, psychologically healthy reaction to the climate emergency, and she feels these emotions every day.

Hickman, who is involved with the Climate Psychology Alliance, says she

is seeing a rise in people of all ages coming to her with eco anxiety, including young women who feel they shouldn't have children with the world in this state and mothers having nightmares about the fate of their offspring.

Inescapable shadow

'Eco anxiety is not like ordinary anxiety because we cannot reassure ourselves that "this will pass", or effectively minimise the problem,' she says. 'A lot of everyday anxieties can be avoided or managed, but you can't with this one, so it's a constant, low-level concern in the back of our minds.'

This is why I've found managing my eco anxiety so tricky, despite my history of therapy for anxiety, and why all the fears sloshing around in my subconscious bubble to the surface in everyday life.

Hickman advises that the most important first step is to make space for, and accept, our feelings. By doing this, we can move through our emotions so they don't become debilitating. Hickman does this during her daily ritual of walking her dog: 'The body >>>

needs to move in response to anxiety, not freeze. I allow myself to connect with my tension and complicated feelings. Pushing them away or denying them forces them further into the unconscious which aggravates our fears.'

We all bear the cross

The other thing that can deepen eco anxiety is taking on too much personal responsibility to the point that you collapse into despair. That's why therapists who specialise in this area take pains to underline that eco anxiety is not a personal 'problem' like some mental health conditions; doing that would be to pathologise a normal human response. In a session, Hickman puts this into practice by moving between the individual's view and the larger perspective, including her own:

'In traditional therapy, when clients talk, I may relate but never say, 'Oh yes, me too! When I got divorced...' But I do acknowledge my related fears about the environment and share my concerns. I don't let them feel alone with it or make it an individual problem. I share, then I show them how I deal with my eco anxiety to help them deal with theirs.'

Not feeling alone is the key. The more you isolate yourself, the more you risk despair. Sharing, and taking action with others who also feel the struggle is the most effective way to quell eco anxiety.

Chain of comfort

After talking to Hickman, I join a few Facebook groups for people concerned about the environment, one of which is Extinction Rebellion Sisterhood, although I am not a member of Extinction Rebellion. The discussions feel rich, varied and connective. I'm learning all the time, and I'm surprised by how quickly I'm consoled by the words of people all over the globe experiencing similar feelings.

For instance, one member posts about her organisation in the small

town of Mahahual, Mexico, which cleans the streets and has raised funds for 300 rubbish bins for homeowners who can't afford them. 'It isn't much but at least we are doing something and it helps my soul rest,' she says.

Conversations get straight to the crux of issues because there is no room for small talk. Rather than depressing, I find it a welcome antidote to selfies and other showy photos on the rest of my feed.

Members also post when they struggle with their mental health. One young woman, Bethany Henry, asks for advice on feeling helpless and depressed. Climate change fear has been in her consciousness since she was seven, but it was when she reached 15 that she began to experience periods of sadness, which evolved into anger and then dread. 'It is like grieving,' she says. 'I go backwards and forwards between emotions. Sometimes, distraction is the only thing that works on days when taking action is impossible for me.'

It helps her to connect with like minds and talk about issues to raise awareness. She posts that she is battling to come to terms with the crisis, while worrying that her feelings seem 'silly'. Support comes thick and fast.

'Work your way through the grief in the same way you would if a loved one was diagnosed with a terminal illness,'

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“Use your passion to do good. Don't let it overwhelm you. We are living in an amazing time because people are talking openly and waking up to the reality of the crisis”

advises UK poster Theresa. 'It's real grief and many are suffering. The more you talk to others who feel the same, the less all-consuming your grief becomes.'

Daisy McCrackin, an artist who lives between Croatia and Holland, says, 'Try gardening to ground yourself, Google Earthing [to view the world as a real and powerful planet], read spiritual stuff and be of service. In the second world war, people thought it was the end of the world – we've faced this a number of times and, somehow, we carry on. Build your community and be kind.'

Change is happening

Others advise volunteering, time in nature (ecotherapy), the Yoga International Climate Change course, joining a group such as Extinction Rebellion or ClimateFast and focusing on the positive action people are taking.

A climate scientist working in conservation, Aylin McNamara, says: 'There is more positive political action now, and movement in the conservation arena to focus on optimism to tackle psychological overload. Use your passion to do good. Don't let it overwhelm you,' she says, adding that we are living in 'an amazing time' because people are talking and 'waking up' to our reality.

Gaia Maess, a university lecturer, agrees. She's moved from shock and helplessness to anger and frustration

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but has 'started a journey of acceptance', in a way that is kinder to herself: 'I felt horrible about flying or buying bottled water if there was no other option, but I decided I'd rather spare my mental energy for collective action and a way forward.'

I am inspired and read a book that comes up repeatedly, Joanna Macy's *Active Hope: How To Face The Mess We're In Without Going Crazy* (New World Library, £13.99), which results in my a one-woman show, *Help! I've Got Eco Anxiety!* to share what I have learned. On the back of it, a local artist sets up a Facebook page, Strathspey Green Hub, to share ideas in our

community. This boosts optimism as we discover how much there is going on locally and we support each other and programmes such as repair workshops, recycling initiatives and clothes swaps.

Make like a jackdaw

I am struck by the fact that those who have looked their fears squarely in the eye and imagined the full atrocity of an apocalyptic future are also the ones living with the most hope and fulfilment. Activist Gill Coombs, author of the self-published *The Trembling Warrior: A Guide For Reluctant Activists* (£6.50), coaches people on how to live more environmentally friendly lives.

Find hope in action

Gill Coombs, author of *The Trembling Warrior: A Guide For Reluctant Activists*, says action lifts our spirits, gives us hope, connects us and makes a difference. Here's her starter kit...

- **Remember** change-maker and writer Mac Macartney's words: 'You can do vastly more than you imagine you can.'
- **Move through** your tension and choose to do something, however small. We can affect what happens to us, even if we can't control everything that happens.
- **We all have** a contribution to make in our own way.
- **Creative acts** of any form are much more fulfilling than forever holding back.
- **Don't try** and do it all and let go of the mindset that says you should.
- **Focus on forms** of activism that energise you. Ask yourself: what do I care about passionately? What can I be in service of? What are the skills, qualities, knowledge and experience that make up my unique gift to the cause? What am I willing to try? What will bring me joy?
- **Don't use action** as a strategy for avoiding your fear; honour your pain for the world, then commit to action.

Alongside facing your fear, she says, it is important to live in the moment. Cultivating joy, particularly in the natural world, builds resilience.

'I watched a flock of jackdaws riding the wind this morning – living their lives, doing their thing,' she says. 'They live permanently with an element of risk that humans insulate themselves from. Yet, despite living on the edge like all wild animals, they live richly and fully, playing in the wind. This crisis could be bringing us more fully alive than we've been in a long time.'

carolinehickmantherapy.com; climatepsychologyalliance.org; Suzy Bashford also recommends 'Facing The Climate Emergency' by Margaret Klein Salamon (New Society Publishers, £10.99), which is out in April