

Climate change and its impact on our lives and mental health

Like many people around the world, you may be concerned about climate change. You or someone you care about might live where extreme weather events hit. You or they may be part of a farm community losing crops, an oceanside town with shrinking shorelines or an urban area breathing in polluted air. Or you may simply be worried about what the future may bring.

The reality is, climate change is making global temperatures hotter, leading to rising seas, more severe weather patterns and natural disasters. Heatwaves, droughts, floods, storms, hurricanes and wildfires are all happening more often.

All of this is largely because of things people do — like burn coal, oil and gas for energy and cut down forests — that add pollution to the air. This creates a greenhouse effect, trapping too much heat in the earth's atmosphere and causing global warming. And, yes, global climate experts and advocates are sounding the alarm, urging nations, corporations, organizations and everyday people to work together to slow the change.

Admittedly, it's heavy, even without the statistics detailing the toll it's taking on individuals, communities and the planet. The impacts of global climate change can be very difficult to come to terms with.

Experiencing the changes firsthand or learning about them on social media and in the news, many people feel a range of tough emotions. These often include fear, uncertainty, helplessness, anxiety, anger, and even feeling overwhelmed or grief-stricken. There are also those who feel emotionally drained or unsure of what to do. Others are in denial. And let's not forget, there are also those who feel motivated to do what they can to make a difference.

Wherever you are on the emotional spectrum, it's important to let yourself feel your feelings. It's also important to take steps to cope with them, so you can keep moving forward. While there isn't a magic wand that can take these feelings away or change the course of events, here are 3 steps you can take to help yourself get through it.



In-the-moment coping strategies can often help manage difficult thoughts and feelings

Some ways to help calm your nerves include: Deep breathing exercises; moving your body; focusing your senses on something you see, smell, taste, feel or hear; and talking to someone you trust.

Reframing difficult thoughts can also help you steady yourself and keep perspective. For example, if you find yourself expecting the worst and focusing on the negative, ask yourself questions to steady your thoughts and gain perspective:

- Unhelpful thought: "No one cares about what's happening and there's nothing I can do."
- Reframed thought: "There are climate experts, advocates and people just like me around the world who care and are trying to make a difference. One way I'm making a difference is by not buying new clothes unless I actually need them. Every small effort adds up to a greater whole."



Practicing self-care helps nurture your overall health and wellbeing

Eating nutritious foods, being active and getting enough sleep all increase wellbeing and reduce stress. So can practicing yoga and mindfulness, meditation, doing activities you enjoy and spending time in nature.

Making social connections and spending time with people you enjoy are other important ways to support yourself. Doing so will give you reasons to feel good and laugh, and keep a steady support system in place when you need to someone to talk to or another kind of help. Being cared about and caring for others also helps you feel a sense of hope, purpose and self-worth, all of which can help make it easier to get through tough times and strengthen your overall satisfaction with life.

When you feel intense emotions, it can also be helpful to direct your feelings into something that helps you create meaningful change, however small. This could mean joining a climate activist organization, speaking up in support of environmental protection policies, or taking part in something else that feels meaningful to you.

Taking care of yourself also means giving yourself time and space to be away from what's on your mind and making your heart heavy. Find ways to relax and rest your mind, such as escaping into your favorite music or show, playing a team sport or game with friends, or simply closing your eyes and sitting still for a bit.



Educate yourself and get prepared to gain a sense of control

When we feel overwhelmed by strong emotions, it can be helpful to focus on what we can control and let go of what we can't. Taking time to learn about your surroundings and what's happening in them can help you understand what's possible and how to prepare. For instance, if you live in an area directly affected by climate change, it's important to be ready for emergencies. This includes knowing who in your community may need extra support during an extreme weather event, such as older adults or children. Sketch out a plan for what to do in the event of a weather emergency. Where would you go? Who needs your help?

In addition, if you or a loved one lives with a health condition, it's important to understand how climate change can affect it. For example, certain psychiatric medications can limit the body's ability to regulate heat. And if someone relies on social services or infrastructure, those supports may be disrupted during extreme weather events.

Consider what supplies you might need and prepare in advance. Store some canned, boxed or bottled food, along with water and any necessary medications. Pack a go bag with a change of clothes, basic toiletries, a battery-powered radio, charged mobile phone and a solar charger.

Also take time to learn what you can do to help minimize global warming. On a global scale, the biggest contributors are generating power, manufacturing goods, cutting down forests, using transportation, producing food, powering buildings and consuming too much. That means on an individual level, each person can help make a difference, such as by taking actions like:

- Using public transportation, walking or biking
- Consuming less food, water, products and power — and choosing things made from recycled and renewable materials when you can
- Planting trees and native species
- Reducing waste — recycle, compost and reuse as much as possible
- Saving water and energy, like using less heating and cooling, switching to energy-efficient appliances and tools, and using clean energy like solar and wind where possible
- Teaching others about what you've learned and what they can do about climate change
- Getting involved in local politics and policies to support solutions to climate change



Getting support

It's not uncommon for people who've lived through a natural disaster to experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or another mental health concern. In addition, an increasing number of individuals of all ages are experiencing distress related to climate change, often referred to as "eco-anxiety."

While each person can experience a mental health concern in a different way, common symptoms include:

- Excessive worrying or fear
- Ongoing sadness, hopelessness or feeling empty
- Extreme mood changes, like irritability or anger
- Changes in eating habits, energy levels or sleeping patterns
- Increased use of alcohol or other substances
- Ongoing physical aches and pains
- Difficulty managing daily tasks or handling stress



If your strong feelings persist and are becoming harder to cope with or these symptoms sound familiar to you, consider speaking with a health care professional.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

United Nations. [Causes And Effects Of Climate Change](#).

American Psychiatric Association. [Climate Change And Mental Health Connections](#). May 2023.

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NASA Science. [What Is Climate Change?](#) Oct. 21, 2024.

Natural History Museum. [Eco-anxiety: how to cope at a time of climate crisis](#).

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Yale Sustainability. [Yale Experts Explain Climate Anxiety](#). March 13, 2023.

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