

## HELP DESK

# We can't stop thinking about climate change, either. Here's a rough guide to coping.

By **Jenni Todd** Globe correspondent, Updated November 8, 2019, 12:00 p.m.



If you're feeling anxious and depressed about climate change, you aren't alone. JANA BEHR/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

A little over a year ago, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [told the world](#) that to avoid a disastrous prognosis for our planet, we'd need to drastically reduce greenhouse pollution during the next few decades.

For many, the news wasn't unlike learning a loved one has been diagnosed with a possibly terminal illness. There have been tears, anxiety, sleepless nights, the overwhelming desire to scream. This collective response has been dubbed "climate grief," a catch-all term for the emotional toll of climate change.

If you're struggling with grief or anxiety about the environment, you're far from alone. We asked the experts for some advice on how to cope.

### **Don't ignore your feelings.**

They're natural, and it's important to acknowledge their weight.

"I was so blocked by my grief that I thought, 'I cannot possibly do anything,' " said Anne Goodwin, remembering her life before she was introduced to the teachings of scholar and environmental activist Joanna Macy. "I was just so tender and so sad all the time."

Goodwin, 62, of Arlington, is now a facilitator with the Work That Reconnects Network, an organization that holds workshops using Macy's methods. Attendees partake in healing exercises such as grieving rituals, [breath-focused meditation](#), and dancing.

"When we come together and share our grief, there's just a huge relief that others share those feelings," she said. "And it becomes almost like turning them into compost to grow new things."

Day to day, Goodwin makes time to "cry or wail or rage" as need be. Engaging with your pain as opposed to shoving it down is crucial for avoiding burnout.

### **Get ready for the long haul.**

Unlike a typical stressor, climate change isn't something we can resolve within a matter of days, said Jacob Nota, a staff psychologist at McLean Hospital.

"This is a really tricky problem for humans because we want an action, and we want to be able to see that action play out. That's what our brain is set up to do," Nota said. "We're

not really that great at, 'What am I doing now and what's that going to mean for 10-years-from-now me?' ”

Part of dealing with a long-term stressor is accepting that you're doing what you can with the information you have in the given moment, Nota said. You might need to change your approach next year or next week, but that doesn't mean the actions you're taking now aren't meaningful.

Moreover, trying to make a difference isn't a right-or-wrong, black-and-white kind of situation. It's knowing that perfection isn't an option, but persistence is.

“That's a thing I'm always encouraging people to do, [to] not feel like they're locked into, 'There's a right way to do this, and if I don't feel settled, I'm doing the wrong thing,' but more 'I might just have to keep playing around with it until I find a balance for me,' ” Nota said.

### **Find a community.**

You can't save the world by yourself, and you shouldn't try to tackle your feelings alone, either. Alexandra Vecchio, the climate change program manager at the Massachusetts Audubon Society, said having a support network is essential.

“You do a better job when you feel like you aren't standing out there alone screaming into the abyss,” Vecchio said. “Having a group or team that you're plugged into makes it so much easier and helps to hold you accountable.”

It could be an activist collective, a listening circle, a dinner table, or even a group chat. If you can't join a community, consider seeking alternative support. Extinction Rebellion Massachusetts, a local climate activism group, runs a [climate grief support line](#) staffed by volunteers.

### **Learn about the solutions.**

Much of the content produced and consumed about climate change focuses on what will happen if humanity doesn't make significant changes. If you're taking the time to learn about the challenges we'll face in the coming years, don't forget to educate yourself about the potential solutions, too.

Vecchio recommends taking a look at [Project Drawdown](#), an organization that researches and ranks existing climate change solutions. They've compiled a list of 80 solutions, plus "coming attractions" that require further study.

Read up on [your community's main sources of emissions](#) and calculate [your own carbon footprint](#). Then, identify some approaches that could address your area's biggest challenges and decide how you want to help make them a reality.

### **Remember that something is better than nothing.**

Allen McGonagill, an activist who does work for Extinction Rebellion, thinks of the climate crisis as an unavoidable, high-speed car accident.

"In the best-case scenario, we would have seen that [car] with plenty of time to slow down and come to a smooth stop, and no one's hurt," McGonagill said. "But at this point, we're 10 feet away from that car, and we have two options. Option one, we slam on the brakes and we slow down a little bit. We're still going to collide with the car. There's no way to not. And option two is to keep our foot on the gas, and we will certainly total both cars."

*Jenni Todd can be reached at [jenni.t314@gmail.com](mailto:jenni.t314@gmail.com).*

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