

In US, climate anxiety churns up psychological storm

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Kate Schapira, a 40-year-old senior lecturer in the English department at Brown University, mans her "climate anxiety" booth in Providence

In the melting Arctic, communities are racing to maintain their way of life. In the rising Pacific, residents are sounding alarm bells. And in

Rhode Island, Kate Schapira and her husband are not having a baby.

Fears about climate change are prompting worldwide action, but one knock-on effect in the United States is mounting anxiety about everything from plastics to class-based environmental disparities.

Schapira, a 40-year-old senior lecturer in the English department at Brown University, is addressing that unease in a number of ways.

The decision not to have children was not just about concern for their future wellbeing amid environmental degradation, she explained, but also about not wanting "my sense of responsibility to the world to shrink down to the size of one person."

Schapira also says she has likely taken her last flight.

She said she was troubled that people were treating her climate fears "like a personal, individual problem," she said, and she wanted to "see if that was actually the case."

So in 2014, Schapira started setting up a "climate anxiety" booth in public spaces, such as farmers' markets. It's a bit like Lucy's psychiatry stall from the beloved comic "Peanuts."

"Climate anxiety counseling, 5 cents. The doctor is in," the booth's sign reads, welcoming passersby in Providence to talk about their fears.

As it turns out, Schapira was far from alone.



Brown University lecturer Kate Schapira says she has decided not to have children and will likely not fly again to address her unease over climate change

Widespread worry

About six in 10 Americans say they are at least "somewhat worried" about global warming and 23 percent say they are "very worried," according to a survey conducted by Yale and George Mason universities in March and April.

Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, said Americans can be broken into six categories based on their reaction to climate change, ranging from alarmed to dismissive.

"The common wisdom is that only upper-middle-class, white, well-educated, latte-sipping liberals care about climate change. Turns out that's not true," Leiserowitz said.

None of the six groups is majorly driven by one demographic, he said, with the exception of the "dismissives"—where "well-educated conservative white men" reign.

They are "dramatically different in terms of how they perceive the risk than everybody else" he said, thanks in large part to "a worldview that we call individualism"—particularly pronounced in that group.

Of course, that same demographic also happens to control the White House, half of Congress and many of the nation's richest companies, such as in the fossil fuel industry.

As the world's top experts head to Spain for the UN summit on climate change opening Monday, Americans must deal with the idea that President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the Paris climate accord.

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