

6 ways to build resilience and hope into young people's learning about climate change

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As they become more exposed to the grim realities of climate change, today's teens and people in their 20s—[an entire generation](#)—are experiencing increased anxiety, grief, fear or guilt about the planet's

future as well as their own.

For teachers of environmental studies, softening the [scientific evidence](#) about what lies ahead—in terms of sea-level rise and the increased intensity, duration and frequency of storms, droughts and floods—is not an option. While parents will need to choose how and when to deliver information in contextually or age-appropriate ways, pretending [climate change](#) isn't here shouldn't be an option either.

We can all agree that letting youth deal on their own with these feelings, which many [call eco-anxiety](#), is out of the question.

Fortunately, for all of us who are concerned about the mental health of this generation, there are ways of conveying the hard scientific facts about climate change [while at the same time fostering resilience](#). In so doing, we can help this generation adapt in the face of adversity and manage the inevitable changes to their lifestyles over time.

The aim is to help them accept that much will get worse—while understanding that that is not the end of the story.

This is not the reality-denying form of optimism we often hear about. It is a darker hope, yet it is one that can turn grief, anxiety and fear into positive action for change.

Here are six ways of helping youth build resilience while they learn about the planet's future and ponder their own. In classroom settings, these strategies and practices can be built into their learning.

1. Accept the realities

The first strategy is crucial: encourage youth to fully accept the realities of our time—[grim as they might be](#)—as well as the anguish they feel

over the many uncertainties and losses.

This may sound counterintuitive, but such wisdom comes from [much research](#). [Joanna Macey](#), a Buddhist scholar and activist for peace and the environment, holds that denying or numbing the truth hinders our capacity to process and respond to information in a healthy way. In contrast, accepting these realities frees up our energy to begin processing feelings and information that are crucial to mental health.

Psychoanalyst [Anouchka Grose has explored ways to put this insight into action in climate conversations with children](#).

2. Acknowledge emotion

Second, help young people to work through their emotions. This does not need to be something elaborate (though if the distress is severe, professional help might be needed).

Begin by assuring them that they are not alone, that you and countless people among their peers are journeying with them, likely with the same feelings. I counsel my students to join clubs on campus that deal with climate issues—[safe places](#) where they can share and see that they are not alone.

Psychotherapist Rosemary Randall and engineer Andy Brown developed the educational project [Carbon Conversations](#) that is now running in many countries around the world. Group discussions are structured to allow participants to process and speak through their emotions and learn about local actions they can take to promote sustainability.

[Purposeful journaling](#) is another way to lessen fears and distress; if it is done outdoors, it can foster our connections with nature. Among its many [benefits](#), journaling can help a person identify what they are

feeling. Teachers can also assign journaling exercises.

3. Teach mindfulness

Related to the previous point is the practice of mindfulness. Psychotherapist Leslie Davenport, who specializes in climate psychology, considers [mindfulness practice](#) essential for mental health.

While mindfulness came into popularity in the West through [encounters with Buddhist practices](#), it is increasingly popular among millions of non-religious people. This form of meditation, with its quiet breathing and non-judgment, can help youth generate a sense of calm by becoming aware of what is going on with their feelings, their bodies and what is happening around them.

[Jon Kabat-Zinn](#), a scientist who is well-known for his work on mindfulness, has produced much data and many resources on mindfulness from a secular perspective. Mindfulness practice can also be part of the purposeful journaling mentioned above.

4. Expand how reality is conceived

Help youth to think dialectically—that is, to cultivate the capacity to see opposites existing simultaneously. [Dialectical thinking](#) moves individuals away from thinking in terms of black and white and frees people [to conceive the world in multiple ways](#).

This technique is used successfully in [evidenced-based therapy](#) around the world to help individuals not only accept the realities they face but to understand that this reality can be changed.

Yes, the situation is grim, but there are many positive developments too.

Yes, this generation is part of the problem, but it is also part of the solution. The [Rapid Transition Alliance](#), a network of international organizations, is a great resource for finding evidence—past and current—of rapid positive changes worldwide.

5. Encourage art

Encourage creative expressions through art to help this generation deal with distress. A [Finnish report, "Climate Anxiety,"](#) by multidisciplinary researcher Panu Pihkala from the University of Helsinki, shows that today's youth can experience healing states of mind through photography, graphic art and even dramatic arts.

Pihkala, whose work focuses on the psychological and spiritual dimensions related to environmental issues, especially climate change, has co-operated with art educators in organizing art-based activities for youth. The activities offer youth a safe space to express themselves. In my teaching, I have found that students' artwork can be incorporated into assessments and lessons when accompanied by written analysis on aspects of their creation.

6. Redefine hope

Fostering a naïve wish that things will turn out well is a form of denial, which is not healthy. Václav Havel, the Czech playwright, essayist, poet, dissident and president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 to 1992, likens hope not to a prediction about the future but to [a frame of mind and heart](#). "Hope," he says, "is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." In short, we must help this generation to discover and act upon something that makes sense.

Finally, let's stop referring to these emotions as eco-anxiety.

[Psychotherapist Rosemary Randall](#) offers "climate distress" as an alternative. Randall rightly notes that "eco-anxiety" tends to pathologize the emotions associated with it, leaving them for professionals to deal with and "cure." These feelings are valid and appropriate, and all of us need to deal with them.

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