

Helping young people turn climate anxiety into climate action

June 19 2024, by Laura Castañón



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Young people today are living with the existential threat of climate change. They are witnessing and experiencing record-breaking heat waves, devastating storms, and rising seas. Moreover, youth are watching

the actions of governments and industries fall well short of what is needed to address the climate crisis, leaving many young people feeling powerless and hopeless about the future.

"Many youth are frustrated and anxious that adults are not acting responsibly; they are going to have to live with the impact of bad decisions that are being made now," said Erin Seaton, a senior lecturer in education at Tufts who specializes in school-based mental health. "It's their future that's at stake, and they feel like they don't have control."

Climate anxiety—a catch-all term for feelings of anxiety, fear, grief, anger, helplessness, and guilt related to climate change—is an understandable response to the current state and scale of the crisis. It's experienced by people of all ages, but is particularly prevalent among [young adults](#). Left unaddressed, climate anxiety can be paralyzing, debilitating, and exacerbate existing [mental health problems](#). But there are ways to help young people manage these feelings.

"It has to be a priority in our schools and our communities," said Seaton. "When we teach students about climate, we can give them not only a greater understanding of the issues, but more agency around their own impact and actions. It can be calming to know there are steps you can take."

Acknowledge the reality of climate change

"When we're engaging with young people about climate, we have to validate the bad. The reality is not always sunny and bright," said Ann Ward, the education and outreach specialist for the Tufts Office of Sustainability.

Ward spent almost two years studying how young climate activists in Boston—particularly in the [Sunrise Movement](#), a youth-led organization

advocating for action on climate change—managed emotions around climate change. "It's a mistake for adults to ignore that, or to try to tell kids that we expect them to feel hopeful."

Often, anxiety in adolescents can arise from feeling like a problem—perhaps an upcoming test, for example—is too big, and they don't have the skills to manage it.

In these cases, reminding young people that the problem isn't as big as it feels—it's just one test—and helping them think through the strategies they already know to tackle it—they've studied and prepared—can help ease feelings of anxiety. But climate change isn't something that any individual can address on their own.

"It's not as if we can say to youth, "Climate change isn't so big and you have skills and strategies to manage it." Those normal ways in which we help manage anxiety aren't available because, as a 16-year-old, you're not writing policy," Seaton said.

"The problem is really big, it's real, and it's impacting us now and in the future."

Climate change is a serious problem and the negative feelings and emotions associated with it are reasonable and justified. Acknowledging this and discussing those feelings can help young people feel heard and supported.

Connect with others

Whether it's through [advocacy groups](#), environmental clubs, or other organizations, connecting with people who feel the same way can make a big difference. Seaton pointed to the example of [Climate Cafés](#)—youth-led conversations on climate change and related issues—as one way to

meet and engage with other people who are thinking about these issues and how to help.

"I think the biggest thing about anxiety is having a feeling and not knowing where to go with it," Seaton said. "We can help students or young people manage these feelings by giving them a sense of voice and agency—here's a way to feel heard in your school or your community and here are actions you can take."

Take action together

There are many opportunities to take action locally. Youth-led campaigns have resulted in to plastic bag bans, community gardens, charging stations for electric cars, changes in how restaurants deal with waste, and much more. Turning climate anxiety into climate action can help young people feel like there is something they can do to make a difference.

Taking action with other people is key, Ward said. It's something that she heard regularly from young activists in the Sunrise Movement.

"Doing things with other people who they felt connected to gave them hope that they weren't out there doing it on their own," Ward said.

"Having that community is part of what facilitates that transition from action to feeling hopeful."

Make space for joy

Addressing the challenges of climate change is neither quick nor easy. And while it's important to recognize and acknowledge the hard parts, it's also important to envision what a positive future could look like and to celebrate victories along the way.

Providing concrete examples of what people are already doing—whether it's advocating for [bike lanes](#), restoring [salt marshes](#), or designing sustainable fashion lines—can help young people picture that future and their role in it.

"It's about connecting to people's passions and showing them examples of how this can actually happen, not just in theory," Ward said. "We can help [young people](#) see what a more sustainable future could be and how they could be a part of it by showing them what other folks are doing to make the world a better place."

At Tufts, Ward has helped create [Resilient Climate Leaders](#), a combination of three programs intended to help students develop skills to tackle climate challenges in ways that preserve wellness now and in their future careers.

The Sustainable Spring program helps students learn about ways to get involved and meet like-minded fellow students; the Sustainable CORE (Cultivating our Resilient Environment) Fellows focus on inclusive community building that emphasizes sustainable action, equity, and celebration; and the Solutions Fellows work in collaboration with staff and faculty to solve problems related to decarbonization, sustainable food, and other major institutional challenges.

"In all of that programming, we are centering community, action, joy, and reflection," Ward said. "And the feedback from our students has been really positive, in particular around their social and emotional well-being. They are meeting people who feel the same way, learning to take action, and feeling more hopeful."

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: Helping young people turn climate anxiety into climate action (2024, June 19) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-young-people-climate-anxiety-action.html>

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