

Green Is The New Frazzled

How to save the world without losing your mind

by E.B. Boyd

I admit it. I've stood at the supermarket fish counter, struggling to remember which fish are sustainably grown and which ones are not. I obsess over the deli containers tumbling out of my kitchen cabinet, worrying about their plastic toxins and inevitable resting place — landfill or recycled? I feel guilty every time I buy bottled water, kick myself if I arrive at the grocery store without my canvas bags, and feel like I'm personally murdering future generations whenever the furnace churns. My heart pounds every time ice breaks off Antarctica. I've fantasized about slapping stickers that say "I have a small weenie" on the backs of Hummers. And at the odd cocktail party, I've been known to blurt out something cheerful like, "So, global warming, huh. I mean, shouldn't we be *doing* something about it?"

Turns out, I'm not alone.

The combined threats of climate change, peak oil, household toxins, species extinction and a slew of other environmental disasters are making many cranky, depressed, resentful, overwhelmed, afraid, fretful, strung out, despondent, belligerent, spooked and snappish. So many of us are in a kerfuffle that there's a new term to describe our feelings: "eco-anxiety."

Though easy to dismiss as the latest chosen preoccupation of overeducated, Whole Foods-buying, Prius-driving, Sierra Club-card-carrying yuppies, therapists say eco-anxiety is real, and it takes many forms. Lisa Murphy, 38, of Aptos, CA, confides that conversations with people who deny climate change or challenge her decision to ride a bike instead of drive a car set off a slew of emotions in her, including irritability, foreboding and sadness. Chloe Martin, 40, of San Anselmo, CA, said she became so perturbed last year when the *New York Times* called a UN climate change report "a bleak and powerful assessment of the future of the planet" that she went on a personal retreat to reflect on what she could do. "I couldn't believe I was reading a line like that," she says. "They were talking about the future of the *planet*. I felt scared." Bill Allayaud, 56, of Sacramento, is the past state director for the Sierra Club and a lifelong environmental enthusiast. What bothers him today, however, is that doing the math on global warming is turning him into a pessimist. "It seems like it's almost overwhelming to the point of depression or paralysis," he says.

Kids aren't immune, either, though their experience is more like that of the generation that grew up under the Cold War, never having known a world in which the threat of nuclear holocaust didn't exist. "I hear less anxiety and more of an intensity about it — some fatalism and some anger," says Catherine Morton, a licensed professional counselor from Vancouver, WA, who works with children as well as adults. "As long as those kids have been alive, it's something they've heard about. It's not the big surprise that it is for older folks."

While anxiety in scattered individuals is ratcheting up, there's currently no nationwide data on the phenomenon. Riley Dunlap, an environmental sociology professor at Oklahoma State University, says heightened levels of worry are not yet showing up in Gallup's annual Earth Day poll, on which he consults. But he says it is starting to pop up anecdotally. "I'm on a listserv for people working in environmental psychology, and there were some exchanges about it a few weeks ago," says Dunlap.

In his latest book, *Peak Everything*, peak oil authority Richard Heinberg predicts people will become more troubled as the implications of our current trajectories become more apparent. "Those with psychological training may play an important role in our collective adaptation to peak oil and climate change as energy experts and permaculturists," he writes. In anticipation of future needs, Sarah Edwards, an ecopsychologist who co-directs the Pine Mountain Institute in Southern California, has started offering continuing education classes for therapists and counselors on identifying and responding to eco-anxiety.

Alice in Worryland

In a recent issue of *HopeDance* magazine, Edwards and Linda Buzzell, a Santa Barbara psychotherapist and founder of the International Association for Ecotherapy, wrote an article called "The Waking Up Syndrome." It describes what happens to people psychologically as their awareness about the planet's likely future grows. "It's leaving many of us feeling like Alice in Wonderland, being sucked down a rabbit hole into some frighteningly grotesque and unfamiliar world that's anything but wonderful," they write.

An initial, and understandable, impulse toward denial, they say, eventually gives way to "semi-consciousness," where eco-anxiety starts to percolate. That, in turn leads to what they call "the moment of realization," where full-blown anxieties kick in, catalyzed by the physiological systems humans evolved to protect themselves from external threats. The perception of danger activates the amygdala, which triggers internal alarm bells. Anxiety emerges as a mechanism to create sufficient discomfort to propel us to action. When the threat consists of looming environmental disasters, Edwards and Buzzell say, "some of us become obsessive newswatchers, documentary filmgoers, Internet compulsives or book readers, wanting to know more and more about what's really happening. Loved ones may think we've gone nuts. Spouses may consider divorce; kids may decide mom and dad are hopeless cranks. The more fragile or vulnerable among us may get depressed or experience panic attacks... Even the more resilient may throw themselves obsessively into save-the-planet and other activities, soon to become exhausted and weary from trying to do what no one person can."

So that's the good news. We're not crazy, self-indulgent, or over-sensitive. And for the libertarians out there, nor do we have some exotic mental health illness that can be converted into disability benefits. What we're feeling, instead, is a normal physiological response. The bad news? It'll get worse before it gets better.

Edwards and Buzzell compare this "waking up" to Neo's taking the red pill in everyone's favorite dystopian-future sci-fi flick, *The Matrix*. To recap, after receiving cryptic messages about something called the Matrix and suddenly finding himself chased by spooky shape-changers, our protagonist is given a choice by his would-be savior: Take the blue pill, forget all the weird stuff, and return to his old — but ignorant — life. Or take the red pill and learn the truth. Neo reaches for the red — and wakes up to a grim reality nothing like the comfortable life he'd led before.



In Treatment: Addressing Eco-anxiety

Feeling the twinges of eco-anxiety? Joanna Macy, a long time environmental activist and instructor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, advocates a three-pronged strategy for moving through those feelings. Choose one activity, she says, from each of the following three categories:

Work to slow down environmental destruction

Join an environmental activism group. Write letters to your representatives. Document the destruction of a particular ecosystem. Attend a protest. Lobby to shut down industrial polluters. Andrew Szasz, a sociology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz and author of *Shopping Our Way to Safety*, interviewed countless housewives who became grassroots activists in the wake of the 1970s Love Canal disaster. "They were psychologically transformed," he says. "The real anxiety reducer is a sense of taking responsibility and getting active."

Get involved in creating a sustainable world

Help build a school garden. Implement a grey-water recycling system in your home. Start bicycling instead of driving. Hang your laundry to dry. Commit to buying locally produced food. If you're feeling particularly ambitious, consider changing jobs or moving to a place where you can reduce your impact. A few years ago, Brent Eubanks, 36, a mechanical engineer from El Cerrito, CA, moved out of a rocket-building career and into energy efficiency. "I'm most optimistic and happiest when I feel like the work I'm doing is closest to the ideal of designing in conjunction with nature, rather than in ignorance of it," he says.

Work to shift your way of looking at the world

Learn more about sustainability practices. Spend time in nature. Study traditions that see the world as a unified whole. And better yet, do it with others. "Don't try to cope with this enormous challenge alone!" say Southern California counselors Linda Buzzell and Sarah Edwards.

Folks who move sufficiently down the path of “waking up” might feel like Neo does when he steps back among his unknowing fellow humans. “You feel like a ghost walking among other people because they don’t know and they won’t listen and they don’t believe,” says Jim Hanson, 51, a web developer from Southern California, whose own awareness grew after he left Los Angeles to live in a small town in the Los Padres National Forest. Christina Ipri, 37, a ceramics artist in Las Vegas who gets despondent at the thought of what pollution and global warming are doing to animals and birds, also struggles with isolation. “It’s not like every third person you meet understands,” she says.

For those of us living in places that have caught the green bug, it doesn’t help that even as we’re doing our best to be part of the solution, holier-than-thou greenies go out of their way to make us grovel over every eco-transgression. Olivia Giovetti, 22, a writer from Los Angeles, tells of one such encounter at a grocery store: “The crunchy granola cashier raised his eyebrow at me when I asked for a plastic bag [to bundle items she needed to store in her office’s communal fridge]. I could just feel his eyes saying ‘You know, that just goes to the plastic vortex in the middle of the ocean, right?’”

Step Away From *The New York Times*

So what’s an eco-anxious person to do once they’ve woken up, if they don’t want to end up a panicky mess? Many of the strategies seem counter-intuitive. First, go on a news diet, says Thomas Joseph Doherty, a licensed psychologist in Portland, OR, who also teaches ecopsychology at the Lewis and Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling. Staying informed is one thing; overconsuming alarmist messages cranked out by a media eager to sell your eyeballs to advertisers is not. “Our media diet is like our other diets,” Doherty says. Consume what you need and then push back from the table. Troubling messages, like junk food, eventually just wear us down.

Then, give yourself permission to proceed at your own pace. Tracy Mayor, 46, a writer in the Boston area, says she takes a “one eye opened, one eye closed” approach, making the changes she can and giving herself permission to turn a blind eye to the others for now. “Being sustainable takes a long time,” says Doherty. “If you can let go and take care of yourself, you’re more likely to make a long-term sustainable change.” And give yourself permission to get down in the dumps occasionally. “We need to accept that we are going to feel angry at times,” says Edwards. “We need to be patient with ourselves and with others. We can’t beat people into seeing it.”

Gail Tennant, a licensed psychotherapist in Berkeley, helps clients re-learn how to calm themselves. Anxieties in general are spiking among Americans, she says, and they often overwhelm us because we’ve lost the ability to calm ourselves in the face of our fears. “The brain contains a system for calming,” she says, but the current culture undermines it by emphasizing speed, speed, speed, and activity, activity, activity. “We don’t know how to relax, how to quiet the mind, how to breathe, how to sit and be still.” For some, learning to find calm might mean reconnecting with a spiritual tradition. For others, it might mean practicing meditation or yoga. “People can’t act with complete wholeness and integration until they have that within themselves,” Tennant says. “Otherwise, they just go out and spread more anxiety.”

And those annoying eco-judgers? Don’t let them get to you, says Doherty. Their behavior ultimately has more to do with their own psychologies than anything you’re doing. Some are simply insecure about their own green good-enoughness. They nitpick you to bolster themselves. Others are making what psychologists call a “fundamental attribution error,” in which a person evaluates the behavior of another assuming they have full knowledge of that other person’s context. Which means we even need to be compassionate toward SUV drivers. “Someone could bicycle to work every day and drive their Hummer only occasionally,” Doherty points out. Well, I guess that sort of kills my “small weenie” sticker idea. Dang. I kind of liked that one.

E.B. Boyd writes about green topics, psychology and media — and tries to stay calm about global warming — from San Francisco.