

Why Facing Our Feelings is Essential for Tackling Our Climate Crisis

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Thirty years ago, I sat in a darkened lecture hall listening to what was happening to our Earth because of the decisions people had made. [Climate change](#), toxic contamination, species loss, forest fires, soil depletion: it was a litany of all the ways humans had gone very wrong. At least, that's how it felt to me, at age 19. Human behavior was directly influencing the globe's weather patterns. It was almost unthinkable.

Apparently, it was so unthinkable for those around me — that people were literally *not thinking* about it.

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We are seeing huge numbers of people starting to bravely name their feelings, openly: I am scared. I feel overwhelmed. I feel powerlessness. I feel angry. Such as Hugh, who struggles with anxiety and wrote into CNN before the climate town hall, "I've been losing sleep after reading a report that talks about how climate change could lead to the collapse of civilization by 2050." A few years ago, this comment would have seemed extreme. This is no longer the case. It just hasn't been acknowledged as openly — until now. And that's a very good thing, especially in this uncertain, anxious and precarious time.

We are all seeking meaning at a time of such radical uncertainty and upheaval. And so the talking heads come out: we should prepare for an apocalypse, mobilize, activate, solve problems, come together, dialogue, innovate, grieve, cry or simply check out.

But we're missing a crucial step. We need to name and acknowledge our feelings; if we don't, we can't move forward.

As [neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux](#) reminds us, "Body hormones, such as cortisol, help us cope with stress. But as with any useful chemical, you can have too much of a good thing. Prolonged, intense stress can raise the levels of cortisol beyond the point where they are useful and can impair memory processing and decision making systems that normally help us be effective amidst uncertainty and change. If we can keep our stress at levels that are useful rather than harmful, we can help ourselves and others be in the zone where we are able to use memory and foresight to cope with the situation. But because we are each different, we each have a unique tipping point."

The question is, how we can do this, particularly when the stakes are so high. Psychologists have a term, "self-regulation" — ways we can keep our stress levels in a zone that enables us to be functional, proactive, agile and resilient.

"It requires huge self-regulation to contemplate and open our minds to apprehend the edges of these massive issues," said [neuroscientist Sarah Peyton](#), author of "Your Resonant Self." This would include

climate change, the pandemic, the economy, who we were pre-Covid-19 and who we are now becoming. “No wonder people get their fuses blown: being asked to take action, mourn, engage, with something so big.

“When anxiety or being overwhelmed hits, we can move outside of our “window of tolerance.” Siegel describes this “window” as the optimal zone of arousal where we are able to manage and thrive in everyday life, despite the ups and downs. On the one end, when stressed we can go into a “rigid” response, which may look like despair or depression, or a more “chaotic” mode of agitation and rage. Often we ricochet between, bouncing around based on how well we can cope with these stressors.

There are many things we can do — individually, socially and collectively — to move us into our window of tolerance. We are all doing them every day: walking, playing with our pets, cooking meals, joking around with our friends. We can also try calming practices like deep breathing and meditation known to powerfully change our stress levels. And, what truly helps us all, is our ability to open up, be honest, and have candid, compassionate conversations with those who feel similarly or who are open to listening.

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