



Abby Luby

Record breaking and dangerously high temperatures are now sweeping the country which means keeping cool and hydrated is a number one priority for any living creature.

According to a [study](#) by an international team of leading climate scientists working with [World Weather Attribution](#) the scorching temperatures hitting North and Central America are “35 times more likely due to human-induced climate change...and that the frequency of these extreme events has rapidly increased in recent years due to the use of fossil fuels.”

The study also notes that the current heatwave is four times more likely today than it was in the year 2000.



<https://www.heat.gov/>

The physical impact on all of us is undeniable, but making it through the sweltering heat that is punctuated with hourly extreme heat advisories and warnings carries a psychological weight as well. A recent panel of psychologists discussed climate change anxiety that effects mild to extreme behavior and how one can cope with a range of emotions in response to global warming. The psychologists appeared at last week’s Bedford 2030’s event “Mental Wellness in the Face of Climate Change: How We Are Affected and What We Can Do About It” at the Bedford Playhouse in Bedford, Westchester. [Bedford 2030](#) is a 1,000 member organization actively devoted to save the planet and address climate change. The event was moderated by [Lauren Brois](#), Director of EnergySmart Homes and GridRewards at Sustainable Westchester. The presenters were Drs. [Joseph Taliercio](#), [Suzanne Davino](#) and [Eric Lewandowski](#).

Words shared by the audience that best expressed their emotions when it came to climate change included “despair, hopeless, frustration, fear, worry, anger, guilt.”

“We’ve been seeing record after record of heat breaking temperatures,” Dr. Joseph Taliercio said. Taliercio is a clinical psychologist with a focus on climate psychology and scientific communication. “Every time we turn on the news we see another story about another disaster, record breaking droughts and famine. We can’t escape this.”

According to the [IPCC \(Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change\)](#) each of the last four decades has been successively warmer than any decade that preceded it since 1850 and the [10 top hottest years ever recorded have all been after 2000](#). IPCC reports that cooling the planet means reducing the flow of heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere to necessitate lowering our carbon footprint which involves cutting greenhouse gases from main sources such as power plants, factories, cars and farms.

According to Taliercio heat waves have contributed to numerous psychological states leading to increases in substance abuse, depression, bi-polar disorder and suicide. “For those without a psychiatric condition, the heat makes us feel tired, less energetic, less optimistic, and there have been links between heat and anger and violence.”



<https://www.mindful.org/what-is-ecoanxiety-and-how-can-mindfulness-help/>

There are however some practical steps one can take to combat psychological downtrends such as wearing light clothing, hats, avoiding the sun, drink plenty of fluids and if temperatures are over 90, forego the use of fans which just push the hot air around. Whether its heatwaves, floods, wild fires, the impact on one’s mental health is real. Dr. Eric Lewandowski, a clinical psychologist specializing in mood and anxiety in youth, spoke about those connections.

“Climate anxiety is really a whole host of emotions,” Lewandowski explained. “They can include worry, grief, despair, madness, panic, hopelessness and all are related to the impacts of climate change current and future.”

Lewandowski presented graphs produced by the [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication](#) that tracks public perceptions of global warming. In the U.S. 62 percent of the national population are worried about global warming while 72 percent of New Yorkers are as distressed. Lewandowsky said other studies show that climate anxiety is more pronounced in younger generations. “Younger people are recognizing that they will live longer into the crisis than older generations.”

[A Lancet Study](#) in 2021 surveyed of 10,000 young people ages 16 to 25 from 10 countries, including the U.S., showed 84 percent were worried about the impacts of climate change on people and the planet. The study also revealed that younger people’s climate change concerns affected their ability to function on a daily basis.

Locally, Lewandowski said the results of a 2023 student-led survey echo these findings. Conducted by students at Croton-on-Hudson High School for their [Greenlight Award project](#), they surveyed the junior and senior classes. Eighty-seven percent of those polled reported some difficulty in daily functions.

Thankfully there are skills that can help us cope with our emotional reactions to climate change. Dr. Suzanne Davino, a clinical psychologist with expertise in young adults and an advocate for the [Climate Psychology Alliance of North America](#) explained how mindfulness, seeing the world as it is and understanding what’s happening to us mentally can help deal with climate anxiety.

“What kind of feelings and thoughts are arising and what physiological sensations do you notice as you go through your day?” Davino asked the audience. “Are you noticing muscle tension? Sometimes those things can be clues at any given moment to how you’re feeling.”

Being clear on the accuracy of climate information is also important, Davino noted.

“There’s the whole idea of tokenism which refers to doing something that’s a climate based behavior, like buying a cotton tote bag to replace plastic bags for example.”

Interestingly and to her point on being well informed about climate change, Davino said studies show it would take 54 years of using a cotton tote bag every day to make it an environmentally friendly alternative to a plastic bag, which can lead to a false sense of complacency.

Individual actions that can change our own carbon footprint can make us feel we are active in combating climate change. Davino suggested that one can reduce their air travel or eat a plant-based diet.

“When you know what to focus on you’re more effective, more confident and maybe not worrying so much about smaller things,” she said.

A new report released by [InfluenceMap](#) detailing its [Carbon Majors](#) project, an influential database of fossil fuel production data, cites a [database](#) analyzing the individual carbon emissions. The data shows over 70% of global fossil fuel and cement CO2 emissions since the Industrial Revolution can be traced to 78 corporate and state producing entities.

That corporations contribute to 70 percent of the earth’s carbon emissions can make the average person feel overwhelmed. Climate change has also become a polarizing issue for many and the constant news stream can lead to mental exhaustion.



<https://gpsnews.ucsd.edu/study-reveals-increasing-polarization-in-climate-change-news-coverage-between-elite-and-heartland-news-sources/>

“Try to stay steady,” Davino advised. “Prioritize and look at what you consume and what you can contribute.” Other mental health advice included advocate for climate change legislation you believe will make a difference and patronize companies that follow climate protection practices. Also being part of a community hub involved in collective action to reduce the impacts of climate change can help reduce anxiety. Such hubs teach new skills and can reinforce a sense that you are not alone in working for a greener planet.

image: [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication](#)

[Map](#) for estimated % of adults who think global warming is happening (nat'l avg. 72%), 2023.

<https://www.heat.gov/pages/tools-information>