

GLOBAL

WORRYING

THE ENVIRONMENT

IS IN PERIL AND ANXIETY

DISORDERS ARE ON THE RISE.

WHAT'S THE

CONNECTION?

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## MY ANXIETY ATTACKS BEGAN

two summers ago. They were mild at first, a low-level unease. But over a period of months they grew steadily worse, morphing into full-fledged fits of panic. I was a wreck. The sight of an idling car, heat-trapping carbon dioxide spewing from its tailpipe, would send me into an hours-long panic, complete with shaking, the sweats, and staring off into space while others conversed around me. The same thing happened on overly warm days, like those 60-degree ones here in the Big Apple last January. The culprit, I realized, was all the reporting I'd been doing on global warming—that, and the emotional impact of becoming a first-time parent. I had come down with a severe case of eco-anxiety—a chronic fear of the environmental future.

MY CONDITION ONLY GOT WORSE. To save electricity—most of which, after all, comes from the fossil fuel-burning power plants that cause 35 percent of the United States' carbon dioxide emissions—I'd skip the elevator and walk the eight flights of stairs to my apartment. At night, I lay awake worrying about which of the myriad climate-related disasters scientists are predicting would come first—flood, famine, heat wave, drought—and how I might prevent each and every one of them. Couldn't I win the lottery and fund a renewable energy technology to replace all those power plants? How much would it cost to run a full-page ad in *The New York Times* telling people how to reduce the greenhouse gases they generate? (Only \$60,000—I checked.)

Sure, my reaction was extreme. But it wasn't wholly irrational either. Climatologists predict that without radical action to address climate change, civilization as we know it may end in 50 years. The world's coastal areas, home to nearly half the Earth's population, could well be under water.





Severe weather will likely wreak havoc upon the delicate agricultural cycle that feeds us. (If we don't drown, we may starve to death.) Half the world's species could perish as their ecosystems change drastically.

My little boy is three years old. Fifty years isn't so long.

Nothing I did to curtail my anxiety helped—not talking to my shrink, not switching my apartment to a greenhouse gas-free electricity supplier, not handing out cards to idling motorists telling them how much pollution they could prevent simply by turning off their engines. My girlfriend started screening the newspaper for me, like some Soviet censor, snipping away alarming news. But even with her intervention, I felt alone. Riding high in their SUVs, few people around me seemed concerned about the changing climate. Was I the only person afflicted?

A little digging revealed that I was not. While few Americans report symptoms as extreme as mine, 36 percent of the U.S. population worries “a great deal” about global warming, according to a recent Gallup poll. Another 26 percent worry “a fair amount.” When asked what will be “the most important problem facing our nation 25 years from now,” Gallup respondents listed the environment third, just behind “a lack of energy sources” and Social Security, and way ahead of terrorism, education, unemployment, race relations, and the budget deficit.

You can't blame them...er, us. Forget about global warming for a minute. (At least try.) There are plenty of current environmental crises to make Americans anxious: the world's disappearing forests, diminishing freshwater supplies, toxic nuclear wastes, over-fished oceans, vanishing species. The list goes on. These horrors flicker nonstop across our TV and computer screens. And with a White House not known for its environmentalism, it's hard to hope that things are moving in the right direction.

In fact, while I was wandering around New York in a panic about our environmental problems, I was just part of an anxious crowd. The question was what to do about it.



WE ARE A NATION ON EDGE, and not just about the environment. A study published in the June 2005 *Archives of General Psychiatry* estimates that 29 percent of

American adults experience anxiety disorders—intense and often exaggerated states of apprehension—most of which begin before the sufferer's twenty-fourth birthday. So deeply stressed have we become that “the average college student in the 1990s was more anxious than

85 percent of the college students in the 1950s,” says San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge, author of a major study on American anxiety between 1952 and 1993, and of *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before* (Free Press). Even little kids today are far more anxious than they were in the 1950s. (Twenge doesn't yet have data on more recent years, but suspects that anxiety levels have continued to rise.)

Why do we worry so? It's complicated: Individual anxiety appears to stem from a combination of genetics and life experiences. “There's at least one gene that predisposes people towards anxiety, and there are probably several others that haven't been discovered yet,” says Jack Gorman, M.D., a psychiatry professor at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. About 30 percent of a person's anxiety level is genetically determined, Gorman says. Traumatic experiences can also predispose individuals toward anxiety, especially if they happen early in life.

Beyond that, researchers aren't entirely sure what causes anxiety. They do know that women are significantly more likely to develop anxiety than men, possibly because women and girls may undergo more traumatic experiences than do men and boys. And possibly because of—you guessed it—hormones.

In any case, once an anxiety disorder emerges, it often perpetuates itself. The anxious brain can get trapped in a kind of feedback loop, says Peter Whybrow, M.D., director of UCLA's Semel Institute of Neuroscience and Human Behavior. “As the alarm bells begin to ring,” Whybrow notes, “the hormonal systems of the brain are elevated” and tend to stay that way. Anxiety becomes a vicious circle.

Whybrow believes that human anxiety evolved on the prehistoric African savanna to deal with short-term threats—a hungry tiger, for example. “This system was designed for a situation where you have to run very fast, fight very hard, or die,” he says.

But today's threats, environmental and otherwise, are rarely hungry tigers. (Which, frankly, are almost extinct.) In an unintended consequence of human progress, the problems we tend to worry about aren't short-term, but gnawing and hard to resolve. For many of us, the concern is not where our next meal is coming from, but whether the world will exist for our grandchildren.

Americans have certainly faced anxiety-inducing crises in the past. During the Great Depression, many people really did worry about their next meal. World War II brought the dark cloud of fascism. The 1950s saw the prospect of another cloud—the nuclear one. So did the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

Depression, war, nuclear terror—horrific threats, all. And yet, researchers such as Twenge suggest that Americans were less anxious then than now. Why? Perhaps we felt more united in the face of war than we do today, amidst the bitter debates about climate change, Arctic drilling, and so on. Perhaps the solutions were clearer: find a job, kill the Nazis, keep the dominoes from falling in Europe and

Asia. Maybe relative ignorance was bliss; Americans in 1950 weren't bombarded with worrying news twenty-four hours a day as we are now. And possibly our leaders inspired us more then. As FDR assured the country, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Today's problems seem beyond our individual or community control. Take global warming: sure, you can switch to a renewable energy supplier, buy a hybrid, or swap your old light bulbs and appliances for energy-efficient ones. And, though it's unlikely under the current administration, the federal government could raise car mileage standards, eliminate tax breaks for SUVs, and fashion an energy policy that doesn't rely on fossil fuels.

But then you have India and China on the horizon, two developing nations more concerned with economic development than greenhouse-gas emissions, and you wonder: What's the point in even trying?

It's enough to keep you up at night.



DO THE TERRORS OF THE MODERN WORLD really account for soaring anxiety rates? Los Angeles-based "ecotherapist" Linda Buzzell-Saltzman thinks so. "A lot of us have a form of secondhand trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder just from listening to the news," she says. "I've worked as a therapist for over 30 years

and I've hardly seen anyone who doesn't have it."

People who come to Buzzell-Saltzman don't generally volunteer that the news is stressing them out. Instead, they have the usual problems—depression, anxiety, conflicts at home and work. "But once you delve a little deeper, a lot of this begins to emerge," she says. "People are really concerned. Almost every day people hear news about the glaciers melting—it's upsetting."

Buzzell-Saltzman and other ecotherapists help people resolve emotional issues not only through traditional psychotherapy, but by encouraging them to reconnect with the natural world through practices such as gardening, hiking, even walking in a city park. She calls it "understanding and healing the human-nature relationship." A little nature, Buzzell-Saltzman says, goes a long way toward improving your mental health.

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For his part, Whybrow, the UCLA doctor, believes that people are so anxious because the dangers that have arisen during recent decades are too new for us to have evolved neural processes and modes of behavior that might help us cope with constant warnings of disaster. "In our modern society, we've built a series of challenges that are not immediately life-threatening, but that create the same anxiety that a wild beast leaping at you would have done thousands of years ago," he says. And because of information overflow, "everybody's alarms are ringing all the time, but they're not turning off." All that ringing leaves us chronically anxious.

Twenge, the San Diego professor, has attempted to explain Americans' rising anxiety rates by looking at social factors. (After all, our gene pool hasn't changed much in the last fifty years.) "Statistically, the best thing to do is to match [anxiety] scores with the divorce rate, the unemployment rate, the crime rate, and other [social] variables from the corresponding years," she says. In examining data from more than 50,000 college students and children, Twenge found that increases in the anxiety rate were attributable to just two variables: The first is a decrease in what academics call social connectedness—the strength of our bonds with loved ones, friends, neighbors, fellow members of civic groups, religious congregations, and other organizations. (A similar theory was popularized by Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam in his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American*

*Community*.) The second factor, is “perceived threats to people’s well-being...the crime rate, fear of nuclear war, AIDS.” Whether or not environmental issues compound those anxieties Twenge isn’t sure, but she thinks it’s possible.

Social psychologist Shalom Schwartz, professor emeritus at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, goes further. Over the course of several international studies, Schwartz has identified one group likely to grow anxious from their awareness of environmental problems: “people concerned with the welfare of unknown others,” he says. If you care about people you don’t even know, you’re more likely to find environmental crises upsetting. By contrast, Schwartz notes, people interested in power and fame are the least concerned about the environment.

In other words, if you’re losing sleep over global warming, you can at least feel good about yourself while you toss and turn.



HERE IS ONE MORE FACTOR predisposing individuals and societies towards anxiety, Twenge says. It’s something psychologists call “locus of control.” Having a so-called internal locus of control—“believing your actions matter and what you do makes a difference”—lowers anxiety levels. People with an external locus of control, who believe that “things like luck and powerful others determine what happens in the world,” are more likely to become anxious.

If so, rising anxiety rates may result from globalization, that great autonomy-erasing, geopolitical trend of recent years. In an era when our lives are increasingly influenced by multinational corporate behemoths, powerful but remote politicians, and socioeconomic trends we don’t necessarily understand, Americans’ locus of control has shifted from internal to external. Today, “kids as young as nine are saying, ‘What I do doesn’t matter,’” Twenge reports.

That’s not necessarily a bad thing, if control lies in the hands of an eco-friendly steward. Numerous polls have found, for instance, that our environmental angst decreased during the Carter and Clinton administrations. “The more people have confidence that the government is handling the problem,” says Riley Dunlap, an Oklahoma State University sociology professor who studies public attitudes about environmental issues, “the more public concern declines.”

All this means that George W. Bush could do a lot more to help me and millions of others sleep better at night—and I don’t say this facetiously. The evidence suggests that a President committed to protecting the environment is seen by the public, at least in that context, as a strong and calming figure.

Given Bush’s historically low poll numbers, the White House

might like to know that going green could make Americans feel more optimistic about the future—and give the president’s ratings a much-needed shot in the arm.



UT BUSH isn’t about to become the eco-President, so I decided to take matters into my own hands and investigate a treatment that research suggests may be the most effective against anxiety: cognitive-behavioral therapy, or CBT. Practitioners of CBT believe that psychological distress results from “disordered thoughts” which are frequently characterized by illogic and hyperbole. (*My wallet is empty at the moment. I’m going to the poorhouse forever.*) Correct the thoughts, and you eliminate the stress they produce. That approach might sound Orwellian, or dismissive of people’s emotional difficulties, but it is effective: CBT produces outcomes at least as good as those experienced by individuals using anti-anxiety drugs.

Perhaps the best-known CBT anxiety expert is Robert L. Leahy,

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Ph.D., author of *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* (Harmony Press, 2005). *The Worry Cure* deals mostly with the types of everyday anxieties experienced by Leahy's patients: the fear of financial ruin, of cancer and spousal abandonment even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Why, Leahy wondered, did his patients feel so much anxiety about things that might never come to pass?

The answer, he believes, is that worriers are likely to think that worry is efficacious. And sometimes they're right. Productive worry helps people accomplish tasks: If you're anxious about missing your train, you can check the schedule. By contrast, unproductive worry bogs down in vague, hard-to-answer questions, such as, "What happens if the United States doesn't sign on to Kyoto?"

According to Leahy, truly anxious people worry that they can't handle the emotions that might occur should the events they're afraid of actually happen. (*I'm anxious about global warming now because I think I might really lose it once the Atlantic floods Manhattan.*) As a result, worriers try to prevent the realization of their fears through constant rumination. The problem is, that technique doesn't work.

Leahy's description resonated with me, and recognizing that calmed me considerably. His techniques helped me relax and redirect my concerns about global warming. Instead of keeping my anxiety caged inside my small household, in the past few months I've begun taking small but productive steps, like helping to start a group at my synagogue to address environmental concerns. Thanks to our efforts, the synagogue and 10 percent of its member households have switched to green power. As a result, almost 200 tons of carbon dioxide that would have been released into the atmosphere next year won't be. That won't save the world, but it's a start.

Buzzell-Saltzman, the ecotherapist, agrees that such individual action is therapeutic. "What you want is to not feel powerless," she explains. "Get involved in resisting that which isn't good. Work on the solution." Growing an organic garden, installing solar panels, or becoming a political activist—"those things lower anxiety" about the environment in general, she says. Meditation or some other spiritual path helps provide calming perspective. And finally, "get involved in a group of people for support. Because the worst feeling is that you're all alone, having to deal with these dreadful things that are happening."



HANKS TO Leahy and Buzzell-Saltzman, I was doing much better. But I wasn't cured; the occasional flash of bad environmental news would still send me into a panic. I didn't know what to do with the fact that, unlike the worries described in Leahy's book, my fears

about global warming seemed not only plausible, but likely.

So, a few weeks ago I went to see the author. I plunked myself down on the comfortable sofa in his midtown Manhattan office and told him about my eco-anxiety. Leahy sat in a big leather chair, warm and professorial in his tweed jacket and polo sweater. Pressing his index fingers together against his lips, he pondered my problem.

Leahy told me that anxious people often carry unconscious beliefs about who they are and what they must do for the world to run smoothly. (*"If I think I'm unlovable, I'll try to be perfectly pleasing. If I think I'm a loser, I can try to defeat everybody."*) And if I'm worried about the environment? "That person may have a core belief that it's all up to them."

He was exactly right: On some unconscious level, I believed just that.

"With global warming," Leahy continued, "there may be really negative consequences occurring now and in the future. The question is, would worry be the best strategy for coping with that information?" Worry isn't pathological as long as it's a first step in dealing with the problem, Leahy explained. "The next stage is, what can I do that's productive?"

Leahy endorses social activism, but he also recommends being realistic about what you can do. "You have to accept that you don't know for sure what the outcome is going to be." Try hard, Leahy said, "to appreciate what's here."

It all sounded plausible, particularly coming from such a reassuring figure. But I had one more question: What to do when I read in the newspaper that the polar ice cap will melt in 50 years and sea levels will rise 23 feet and I start to freak?

"Then watch what you're doing," he said calmly. "Say to yourself, 'I'm freaking out about this.'" Taking this step, he said, might lessen the emotional punch.

Leahy's advice seemed so simple. But would it actually work? I wondered.

A few weeks later, I found myself face-to-face with *Time's* issue on climate change. "BE WORRIED," the cover screamed. "BE VERY WORRIED." The "very" was printed in fire-alarm red.

You mean I wasn't worried enough?

I started to flip out. No conscious thought—just shaking and sweating. I went straight home, where my girlfriend reminded me that the article probably didn't say anything I didn't already know, and, besides, editors write sensational cover lines to sell magazines.

True enough. But it didn't help.

Eventually, though, I thought of Leahy and his suggestion that I simply take notice of what was happening to me. *I'm freaking out*, I thought. That perspective had eluded me during many other moments of extreme anxiety. *Just...freaking out.*

And somehow—not instantly, but soon enough—I calmed down. ■