

I'm having a hard time coping with scary climate change news. What should I do?

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Body

I'm having a hard time coping with scary **climate change** news. What should I do? Dear Sara: I recently read the **climate change** report out of Australia — "Existential **climate**-related security risk: A scenario approach" — and I am having a hard time coping with its implications. I'm in my late 20s, I work for a consulting group that helps companies switch to clean energy sources, and I am typically an optimistic person. I know that our world is not in a good place, but I have always been hopeful that by working together we will find a way to fix it.

After reading this piece, though, I do not know what to do. Assuming it's true that human civilization as we know it could very likely come to an end by 2050, it's hard to focus on staying positive. How can we fight against the economic and political systems in place in the U.S. so that we get results, instead of feeling resigned to the way things are now? How do we stay positive here? I'm not sure if that's a question or a cry for help, but I hope there is a good question in there. — Courtney in New York City Dear Courtney, My answer might seem contradictory at first, so bear with me. I don't find that Australian report very credible. But I also think you're right to fear for the future. And it's worth taking steps to address that feeling — more on that in a bit. About that Australian **climate change** report For readers who missed it, in May 2019, an Australian think tank published an 11-page paper by former fossil fuel executive Ian Dunlop and book author David Spratt. In their paper, Dunlop and Spratt outline a scenario in which the world does not swiftly reduce global warming pollution. By 2050, in their scenario, coral reefs and the Amazon ecosystem collapse, deadly heat displaces more than 1 billion people, and food prices skyrocket. Dire social consequences ensue, including armed conflict, pandemics, and outright chaos. The paper, which was not peer-reviewed, provoked immediate criticism from **climate** scientists, who challenged both the report and resulting news articles claiming that human civilization could end within 30 years. "This is a classic case of a media article overstating the conclusions and significance of a non-peer-reviewed report that itself had already overstated (and indeed misrepresented) peer-reviewed science," **climate** scientist Richard Betts, head of **climate** impacts at the Met Office Hadley Centre, wrote in a critique of a news article on the paper. "(T)he report's authors have merely read (or possibly seen without actually reading) a few of the scariest papers they could find, misunderstood (or not read properly) at least one of them, and presented unjustified statements," Betts said. Penn State scientist Michael Mann — who has endured intense harassment over his work on **climate change** — also called the think tank report exaggerated. "I respect the authors and appreciate that their intentions are good, but as I have written before, overblown rhetoric, exaggeration, and unsupportable doomist framing can be counteractive to **climate** action," he told NewScientist. You can read more about the controversy over the Australian paper in this Vox explainer: "Is **climate change** an 'existential threat' — or just a catastrophic one?" The case for worrying about the **climate** Even if you don't buy the idea that civilization is going to outright collapse, there is plenty of mainstream, peer-reviewed research indicating that **climate change** is likely to cause enormous suffering this century. The Intergovernmental Panel on **Climate Change**, the organization of scientists that issues periodic reports on **climate** science, is

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sometimes accused of being too conservative in its assessments. But even a recent IPCC report warns that an additional 0.5 degree Celsius of warming — on top of the roughly 1 degree the world has already warmed — could kill 70-90% of the world's coral reefs, cause annual global fish catches to fall by 1.5 million tons, and increase the risks to "health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth." And according to the IPCC, warming the planet by an additional 0.5 degree C is actually the best-case scenario. Unless the world cuts global warming pollution swiftly — by about 45% below 2010 levels by 2030 and to net zero by 2050 — the planet is likely to warm by more than 0.5 degree C, unleashing even more harm to people and the global community of species. Yikes! Courtney, you asked how to stay positive in light of frightening information about the climate. What if you ... didn't? What would happen if you allowed yourself to feel the full force of your fear, sorrow, anger, or despair? "Respect and honor your feelings," said Margaret Klein Salamon, who holds a doctoral degree in clinical psychology and is the author of *Facing the Climate Emergency*, a book due out next spring. She is also the executive director of The Climate Mobilization, a nonprofit calling for a World War II-scale mobilization to rapidly slash global warming pollution. "They make sense. They are based in reality. They are based in your love for this world and for humanity." "You want to be a robot who doesn't care that all life is threatened? Hell, no," she said. Trebbe Johnson, the author of *Radical Joy for Hard Times*, also encourages acceptance of despair and grief about environmental destruction. "Recognize that you can't always change things in the moment," she said. "That kind of acceptance does not mean submission or capitulation. It simply means that you ground yourself in what is, so that you can move to the next step." So what is that next step? Consider these suggestions. Get informed, but recognize the psychological toll Patrick Houston, an organizer with New York Communities for Change, recently helped pass a bill to slash climate pollution associated with buildings in New York City. He said the first step to coping with climate despair is to learn more about the issue. He acknowledged that staying up-to-date with climate news can be daunting: "That comes at the emotional cost of constantly reading about the terrible situation that we've gotten ourselves into and how we're digging the hole deeper," he said. So he suggested choosing just one source to follow consistently. One option: InsideClimate News, the Pulitzer Prize-winning news site focusing on climate and energy. Houston also recommended identifying your elected officials at the local, state, and federal level. What do they say about climate change? Votesmart.org is one place to research a politician's stance on the issue. Connect with others Salamon said it's common for people who are knowledgeable about climate change to feel alienated from others. They might experience thoughts like, "No one understands. No one wants to talk about it. I'm kind of sitting here all alone with this horrible information." Not true. Nearly 70% of American adults are worried about climate change, making it a mainstream concern. Try talking about your fears with friends, family, or people in your community who are working to address the problem. "There is true relief in the fellowship of others who understand and who are grieving," Salamon said. Commit to action The next step, Houston said, is civic engagement. It's can be easy to feel cynical about U.S. politics. But Houston said it's important for people to understand that elected officials do in fact pay close attention to their constituents. "Some of those small actions that might not feel like a lot — sending a letter, signing onto a letter, calling your elected official, standing in the street for a rally or protest — even if it doesn't feel like a lot, they should know that elected officials pay a lot of attention to that, even if they don't always listen," he said. His other advice: Volunteer at a level that you can sustain over time. Many people can find time to get involved with one organization, but not a dozen. "It can be less overwhelming if you're just zoned in and focused on one goal rather than freaking out and trying to address every single part of the climate crisis by spreading yourself thin and volunteering with a bunch of different organizations," he said. Seek reasons for hope "What we're dealing with is horrible, but it is calling on us to be better," Salamon said. She said she takes inspiration from reading about how Americans responded to World War II. After the shocking attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. rapidly transformed its economy to produce goods for the war effort. People grew vegetables in victory gardens. Gasoline, meat, sugar, and other commodities were rationed, "which by and large Americans accepted cheerfully as part of the war effort," she said. There are advantages to that kind of mentality, she said: "It's actually a much better way of living to be working with your neighbors and your whole society for a common purpose." And unlike the case of a world war, she added, "This time, we don't need to kill anybody." * Sarah Kennedy contributed reporting.

Graphic

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A man carries a young girl who was rescued after being trapped with her mother in their home after a tornado hit Joplin, Mo. on Sunday evening, May 22, 2011. The tornado tore a path a mile wide and four miles long destroying homes and businesses. (AP Photo/Mike Gullett) Associated press A man carries a young girl who was rescued after being trapped with her mother in their home after a tornado hit Joplin, Mo., in 2011. The **changing climate** has been creating more such dramatic scenes in recent years. Associated press A man carries a young girl who was rescued after being trapped with her mother in their home after a tornado hit Joplin, Mo., in 2011. The **changing climate** has been creating more such dramatic scenes in recent years. Associated Press A man carries a young girl who was rescued after being trapped with her mother in their home after a tornado hit Joplin, Mo. on Sunday evening, May 22, 2011. The tornado tore a path a mile wide and four miles long destroying homes and businesses. Associated press A man carries a young girl who was rescued after being trapped with her mother in their home after a tornado hit Joplin, Mo., in 2011. The **changing climate** has been creating more such dramatic scenes in recent years. Associated Press A man carries a young girl who was rescued after being trapped with her mother in their home after a tornado hit Joplin, Mo. on Sunday evening, May 22, 2011. The tornado tore a path a mile wide and four miles long destroying homes and businesses.

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