

Coping with Ecological Despair

These are scary times. It is possible that the Earth will be mostly uninhabitable for humans by the end of the century. And there will be increased suffering in the meantime, due to rising sea levels, and more frequent/severe heat waves, storms droughts, etc. How can one live with this?

You've heard the recommendations: Don't eat meat, avoid car and air travel, reduce-reuse-recycle, etc. Maybe you even plan to be childless. These are good and noble intentions, but the question I'm raising is more general—how to mitigate despair and stay resilient.

One helpful tactic is to remind yourself why your actions matter. Consider: Even though each person dies eventually, it still matters *how* you die. You can die peacefully, or you can die in prolonged agony. But this point applies to all living beings. So even if you are convinced that our ecosystem is doomed, it still matters *how* this plays out. And we can still do a lot to prevent vast amounts of suffering. *That* is why your efforts matter. Remember this.

A second response to despair can be added. Psychologists are now converging on the idea that, oddly, one way to allay negative feelings is simply to *accept* them when they arise (Linehan 2015, p. 151). Don't ignore negative feelings, don't resist them, just observe them with interest.¹ Of course, it is not ideal to *dwell* on negativity or wallow in suffering. But one major source of suffering is our resistance to negative emotions. If you can release such resistance and just allow negative feelings to be, this significantly lessens their intensity.

One more thing. The whole problem is to maintain *right mind*. Too often, your mind gets caught in a loop, fixating on all the stress in your life, on how life is unfair, on how people are terrible, and so on. This in turn make you cranky, self-centered, and ultimately unhappy. Part of the remedy is just to *see* that this is so. The next time your mind goes astray like this, take a step back and notice how it seems almost obsessed with being upset.

Another part of the remedy is just to remember what it means to be in right mind. But what does it mean? This is a question best explored on your own periodically throughout your life. (Try freewriting on it and see where it leads.) Currently, my own thought is this: Right mind means *empathy*. It is a recognition that all beings suffer and are therefore worthy of understanding and tenderness. This helps break the thought-loop of “me” and “my suffering,” and creates a mindset of compassion.

You might think it is depressing to contemplate “all beings suffer,” and I suppose it can have that effect. This is one reason why finding your own understanding of “right mind” is far better than just adopting mine. But if you're like me, the thought just pulls the love out of you, and *right mind means empathy* can be a mantra to help keep you inspired.

Reference

Linehan, M. (2015). *Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Skills Training Manual*, 2nd edition. New York: Guilford Press.

¹ The practice of observing one's mind is also cultivated in Vipassana meditation. See <https://bit.ly/3klDodC>.