

ADVICE



How Taking Care of Your Health Is Part of Climate Action

by Sheri Radford / Mar 10, 2022

Droughts. Flooding. Storms. Landslides. Heatwaves. Rising sea levels. Mass extinctions.

Sometimes the news about climate change feels relentless, and the problems can seem unsolvable, leaving even the most optimistic among us in despair. But it's more important than ever for armchair environmentalists and eco warriors alike to stay healthy, both physically and mentally, because we're in for the fight of our lives (quite literally).

Eco-anxiety

Therapists are seeing more and more young people who are feeling fear, apprehension and grief over the state of the planet and the future of all living things. Children and youth have been disproportionately experiencing what has been dubbed [eco-anxiety](#). It can manifest as tension, guilt, insomnia, substance abuse, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other signs of poor mental health.

At a community level, when eco-anxiety increases, social cohesion decreases. Aggression, violence, crime and other acts of social instability can result.

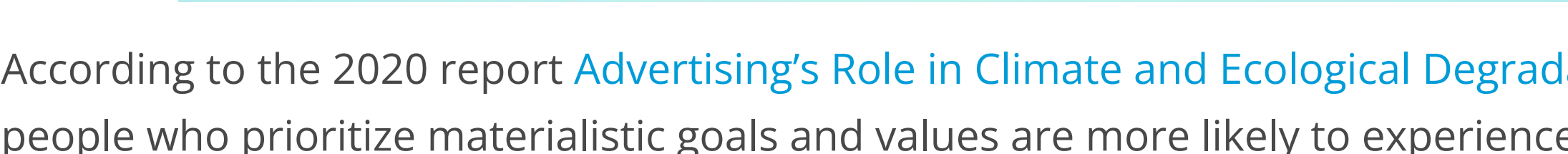
To combat eco-anxiety, the American Psychology Association [suggests boosting resilience and fostering optimism](#) by activities such as strengthening social networks, maintaining a connection to one's culture, finding a source of personal meaning through a spiritual practice, and improving personal preparedness for emergencies such as floods or earthquakes.

Also key to overcoming eco-anxiety is taking positive action: following a more sustainable lifestyle and encouraging others to do the same. Simple acts of self-care are helpful, such as writing in a gratitude journal, going for a walk in the sunshine, watching a funny video, spending time on an enjoyable hobby, or even simply closing your eyes for 30 seconds and taking a few deep breaths.

Materialism

In our increasingly disconnected world, with many people living far away from family and spending too much time doomscrolling, some of us turn to objects to fill the void. But consumption doesn't bring lasting happiness. Consumption only leads to more consumption—and most North Americans already have too much stuff.

The average American home [contains 300,000 items](#). According to the people who calculate [Earth Overshoot Day](#) each year, if everyone bought as much stuff and used as many resources as Americans do, we would need more than five planets in order to meet the demands on nature.



According to the 2020 report [Advertising's Role in Climate and Ecological Degradation](#), people who prioritize materialistic goals and values are more likely to experience low levels of well-being and also to display negative ecological attitudes and behaviours, such as driving large SUVs and refusing to recycle. [Another analysis](#), this one from 2013, indicates that people's well-being decreases if they place more importance on materialistic goals and values, but it improves when they do the opposite.

In other words, people who learn how to find happiness through experiences and personal connections lose their desire for more stuff, which is good for both individuals and the planet.

Individuals who are healthy physically and emotionally don't feel as tempted by the siren call of consumerism. They are less likely to chase an elusive high by endlessly shopping for fast fashions and the latest gadgets, and more likely to find joy through simple activities: hiking in nature, cooking a meal from scratch, laughing with friends over a potluck dinner, playing with the family dog, escaping into a library book, making a gift by hand, digging in a garden, snowshoeing in a park. As a bonus, such soul-enriching activities often create lasting bonds with others.

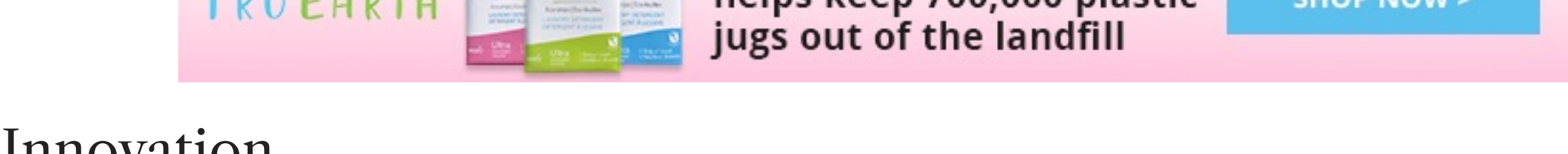
Energy

The fight to end climate change has often been compared to a marathon, not a sprint. And as with running 26.2 miles, stopping global warming requires careful energy management over a prolonged period of time.

It takes a lot of mental and physical energy to protect the environment, from remembering to do the smallest tasks—carrying a reusable shopping bag and coffee mug every day, sorting recycling into the correct bins—to tackling the larger ones: chaining yourself to an old-growth tree about to be chopped down, spearheading a letter-writing campaign to a politician or a corporation.

It also takes great reserves of energy and patience to teach others, especially children, about how and why to save the planet. Plus, extra stamina is needed when dealing with climate change deniers, conspiracy theorists and others intent on ignoring what the climate science tells us.

Energetic people can inspire others and change the world in the process. That inspiration can be as prosaic as encouraging your book club to read a memoir by an environmentalist, or as extraordinary as speaking about climate change in front of an audience of 10,000 people. Both are influential in different ways.



Innovation

Participants in the [UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow](#) in 2021 agree that this decade is critical to halting global warming before we reach the point of no return. A crisis as big and urgent as climate change requires creativity and innovative thinking to fix it, and not just from a few scientists or politicians.

We all need to think outside the box if we're going to reduce greenhouse gas emissions rapidly enough to avert climate disaster. Fatigue, despair and illness are the enemies of innovation. Healthy bodies and calm minds encourage creativity to flourish, and help us develop the curiosity and open-mindedness needed to recognize and embrace truly original ideas.

Healthcare systems

It may sound counterintuitive, but healthcare systems have a huge environmental impact, harming individuals, communities and the Earth. According to a [report published in 2018](#), Canada's healthcare system produces about 4.6 percent of the country's greenhouse gas emissions. The numbers are similar for the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

The reasons are many. Hospitals and clinics have long relied on single-use items in plastic packaging, even though reusable alternatives often exist. Disposable items usually have to travel long distances. Electric vehicles are rarely used as ambulances. Many countries have been slow to adopt virtual care for routine ailments, despite the fact that phone and video appointments reduce emissions compared to driving to receive in-person care. And many common medications and treatments, including gas-propelled inhalers for asthma patients and the anaesthetic gas desflurane, have a high carbon footprint compared to widely available alternatives.

In general, healthier populations have less need for huge healthcare systems, which all too often are wasteful and polluting.

Final thoughts

One of the best things you can do for yourself, your community and the planet in general is to stay healthy, both physically and mentally. Being physically active improves mental wellness, helps with creativity and innovation, and reduces both stress and materialistic desires, all of which boost happiness and increase the energy needed to keep fighting to end climate change—and to inspire others to do the same.

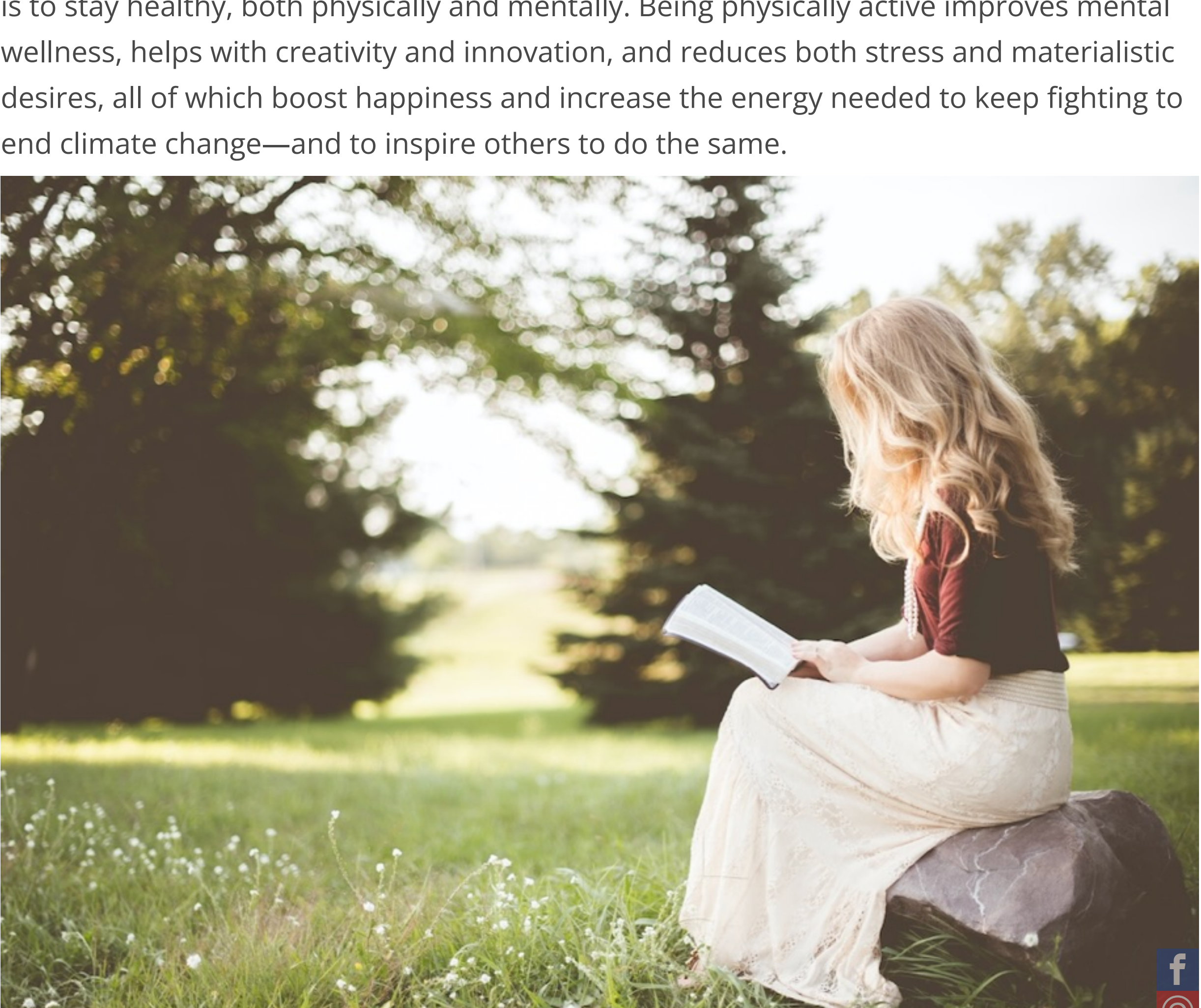
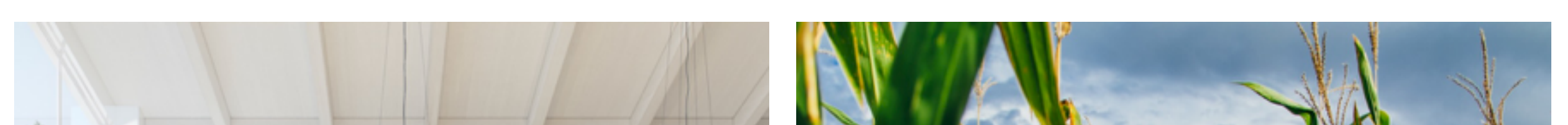
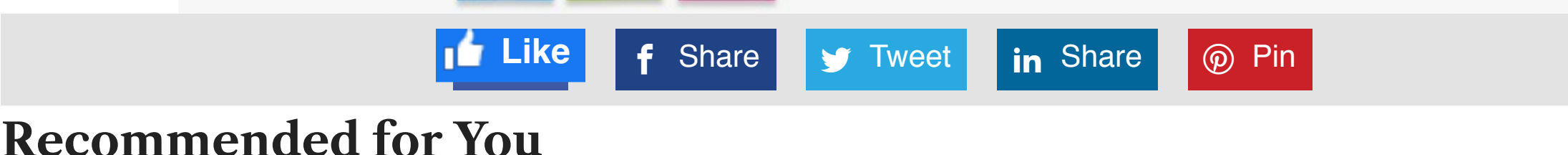


Photo by Ben White on Unsplash

Recommended reading

- [A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet](#): Aimed at Gen Z (but equally useful for older readers), this existential toolkit by Sarah Jaquette Ray explains how to avoid eco-guilt and burnout while developing the resilience needed to advocate for climate justice.
- [How to Prepare for Climate Change: A Practical Guide to Surviving the Chaos](#): In addition to tips on managing eco-anxiety, David Pogue gives down-to-earth advice on everything from preparing your children for climate change to choosing which future-climate-haven area to relocate to.
- [Turn the Tide on Climate Anxiety: Sustainable Action for Your Mental Health and the Planet](#): Megan Kennedy-Woodard and Patrick Kennedy-Williams explore how to harness eco-anxiety and transform it into positive action. They also examine some of the often-overlooked positive effects of the climate emergency, such as feelings of motivation and connection.
- [How to Talk to Your Kids About Climate Change: Turning Angst into Action](#): Better known as the [Climate Mama](#), Harriet Shugarman helps parents overwhelmed with fear and grief figure out how to speak frankly with their children about global warming and help them inspire their kids to stay hopeful for a better future.
- [All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis](#): This collection of insightful essays, interspersed with poems and art, showcases the voices of a range of women in the climate movement: scientists, farmers, lawyers and more. They explore ideas of how we can radically reshape society and fix this crisis. Edited by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson.



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