

The Six Stages of Climate Grief

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Now that the hottest summer on record is drawing to a close, are we any closer to admitting that climate change is upon us? If not, why not?

It might have something to do with the five stages of grief. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified these stages as denial, then anger, followed by bargaining, depression, and acceptance. With record drought killing our cattle and our corn, West Nile virus sweeping the country, and Arctic ice sheets melting away, it's no surprise that millions of people are responding to these frightening signs of environmental decline in stages.

Nobel Laureate Steve W. Running first proposed this frame for understanding the popular response to climate change in 2007. I'd like to go one step further and suggest a sixth stage: The Work.

Denial, the first stage of grief, can be quite comfortable. The U.S. media is in many ways co-dependent with the denialist camp. It rarely connects the dots between extreme weather events and climate change, making it easy to remain blissfully ignorant. Our politicians are also prolonging this denial stage by rarely uttering the term "climate change," as though the words themselves were obscene.

The second stage — anger — sums up the likes of Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh. These talk show hosts are at their most vitriolic when they attack climate scientists or advocates of fossil fuel alternatives. Their ferocity gives license to the crazies who issue

death threats against climate scientists: they would rather shoot the messenger than listen to the message.

The next stage, bargaining, comes when the deniers begin to acknowledge that global temperatures are indeed rising, but claim it's due to natural causes. Or they take a stance like ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson's — admitting climate change is a major, man-made problem, but claiming that the answer is to “adapt” to it instead of changing our behavior.



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Depression is a familiar state to me and my fellow climate change activists. If the truth will set you free, the truth about climate change may set you free to take anti-depressants for the rest of your life. Every weather abnormality comes with a sense of dread. It's at this point that we lose people. Denial starts to look attractive.

Acceptance is the hardest stage, because what experts tell us lies ahead is so damn scary, it will make you want to hop into Rush Limbaugh's lap and stay there: We are surpassing all of scientists' worst-case scenarios by a long shot — we are now on track to an 11-degree Fahrenheit rise by the end of the century, according to the International Energy Agency. We've broken over 4,000 temperature records in the United States just this year, and scientists tell us record droughts, floods, storms, and forest fires all may become “the new normal.”

We must accept this dreadful prognosis if we are to act appropriately.

But acceptance does not mean that all is lost.

After years of working through these stages, I've discovered a new sixth stage: doing The Work. This means taking courage from each other as we look this monster in the eye and fight side-by-side in the battle of a lifetime. Systemic change — not just light-bulb change — is what's required now. This must include everything from replacing the GDP as an outdated measure of progress to getting schools to teach climate science and arm the next generation with the facts.

Together, we can get a glimpse, beyond despair, of a world of transformation and rebirth that is possible if we're courageous enough to fight for it. After all, our planet will eventually restore itself to a state of equilibrium — we just have to make sure humankind is around to witness it.