



essay

A Student's Perspective: What Can I Do About Climate Change?

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We've all heard about the climate crisis, but it can be hard to shake off a feeling of distance. It can feel limited to splintering sea ice in the distant poles, or the vanishing of distant species, all leading to a dystopian, distant future. Climate change is not distant. It is already changing each of our lives, and will only continue to do so. As a young person, a world in crisis is the only world I have ever known – and it will be up to my generation to take responsibility for it. In this article I will discuss the personal effects climate change has on us now and in the future – and why the efforts of young people are especially important.

Health is one of the most personal ways climate change is affecting us. A French study conducted after the country's 2019 heatwave that reached a record-breaking 46°C, showed that heatwaves that serious are 10 times more frequent today than 100 years ago.^{1,2} The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates 250,000 excess annual deaths from 2030 to 2050 from climate-change related issues.³ These include an increase in heat-related health conditions, as well as diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, due to larger areas of the world's climate becoming habitable to the insects that transmit these diseases.

There is also a potential for a surge in mental health issues. Research by the American Public Health Association suggests that 25 – 50% of

people facing an extreme weather event have negative mental health effects.^{3,4} It is not just those who directly experience these events whose mental health is at risk, however. Eco-anxiety, which refers to a fear of environmental damage, is a growing issue, with a 2018 Yale survey finding that 59% of Americans feel 'helpless' about climate change.^{5,6}

Climate change is also having an impact on an essential part of our lives – food. As our greenhouse emissions and their associated temperature increases grow, more and more of the food we treasure will become unsustainable. Seafood is becoming scarcer as a result of ocean acidification caused by CO₂ emissions, as well as rising ocean temperatures. A study looking at the maximum amount of fish that could be sustainably caught in 1930 vs. 2010 found a 4.1% overall decrease.⁷ Though seemingly small, this makes up for 1.4 million metric tons less of fish. The threat to our diets extends across the board: whether it is worldwide crops, vegetable yields or even coffee, you do not need to live in an area at risk of natural disasters for the impact of climate change to affect your daily life.

The immense and personal importance of climate change is clear. But the question remains: why is my contribution as a student important? Perhaps the simplest answer is that my generation will live to see the worst effects. As the environmental impacts of the human behaviour of the past



centuries grow, the current students' contribution will matter more and more.

Secondly, mine is the generation that has always lived in the looming shadow of this crisis. Since events such as the Haiti earthquakes in 2010, all the way to the Australian wildfires in 2020, it has been especially difficult in the last few decades to ignore that the number of climate related natural disasters has tripled in the past 30 years. ⁸

Next, the student generation's youth makes them key in the climate movement. Large industry leaders and governments are pressed to protect profit and voters when discussing climate change with the public, but students need no such filter. Perhaps that contributed to the movements of activists like *Greta Thunberg*, who launched the 2018 School Strike for Climate ⁹, involving 1.6 million students in 125 countries, or *Licypriya Kangujam*, who founded the Child Movement to protest for climate change laws in India at just six years old. ¹⁰

Young activists across the globe can connect to the larger climate movement through social media, and this may make young people's role even more crucial. Social media is the tool that can connect people together in worldwide campaigns such as the *#climatestrike* in May 2019, and the fact that the majority of social media platforms are used more by young people makes their role in these campaigns even more powerful. ¹¹

Furthermore, the reason why young people are so important might be that younger people care more about climate change. Considering that young people are the ones who will be around to see its effects the longest, it's not hard to believe that 70% of people between the ages 18 to 34 are worried about climate change, comparing to 56% aged 55 or older. ¹²

So, whether it's due to awareness, responsibility or willingness to act, students play an essential role in dealing with climate change. But what can I, as a student, actually do to help? Not having control over energy use choices, a job in research or industry, or being able to vote might make it seem like my only choice is to sit and wait for the years to tick by.

In fact, the complete opposite is true. There are a massive number of things young people can and

should do. For instance, you could start with something as simple as signing a petition. Greenpeace's 2014 petition to stop the oil company Shell from drilling in the Alaskan Arctic started with a petition of over 5 million signatures, and was a key factor that contributed to the project being abandoned. ¹³ Current petitions include Friends of the Earth pushing the government to commit to 100% renewable energy ¹⁴, the WWF asking for climate action to be made a priority ¹⁵, and the Climate Coalition requesting more green space and climate justice to be considered. ¹⁶

You could also send a letter, email, or even have a phone call with your local Member of Parliament about what they think about the climate change crisis, and what your local council is doing to reduce its effects. Just letting them know that you're concerned is a help – hearing that constituents care can make them more engaged as well. Luckily, there's a lot of support available about the best approach.

And, perhaps most simply, you can educate yourself and everyone around you. The more we open our eyes to the issues surrounding climate change, the more passionate we become, and with passion comes action. The information out there is almost endless, but a good place to start is to remind yourself of the basic science surrounding global warming. ¹⁷⁻²⁰ After that, there's digging into all the things we're doing to our planet, whether it's in the textiles industry, from food waste, energy, or travel. And most importantly, the solutions. ²¹⁻²³

So, climate change is happening now – and it's much more personal than we might ever have predicted. But the responsibility, the power to change the way things are, is just as personal – especially for young people.

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