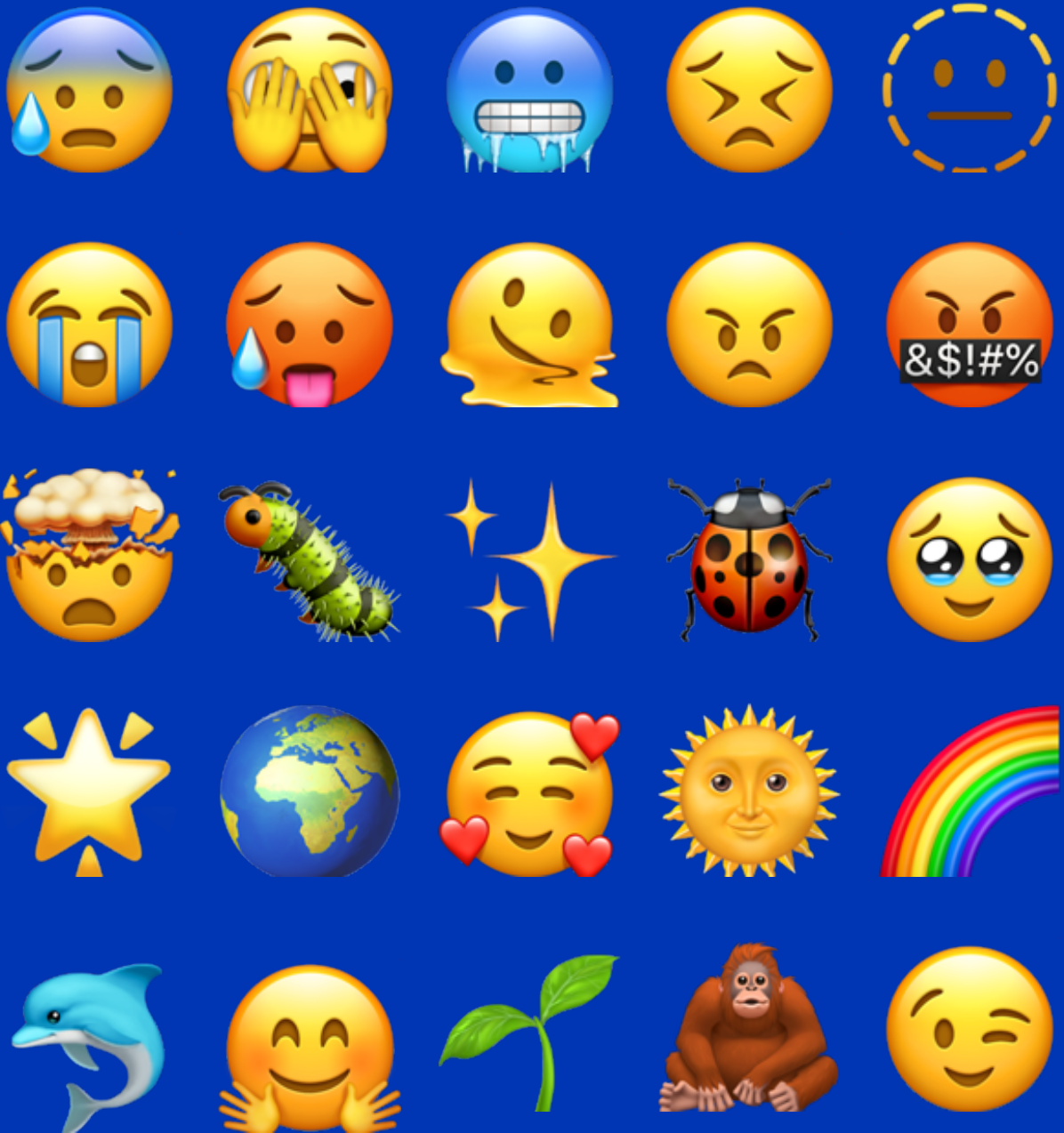


# Emotional Responses to the Climate Crisis:



## The Role of Positive Imaginaries

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## About Climate Vanguard

Climate Vanguard is a youth-led think tank empowering the youth climate movement to become a radical force of political-economic transformation.

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## Introduction

Emotions are what make us human. Among other factors – including material conditions, risk perception, and ideology – emotions dictate one’s level of engagement with the climate crisis.<sup>1</sup> An individual’s level and type of engagement is further determined by how different emotions interact with one another. For example, one may fear the future, be angry at the economic system, and be hopeful about their own ability to change things all at the same time. In turn, a given mix of emotions can generate wide ranging responses from mass organising to civil disobedience.

While there is no perfect “emotional recipe” to inspire activism, it is important to understand the primary emotional reactions to climate breakdown and how they can be leveraged towards action. Such an exploration is particularly relevant when a pervasive lack of hope is proving to be a clear obstacle to climate action. This emphasises the need for narratives which inspire people to believe that a better, more equal world is not a utopian dream, but a reality that can be collectively realised.

## Paralysing Fear

*“What if we stopped pretending?”*

— Jonathan Franzen, *What If We Stopped Pretending*

Young people are particularly afraid of the future.<sup>2</sup> A global survey of children and young people carried out in 2021 revealed that 75% of respondents think the future is frightening, 83% think that people have failed to care for the planet, and just 30% feel optimistic about the future.

This is not surprising considering recent climate impacts. Just this year, unprecedented flooding drowned 4,000 people in Libya, 200,000 people were displaced by record-breaking wildfires in Canada, and heat records around the world have been smashed in recent months.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the most up-to-date science suggests multiple irreversible



Figure 1: **Social media** is rife with pessimistic feelings about the future (see example tweet and meme).<sup>20</sup> For example, **#corecore** is a viral TikTok trend based on the ironic use of the suffix, **-core**. Early iterations of the trend had environmentalist and anti-capitalist undertones, often combined with feelings of hopelessness.<sup>21</sup>

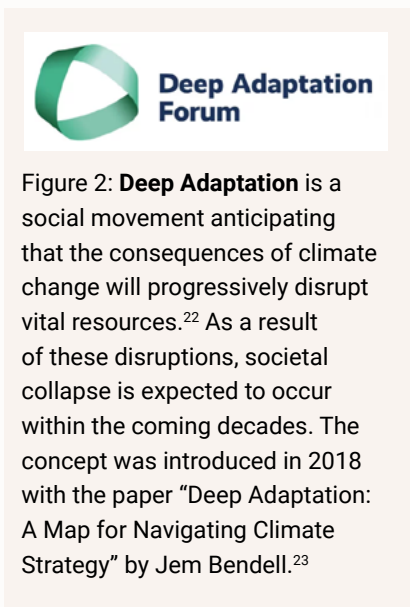


Figure 2: **Deep Adaptation** is a social movement anticipating that the consequences of climate change will progressively disrupt vital resources.<sup>22</sup> As a result of these disruptions, societal collapse is expected to occur within the coming decades. The concept was introduced in 2018 with the paper “Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Strategy” by Jem Bendell.<sup>23</sup>

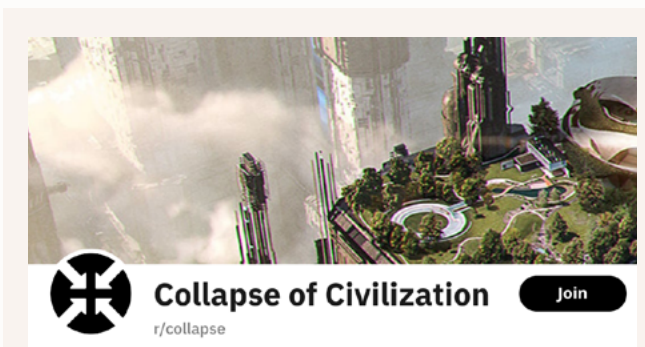


Figure 3: **r/collapse** is a Reddit community focused on the concept of collapse. Its members document signs of collapse that they see in their lives.<sup>24</sup> The subreddit counts almost half a million members and has been gaining significantly more members in the past few years. The climate crisis is one of the topics most often discussed.

tipping points will likely be crossed within the decade as ocean temperatures spike, sea ice extent hits record lows, and biodiversity plummets.<sup>4</sup> Some believe we have entered the ‘Great Unravelling.’<sup>5</sup> Within this context, fear is a natural response.

Fear generally tends to result in cautious behaviour and a desire for more information. It triggers a cognitive “surveillance system” in which people become more attuned to their surroundings, leading them to pause, observe, and seek out messages that challenge their preexisting beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Fear is important in activism as it drives people to question the status quo and to understand the forces driving this terrifying reality.

While fear can play an important role in urging people to take action, it can quickly lead to climate doomism (Figures 1, 2, and 3).<sup>7</sup> Doomism largely follows the logic that global heating is real, we are causing it, but nothing can be done to stop it.\* This is an expression of extreme fear, which predictably leads to paralysis.

The doomist narrative is a dangerous one, giving ammunition to vested interests inhibiting transformational change and tempting policymakers to consider the deployment of unproven technologies. The “change is impossible” narrative is at best delaying and at worst, impeding action.<sup>8</sup> It may also bring about a “doom loop” – a phenomenon where attention and resources are diverted from tackling the root causes of Earth systems collapse, and instead focused on the symptoms of the crisis. This would trigger a cycle of further despair and runaway climate breakdown.<sup>9</sup>

## Angry at everything

*“When do we start physically attacking the things that consume our planet and destroy them with our own hands? Is there a good reason we have waited this long?”*  
— Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*

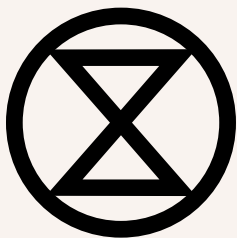


Figure 4: “**Love and rage**” is the rallying cry of Extinction Rebellion, an environmentalist movement started in 2018. Extinction Rebellion uses civil disobedience as a primary tactic.<sup>25</sup>

Anger is another very common, and rational, response to the crumbling of our planetary life support systems.

However, there is often a dismissal of anger among activists in the Global North, as

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\* The statement, “we are causing it” refers to two separate, but related, currents within doomism. The first follows the logic that our drive to burn the Earth is part of human nature, while the second blames capital but sees this as an incontestable force. Either way, the outcome is the same, a belief that our trajectory towards ruin is inevitable.



Figure 5: **Tyre Extinguishers** are a climate group targeting SUVs – highly polluting vehicles. The group uses direct action, deflating SUV tyres while leaving a leaflet explaining the reasons for their action under the windscreen wipers.<sup>26</sup>

“anger [is] generally viewed as suspicious in the context of liberal consensus-oriented democracy.”<sup>10</sup>

But we should not demonise anger. Anger is a legitimate emotional response to climate breakdown and should be leveraged for driving change. In recent years, parts of the climate movement have become increasingly radicalised, employing strategies such as civil disobedience and sabotage – a trend that has seemingly been spurred on by mounting rage (Figures 4 and 5). In fact, climate anger is the strongest predictor of self-reported activism.<sup>11</sup>

Anger can fuel action, but action cannot rely solely on anger.<sup>12</sup> Blind, uncompromising rage is not constructive.<sup>13</sup> It is shared anger, feelings of resentment against the same wrongdoer, and a violation of common values, that catalyses collective action.<sup>14</sup>

## Searching for (real) hope

*“SpaceX is starting a program to take CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere & turn it into rocket fuel.”*

— Elon Musk<sup>15</sup>

In a study of public beliefs regarding climate breakdown, researchers found that “not only is there a lack of hope, there is also a lack of information and ideas about what may promote hope.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, there is an imagination deficit.

Our ability to imagine a world radically different from the one we are living in is atrophied at the very moment it is most needed. Indeed, hope is what makes fear and anger forward-looking, constructive, and more action-oriented.





Figure 6: **Solarpunk** is an artistic and literary movement envisioning a world in which humanity and nature are interconnected. A common trope of solarpunk are eco-cities rich in green spaces, running on renewable energy. “Solarpunk is a rebellion against the structural pessimism in our late visions of how the future will be.”<sup>27</sup>



Figure 7: **Elon Musk** is the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX. He is the wealthiest person in the world and known for his extravagant claims about the prospects of his companies and their products,<sup>28</sup> ranging from plans to take humanity to Mars to programs of turning atmospheric carbon into rocket fuel.

However, not all forms of hope are constructive. Nowadays we are constantly told to be hopeful, even when there is little reason to be. A primary example is “technological optimism,” which is one of the key discourses of climate delay (Figure 7).<sup>17</sup> The incrementalist approach adopted by most policymakers and businesses is equally perilous, gaslighting the public into thinking that the problem is under control and there is nothing to fear.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, false hope feeds into doomism once the promised change inevitably fails to materialise.

## Worldbuilding another climate future

*“Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors within an emergency. [...] To hope is to give yourself to the future – and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable.”*

– Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*



In this alternate world, nature, instead of human institutions, holds the most power. Forests grow freely, and animals move without fear. Rivers follow their ancient courses, unperturbed by dams or diversions. The humankind, instead of dominating, exists in harmony with the environment, their technology guided by ecological wisdom.

Figure 8: Some are using **generative AI** to transform the present and reimagine the future. For example UrbanistAI offers a tool to support the redesign of urban spaces, cities can be places of hope, while ChatGPT and MidJourney can be used to visualise how a more sustainable society may look like.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 9: **Good Energy** “supports TV and film creators in telling entertaining stories that honestly reflect the world we live in now—a world that’s in a climate crisis.”<sup>30</sup> This initiative was born out of the realisation that climate change is almost absent from scripted entertainment.<sup>31</sup>

The climate crisis is a crisis of many interconnected things, but especially a crisis of culture and imagination.<sup>19</sup> Thinking that a climate future of doom and despair is inevitable serves the rich and powerful. Now more than ever, it’s necessary to create stories and narratives that make *our* vision of the future seem inevitable.

Even though there are hopeful imaginaries around, it is extremely difficult for them to take root and flourish because our society largely remains captive to capitalist realism – the idea that capitalism is the only viable way to organise society. Climate action means shifting what is now seen as impossibly radical to inevitable and within reach. Importantly, this does not mean looking at the future through rose-tinted glasses. To effectively convey hope we need to see the complexities and nuances of our fast approaching future, and avoid the pitfalls of false hope. A more just and equitable world is possible *and* it will be hard to achieve.

The fight for climate justice must be grounded in a positive vision of a liberated post-capitalist future. Creatives in every field must come together and start a global exercise in worldbuilding. We must show that there are multiple pathways towards different climate futures and be clear that it is our responsibility to build power and realise these alternatives (Figure 8). Let’s think about what we want to keep of this





Figure 10: **Imagine 2200** is an initiative inviting writers to imagine the next 180 years of climate progress. It aims “to showcase stories of creative climate solutions and community-centred adaptations, with an emphasis on uplifting voices and cultures from the communities most impacted by the climate crisis.”<sup>32</sup>

world and what we want to leave behind; what can be changed and what cannot. Let’s think about the stories of the people who will try to achieve that vision, their challenges, their successes, and their failures (Figure 9). Let’s ditch the idea of a “liveable future” and think about a liberated future where everyone can thrive within planetary boundaries, where there will be fear, anger, but also a healthy dose of hope (Figure 10).

As a first step towards deeper engagement with hopeful imaginaries, check out the Climate Futures Prize – a fiction story contest encouraging young people to channel their creativity and imagination into liberated visions of the future. This year’s winning stories range from solar punk to tales of indigenous resistance from deep in the Cameroonian forest.

**All stories will be published in early November 2023.**



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