

The Climate Crises and the Five Stages of Grief

Tony Duckenfield, August 2022

A useful way of looking at the climate crises is through the lens of the Five Stages of Grief (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross): Denial; Anger; Bargaining; Depression; and Acceptance.



Source: [verywellmind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com)

Stage 1 Denial

It appears that while most people in the UK are beyond the denial stage there are still some laggards. The BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker indicates that just 3% of residents are not at all concerned about climate change and another 2% didn't know, meaning that around 1 in 20 are still in denial. Although a small minority, their weight is amplified by the relative obscurity of the "silent majority" who are concerned about the climate but not enough to shout about it.

Clearly extreme weather events and official sources like the IPCC, WMO, Met Office and UN aren't cutting through to deniers, but perhaps a Big Oil source which acknowledges the problem and the need to do something about it would be taken more seriously by them? Well at least one of these does exist and was produced by Shell in 1988 in a confidential report "The Greenhouse Effect" (no doubt other oil companies have equivalent documents). This stated that "with fossil fuel combustion being the major source of CO₂ in the atmosphere, a forward looking approach by the

energy industry is clearly desirable, seeking to play its part with government and others in the development of appropriate measures to tackle the problem”.

Stage 2 - Anger

Most people are concerned about climate change and beyond the Denial stage and of these, a vocal few are downright angry. This includes typically well-educated young people angry at the lack of action by adults who are supposed to be their betters. Greta Thunberg is perhaps the archetype, with her comments sparking an angry response, particularly from middle-aged white men. So apparently, she is mentally ill; being cruelly manipulated by her parents; is a communist; a hypocrite; and a clueless fanatic. The actions by Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil have also been met with an angry response, and although they have made the news, it's typically more about the disruption they've caused than the point of the protest.



Although it seems that a relatively small proportion of the population can be described as “angry”, many more people are annoyed, with an example irritation being massive profits made by oil companies which appear to be profiteering from the energy crises. However, these annoyances rarely turn into actual action – for example, while many people were clearly annoyed about the recent hike in petrol prices there was no noticeable effect on overall traffic levels. What anger or annoyance can turn into though is the next stage: Bargaining.

Stage 3 – Bargaining

A way of avoiding or managing anger is to seek some control over the situation and find potential solutions. For a few, taking part in demonstrations fulfils this role, but most people prefer an easier option. This is where the attraction of neat technological solutions like carbon capture and hydrogen fuel come in. These are ideal because it means no sacrifice has to be made, while for those that want to feel like they're making a personal contribution, switching to an EV can be attractive. At this stage a priority is doing something so as not to feel helpless, and this is the

problem created by Greenwashing – people in the Bargaining stage are only too happy to jump on positive claims made by manipulative companies.



Also, at this stage people are susceptible to attractive sounding fads like climate friendly diets such as the Climatorian, the Climate Carnivore or Ultra Flexitarian. Bargains made at this stage can be a positive step, but if they fail to deliver can also lead to a backlash and the next stage, Depression...

Stage 4 - Depression

Depression can follow bargaining on the realisation that the solution believed in isn't all that it was cracked up to be. In reality, as pointed out by Katherine Hayhoe there are all kinds of emotions that people can have at this stage of the process: anxious, worried, frustrated, concerned, devastated, overwhelmed, angry, hopeless, horrified, frightened, heartbroken, and afraid. This can lead to people thinking there's no point in trying and giving up the fight.

Climate Anxiety is increasingly acknowledged as a source of distress, especially for young people with 45% of young adults (16-25 years old) saying that their feelings about climate change impact on their daily lives. Magnifying the concern is government inaction and a feeling that they are failing young people (Young people's climate anxiety revealed in landmark survey (nature.com)).

Those actually working to tackle the Climate Emergency don't have the easy option of giving up and this can lead to depression as the job can feel like running up hill in treacle with the occasional brick wall thrown in for good measure. Climate change is the great challenge of this generation and insufficient attention has been paid to the emotional well-being of those working on it.

Stage 5 – Acceptance

The final stage is Acceptance and at this point people are ready to take action, so long as it's easy, doesn't require too much sacrifice, and they can see the benefits of what they're doing. This positive feedback is important because it's the way the actions taken will be maintained and turned into everyday habits. Although this is the fifth of five stages, in practice, human emotions and behaviour are rarely linear, so depending on external influences such as what's happening with friends and relatives or what's in the news, they can waver between any of the five stages. The significance

of this is that timing is important for any efforts to change behaviour, as is taking account of these external influences which can either help or hinder change.

Key take out

Appreciating the Stage of Grief in relation to Climate Change is a useful way of informing measures to encourage more sustainable and climate friendly behaviour. If someone is in Denial then they will ignore any initial approaches, though fortunately such people are very much in the minority. For this group a motive other than climate change would be more impactful, such as saving money on energy bills and petrol.

If someone is Angry then providing practical ways of helping to tackle climate change could be a way of helping them to manage their feelings. However, the approach needs to acknowledge these feelings to avoid efforts backfiring. In particular, it would be important to help them feel that they are not alone and that they can actually make a difference.

At the Bargaining stage, a particular challenge to overcome is getting people to realise that there is no easy fix and that some sacrifice on their part is needed.

Those that have recognised this and feel overwhelmed by the challenge (Depression Stage) need initially to be guided out of their negative feelings before being able to take positive action. This will require helping people to feel empowered, for example by sharing examples of successes achieved by people in similar situations to themselves.

At the Acceptance stage people are the most likely to listen and act on potential solutions. This means that the response to behaviour change measures can be maximised by engaging with the right people at the right time, so they are in the most accepting state possible. Given that this is not often possible, perhaps the most valuable application of the Stages of Grief is to help tailor the approach, so it takes into account the emotional state of each person at the point in time that they are being encouraged to make changes. This will improve the response, irrespective of the Stage of Grief.