

## **Stress Resilience and Hope in the Anthropocene: Three Tips for Mental Preparedness**

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We live in the epoch witnessing how humans' extraction and carbon use has created dramatic climate change (the Anthropocene), and we will experience climate disasters for the rest of our lives. To be alive today means we will experience heartache and suffering for the changes and losses in our ecosystem, and at the same time we can still appreciate and experience awe in the beauty of nature, the preciousness of life. And most importantly, we have our collective ability to heal the planet. This is the unique path we walk together, living in the Anthropocene.

I have experienced deep climate distress. I have had periods when I could not look at trees without also feeling sadness and have faced mental blocks and procrastination on research projects on climate because they felt futile in their impact. I am at times visited by dark thoughts about how the miracle of our life on earth might end. I feel this most when the fires are burning here, near my home. There is so much I cannot share around my son, and while I try to protect his view of humanity, the worst examples of human behavior and climate turmoil are on full display for our children through the many screens we cannot control.

As a stress researcher I know that trauma opens the door for personal transformation. A zen proverb states this in another way -- "Obstacles do not block the path, they are the path." There are resilience skills that help people survive traumatic or chronic stressors --with transformational growth, and that is dependent on who you surround yourself with, and if you find the support and resources for healing and growth. The science of facing adversity is a story of the strength of the human spirit more than one of vulnerability.

The same is true for our collective trauma --there is a portal open right now for societal transformation. Given the existential threats we face, this is not a path you can walk alone. While I feel the natural deep concern for our future, I have developed a sense of robust hope into action, and a way of living with the dialectic with more equanimity. I share some of the insights I have learned from many others (including Jane Goodall, and Doug Abrams, of the Book of Hope), in case any one of these points is helpful for you on your journey.

We need to develop our **mental preparedness**. We are going through a portal together. It's 2021. Pack your bag! Embrace uncertainty with joy. Build absolute and active hope. And consider starting a resilience pod for your journey.

### **1) Pack Lightly!**

Our bags of luggage, both mental and physical, are too heavy and it's time to simplify, shed and repack. Focus only on what matters to you most. Make that list of what you truly need in life, and how you want to spend your limited time. A short list will allow you to live more lightly on earth, materially and spiritually, and to focus more time on living your purpose. You might ask how you can "lighten" your mind, focusing part of your attention each day on what matters most to you, and letting go of things you cannot change. Can you soften any emotional attachments that weigh you down? Notice what is cluttering your mental real estate. Leave unnecessary baggage behind. Encourage others to follow you, by your joyous example.

## 2) Welcome uncertainty!

Expect the unexpected. We have both the usual uncertainty in our personal lives, and now we have volatile uncertainty of our unstable climate. The only thing we can be certain about in the future is uncertainty!

With a sigh, and a smile, soften your grip on the future. Find delight in the unknown, the humbleness in “not knowing”. What do you feel uncertain about? Hug the uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty and breath into it, befriending it. We can stretch our tolerance of uncertainty and use it to awaken us to live a more purposeful life. It can also open the door to experiencing joy.

At the same time as we embrace uncertainty of the future, we can increase our own regenerative energy and joy. You can indulge in the certainty of this present moment, breathing into this body with this air we share. Let yourself feel the certainty of the present by breathing with more ease. Control what you do have control over. People who appreciate what they already have feel the most life satisfaction and happiness. Find joy in what you do have now. Notice the small miracles. Your smile spreads joy.

## 3) Build Hope

### Build Absolute Hope:

**Hope is the foundation of stress resilience.** Jane Goodall says “*Hope is a survival skill.*” Hope enables us to face loss and pain, and to build a better future.

Sometimes we hope for a specific outcome and our hopes are dashed. Feel into absolute hope, the robust hope that cannot die, regardless of what unfolds, that brings us together to keep doing our part to heal this world. What gives you hope? Can you feel the hope from the strength of our ancestors that brings us life today? The natural compassion humans are born with? The acts of altruism or generosity you witness? Hope and awe in the resilience of nature? Choose something that bolsters your sense of absolute hope for our future. Look for role models.

Expect to lose and regain hope often during this journey in the Anthropocene, as you build a sturdy foundation of absolute hope. When you lose hope, or cannot feel it, when dark shadows fill the real estate of your mind, you can speak kindly to yourself-- this is natural, this is to be expected, this is part of our universal experience of living in this new world.

### Build Active Hope

Active hope is hope infused with caring action, as Joanna Macy has described. Active hope cannot easily be lost. It is a highly contagious emotion because it models inspiring action. It is what spreads into social change. Remind yourself that active hope, doing the acts that are meaningful to you bring the most powerful relief from pain, sorrow, anxiety and anger.

You can create a vow of active hope that speaks to you. Here is one from Joanna Macy:  
*“I vow to myself and each of you: To live on Earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products and energy I consume.”*

*And from me:*

*“I vow to myself and to each of you: To speak up when I see injustice to earth beings and nature, to find my own effective role in carbon reduction, and my place in the network of social change.”*

**Stress resilience despite fatigue.** We are all feeling fatigue, living in 2021. And our actions matter more than ever being alive in this critical era. Try to switch as much as possible to regenerative energy in your body, the positive energy source you get from acting with purpose, and from other people you find supportive or inspiring.

Social influence transmits and sustains active hope. Ask someone with common interests to create a **Resilience Pod** with you. A pod is a safe place you can share sadness, despair, hope, support, and develop action. Trust that whatever it is that you chose to do, or already do, to reduce suffering in any way, including indirectly, is part of your life purpose. Your influence and impact will join with others, and will inevitably add up, even if you cannot see or quantify it. “If you think you can, or you think you can’t, you are correct.” We do not know the outcome of our efforts, but by choosing absolute and active hope, we are influencing outcomes.

**Joy through connection.** Using some of these insights and actions above, we can help develop the mental preparedness we need for our new future, fueled by hope. The science of happiness reveals that joy is created most easily through social connection. Stress resilience today is also a social process, one that opens the door to the social transformation that we crave and that will be life sustaining. Allow yourself to envelop in the hope from those you see today. Absorb it and let it flow from you as well. Share your active hope Vow. This is how we can journey together through this 2021 time portal, with light bags, holding hands together.

*More details are in Elissa’s Summit Talk. Some of these tips are described in Elissa’s upcoming short book “Stress Rx,” Penguin Random House, which focuses on preparing ourselves with a new world mindset.*