

## Blogs: Docs Talk

### *Is Climate Change Getting You Down?*

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By Dr. Courtney Howard

Mosquitoes. Mosquitoes will like climate change. As things get warmer and weather patterns change, they will spread and take their biting, whining, malaria, dengue and yellow-fever-containing selves to new altitudes and territories. We will hate them more than ever before, and they will likely kill more of us than before. Oceans will rise, displacing populations, resulting in social disruption, lack of shelter, food, and sanitation services. Think of refugee camps now. You get the idea. With dwindling resources, people will get mad. And scared. They will fight. Fighting yields injury and anguish, and we will see those things too. Kids will wheeze from asthma and older people have heart attacks from the heat. There will be floods in some places and droughts in others. As summarized in a recent article in the medical journal, [The Lancet](#), "The rich will be more uncomfortable...the poor will die." The authors went on to call climate change the biggest global health threat of the twenty-first century.



Mosquitoes are going to like climate change (Credit: [eyeweed](#) via Flickr).

How does that make you feel?

If you are like most people, this is the kind of news that makes you want to cuddle your kids close, or escape to an episode of "So You Think You Can Dance," perhaps while opening that bottle of wine or raiding the cookie-jar. It is the kind of news that can lead to poor sleep, feelings of hopelessness, and an eventual slumping in your chair as you find yourself unable to concentrate on anything except our collective doom. In my case, while on a health-related environmental-learning binge one chilly Arctic December in Inuvik, I ended up looking so rough that a concerned nurse at the hospital where I work asked sympathetically whether the night shift had been tough. Just as I was, in fact, starting the day shift.

Ironically, for something so grounded in the physical, the first health crisis related to climate change may be one of [mental health](#). It might also turn out to be a game-changing factor - saving our physical skins will depend on our ability to absorb distressing news and enter neither into denial nor catatonia, but continue on to productive action. In forming a prescription for our survival, we need to take our emotional state into account, or we're very likely to continue in the same patterns. Here is one idea for an approach.

**Step 1:** Figure yourself out. How are you reacting to this pessimistic diagnosis? To borrow a schema from Cancer Care, are you an AVOIDER? A Denier? A Fatalist (It's out of my hands)? Are you Helpless/Hopeless? A Worrier? Or one of these people with a "Fighting Spirit", who charge forward to meet a challenge? What are the strengths and blind spots inherent in your reaction?

**Step 2:** Decide—do you actually want to engage with this issue? Do you want to DO SOMETHING?

**Step 3:** Anticipate an emotional reaction and create a Happiness Buffer so you don't get totally bummed if your first attempts to DO SOMETHING feel inadequate, unsuccessful, or turn up even worse news. If you develop profound symptoms of depression or anxiety you should see your doctor, but if you mostly just feel down, here are some evidence-based ideas from the psychological literature to help create a Happiness Buffer to power your climate-related efforts:

- Happiness Boosters: Time with friends and family, meaningful work that makes use of a particular talent, volunteering, spirituality, time engaged in activities that are so absorbing that you forget where you are, marriage, and exercise.
- Things that feel like Happiness Boosters but are really kind of short-term patchwork solutions: Pleasures. Chocolate, cheese, alcohol, and sex without attachment.

Find out more about the David Suzuki Foundation's work on [climate change](#).

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- Happiness Killers: Thinking that buying stuff is going to make you happy.

My personal strategy includes plenty of exercise, really terrible guitar playing, and a mandatory 2 p.m. pop-music living-room dance break before any attempt to DO SOMETHING. You'll find what works for you.

**Step 4:** Figure out what you want to do. Read, learn, support, donate. You probably can't plot a whole path from where you are now. Choose a first step, show up, and then look around at the new view and go from there.

You'll eventually come across some new people or new ideas that will get you excited. For me right now that is new research describing win-win solutions that are healthier, cleaner, and save the system money. [Cycle and walk](#) to where you want to go: this reduces your chances of depression, dementia, obesity, cancer and heart disease (and all the expenses associated with them), as well as greenhouse gas production, traffic accidents and breathing problems in people sensitive to smog. [Eat less meat](#) and dairy: you will use less water and energy, be less likely to get colorectal cancer and probably have fewer heart attacks.

I like the win-wins. They're my idea of low-hanging fruit, and I'm cheerleading them at every opportunity... in between dance breaks in the living room and plotting against the mosquitoes.



Courtney Howard is an emergency room doctor in Ottawa who does frequent locums in Canada's Arctic. She is a board member of the [Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment](#) and has recently completed a trial called FLOW, which compared tampons to a reusable menstrual cup. She's a half-decent dancer and a dismal guitar player, and is currently awaiting her first mission with [Médecins Sans Frontières](#).

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