

Negative language can perpetuate feelings of doom

Lately when I hear what's going on in the world, I'm overcome with dread and anxiety. There always seems to be another war, more casualties, worsening climate conditions and fears about artificial intelligence or politics.

That impending doom people feel when watching, reading or listening to the gloomier news of the day is a frequent occurrence nowadays. But rather than calling it anxiety, internet influencers have dubbed it doomerism.

"During times of adversity, we tend to spend more time worrying about the future, or in fear of the future, or we reflect on the past with rumination at a higher rate than reminiscence," said Dr. Chan Hellman, founding director of the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma. (Rumination involves fixating on previous mistakes, while reminiscence recalls past events in an enjoyable or nostalgic way.)

The doomer perspective

Seventy percent of adults said that they were anxious about current events, according to the American Psychiatric Association's annual mental health poll, which was published in May.

"I would say that millennials and below, but especially Gen Z, are feeling the effects of climate change, political instability and cynicism over politics and environmental efforts," said Dr. Norma Mendoza-Denton, professor of linguistic anthropology at UCLA.

Discussions of climate change on social media and in mainstream media often focus on warnings with little emphasis on solutions. As a result, there is a "hope gap" in which people concerned about climate change are unable to think of a solution or mitigating steps to the climate crisis. When hope is provided, people begin to believe they have greater problem-solving abilities to deal with the crisis.

"If the definition of hope is the belief the future will be better and that we have the power to make it so, the argument (for doomerism) would be, 'How can that definition be true when today's as good as it will ever be. Tomorrow is going to be worse,' and so on," Hellman said.

Consuming too much information can lead to stress, fatigue and exhaustion, according to a 2021 study. Not only does this information overload elevate feelings of uncertainty or in this case doom, but it can cause negative emotions and depressive symptoms.

"The research has been clear in that we've seen a tremendous uptick in depression and anxiety, especially in younger people and then coming out of Covid," Hellman said. "The concept of hope is a social gift, meaning that hope is developed and reinforced in relationships that we have with each other. During Covid, there was an enhanced isolation, so I think that greatly impacted those issues."

The impact of doomer language on perceptions

In recent years, online sources have described climate change as catastrophic, rapid, urgent, irreversible and chaotic. These terms are used to emphasize concern about the climate crisis, but they also contribute to readers feeling helpless and overwhelmed when assessing their position on the issue, according to Maxwell Boykoff's 2011 book, "Who Speaks for the Climate? Making Sense of Media Reporting on Climate Change."

Social media messaging and gloomy news coverage can cause feelings of doom, according to a 2008 study. Individuals who are regularly exposed to content about global warming or climate change have reported stronger feelings of inefficacy or the inability to contribute to a desired goal, the same study found.

That's because these messages can have an echo chamber effect, which is created when there is a closed loop of information exchange that lacks diverse perspectives.

Echo chambers are especially prevalent in social media. Individuals may find themselves in online communities that encourage the sharing of similar viewpoints or tonal language, which is when a phrase is dependent on the pitch or tone with which it is spoken, according to a 2024 study. Such chambers can result in an isolated information bubble.

Doomer communities attribute unsuccessful outcomes to individual and global factors, which lead to pessimistic or cynical views and encourage negative language to express those feelings. For instance, these individuals might say that "everything is doomed to fail" or that it's "too late."

This pattern is extended into doomer slang, which includes substituting "laughing" for "crying," "dying" or "screaming." Online users also tend to share memes exhibiting a tragedy, such as an explosion, with a 2D character saying, "Everything is fine," in a sarcastic manner.

Using such phrases may "prime" or trigger a sequence of terms associated with those words in your head, according to Mendoza-Denton.

"So, when you use the word 'cat,' it primes all the pets, words that rhyme with 'cat,' like 'that,' and all the words that might be felines, like a tiger," Mendoza-Denton said. "It's kind of an interesting question as to whether using the phrase 'I'm crying' or 'I'm dead' activates the positive frames or the negative frames."

However, there has also been a flipping of words and phrases associated with negative definitions to be humorous, such as the phrase "I'm dead" equating to laughter for younger generations, according to Mendoza-Denton. So, it's important to remember that not everyone's use of doomer slang contributes to negative feelings.

How to manage feelings of impending doom

The most effective way to manage symptoms of impending doom is to focus on creating and following specific short-term goals rather than broad future goals, according to Hellman. For instance, rather than creating a yearlong resolution to read more, you can set a weeklong goal to read the first chapter of a short book.

“It falls under a framework that we use called ‘hope begets hope.’ As you and I begin to experience success in very short-term steps, it enhances our belief that that future is possible,” Hellman said.

Doing so can drive individuals to look for solutions, according to a 2023 study. Being able to have positive or optimistic expectations about the future, even if it’s only concerning the near future, can act as a coping mechanism and lead to physical longevity and emotional adjustment.

It’s also good to try to identify social connections. These people can become potential models to guide you toward your goals, especially if those goals are something that they’ve already achieved, according to Hellman.

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