

How Do I Say This...

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

Kousha Navidar: Ariana, lately I've been thinking about how hard it is to talk about climate change every week. You and I sit down with each other, or with experts, and we have to confront frightening data, or human tragedy, without losing motivation, and keeping space for, dare I say it, joy.

Ariana Brocious: Right, sometimes, it's hard to even find the right words — because the ones we default to might be doing more harm than good.

Kousha Navidar: Do you mean like climate change?

Ariana Brocious: Exactly. Or, for example, depending on who you're talking to, the phrase "greenhouse gas emissions" might not land the same way as "heat-trapping pollution".

Kousha Navidar: That's why today we're looking back at three conversations we've had that dig into very different aspects of how to talk about the climate crisis. Or climate disruption? Or.... you get the idea.

Kousha Navidar: Later we'll head to Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where one community organization spent years building the kind of trust it takes to get residents to buy into a solar project... literally.

Ariana Brocious: Then, we'll hear from a climate communication expert who says the actual words we use matter much more than we think.

Ariana Brocious: But before we get to all that: today, kids are experiencing a lot of fear and grief about the future, often without having the language to name it.

Kousha Navidar: When I taught high school math, I remember quickly understanding how deeply kids could feel the weight of the world, even if they didn't necessarily talk about it explicitly.

Ariana Brocious: These feelings can be overwhelming to anyone, regardless of age. (reflect on your own feelings, or what it's like to be a parent in this moment)

Ariana Brocious: To find out how best to help young people navigate their climate related mental health issues, I spoke with Robin Cooper, Co-Founder and President of the Climate Psychiatry Alliance.

Ariana Brocious: What are some of the most common climate related mental health issues students are facing right now? And when I say students, I mean high school age and younger.

Robin Cooper: kids are feeling a lot of distress about what they know about the impacts of climate change and the enormity of what they're feeling and their feelings are across a whole variety of spectrums. particularly for teens, but younger kids also, they're feeling a lot of anxiety. They're feeling dread, they're feeling fear, and they're feeling a sense of doom and hopelessness. Will there be a world that I will grow into for little kids? Is the world gonna die? Am I gonna die for teens? Will there be a world that's a viable place for me to live in in the future? Should I, could I have children in the future? What will my future be? And a lot of doom and feelings of hopelessness. They feel a lot of anger. Betrayal, betrayal that the grownups in their world have left them with these burdens and not protected them, and a lot of sadness and grief about what they're seeing.

Ariana Brocious: That's a lot.

Robin Cooper: It's a whole lot for young people to have on their shoulders, really a lot.

Ariana Brocious: And they're not wrong. I think I'm not a young person, I have feelings, similar feelings, which we'll get into kind of the adult version of this in a minute. But from what you've observed on average, how well equipped are the adults in young people's lives, to handle these problems?

Robin Cooper: Well, it depends on who the adults are and I'm gonna call it, the parent club. Those grownups that are beyond just their, their parents, their grandparents, their teachers, their coaches, their. Aunts and uncles, it's very variable and it depends on how connected those grownups are to the, to the worries about climate change. Whether those grownups have been able to face their own worries and deal with them in effective ways so that they're not overwhelming. So it's widely variable, but I think the grownups that parent club need a lot of help in managing to guide their kids through this tough terrain.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, I like the term grownups. to imply that there are a lot of responsible adults in children's lives. It's not strictly a parent, child relationship and that a lot of adults can influence and help kids navigate all kinds of things. So. How can adults who themselves have climate anxiety, address this issue with the children in their lives? Should they handle it first themselves? Should they model for the children the struggle of dealing with it? What are some of the ways they can try to do that?

Robin Cooper: Well, I think, grownups have a big responsibility to help kids navigate this. And first they have to be understanding what the real world issues are and also be enough. Connected to managing their own climate anxiety so it doesn't exaggerate or spill over to what the kids are

burdened with. They have to be able to guide them with things that they are also doing so that kids don't feel abandoned and alone in managing this. That's kind of being partners with them. And you've also said how important it is to think about beyond just parents. Teenagers, particularly developmentally are navigating, separating from their parents. And sometimes then the ever present tensions between parents and teenagers need to be considered in that mix. And sometimes, uh, engagement with. Others than just parents. But that does not diminish the very important role of parents being attentive, alert and with their kids.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, this is similar to so many other kinds of parental advice, right? I mean, there's a lot of, talk about when you're maintaining boundaries. For example, you can still be there, sit with your kid, still say, no, you can be kind, you can still say no. so I hear that kind of being able to be there with your kids, not dismiss, not, Glaze over or gloss over their very real concerns. Um, and then try to give them some, I suppose, age appropriate answers. I mean, that's, that feels tricky. You know, I've dealt with this a bit in my, in my own life so far, and, it's sometimes it's hard to know how much a kid can take of, of the real truth that we're struggling with as adults.

Robin Cooper: I think you've mentioned two particular things that I wanna highlight that I'm so in agreement with you about first is that the issues around climate distress and the threats that we're experiencing and the, and teens and kids grappling with this, is laid on normal developmental relationships as they grow. And that's true with teens and their relationships with grownups, but they're separating. They're also not there yet, so they still have a component that very much needs parents to be involved and protective. And the other is how to navigate appropriate, developmentally attuned responses about information. Sometimes I think. Grownups tend to think of kids as little grownups and talk to them in language that is way too complicated, not adhering to the the, the reality that kids bring in information in. Developmentally appropriate ways. So little kids are very concrete and teenagers are beginning to understand in a more, nuanced ways, but still see things, uh, in overwhelming ways.

So parents need to be there. Honest and validate feelings in reality, but not overwhelm kids and know that sometimes what they say can just go right over their head if they're talking in too abstract ways.

Ariana Brocious: Right. And you've just touched on, um, a key component of all this, which is trust, right? In building that trust, continuing to maintain that. So When we spoke earlier, you described how your father talked to you about the threat of nuclear war, not climate, but also in a very scary, scary threat, when you were a child. So can you share that story?

Robin Cooper: it's a story that guides my thinking now and it's very personal. Um, as you mentioned, it was at the time when this other existential threat was. Coming into my consciousness as a kid, I was little, maybe I was seven-ish or so, and it was the time of nuclear weapons development and a lot of international conflict, and I asked my father, would I die? In a nuclear war or would there be a, a nuclear war? And he said, absolutely no, this will not happen in your lifetime. I was enormously relieved at my, what is 7-year-old mind, and my father did right by protecting me. But later when I was an advocate to eliminate nuclear conflict. I was in my mid twenties, maybe, and I, um, said to my father, how could you tell me that? How could you tell me that it's just not true? You don't know. And he said to me. Robin, what was I gonna do? You were a little kid. My father held the position of knowing he had to protect me from overwhelming, catastrophic feelings, but what he didn't do. And what I would now do and tell him is that he didn't validate my concerns. He didn't say, yes, this is a very big concern. I'm concerned too. He didn't then say, we can do things about this and we can do things together in facing what is really a true thing. And he. It didn't help me then to see the nuances that I could tolerate even at that age. And that guides me to think about how grownups can be, with kids validating, being with them, but also protecting them from the enormity,

of the risk that can't be grappled with when you're that little.

Ariana Brocious: Mm-hmm. And you know, you've mentioned first I think this idea of agency and giving. Kids, young people, this strong sense that they're not powerless. So none of us are completely powerless. We have the ability to change things and that can help how you feel about a given issue. and also I think in your case, the story of your dad. So you have a conversation when you're seven and then maybe don't revisit it together until you're in your mid twenties. There's a lot of years in there where he could have come back to you, or if you had initiated another conversation, he could have kind of maybe moderated what he said and, and allowed for some more of that reality, and had the conversation when you were a bit older and perhaps better able to kind of absorb that. So I think that's another thing in this climate space, right, is that it's not a single conversation you can have many, many conversations, with young people.

Robin Cooper: What a, what an important good thought. It's not a single one-off and it can. Be revisited at different developmental moments for kids, and it can come from the kid or it can come from the parent or the grownup, and that means us grownups being observant. Watching our kids knowing that they're hearing about this in a zillion places, and many of those places do not give them accurate information. So observant, being able to open the conversation without it being overly intrusive and watching kids for their responses and being curious about what they know. Being curious about what they hear,

Ariana Brocious: Mm-hmm.

Robin Cooper: curious about what they're feeling about what they hear.

Ariana Brocious: Mm-hmm. Well, okay, so we've covered a lot of ground. Let's give, uh. Parents and teachers who we haven't really talked about much yet. A little bit of a guide to help address the psychological health of children and students, um, in this situation. So how would you help a parent or teacher identify in the first place that a child is struggling with something like climate anxiety or grief?

Robin Cooper: It is a really good question. What do you notice and what do you see? Watching to see if they are stalled in appropriate developmental tasks. The things that they should be achieving at the stage and age that they're in, are they able to involve themselves in schoolwork? Are they able to involve themselves with friends? Are they still experiencing or not pleasure in things that they used to get pleasure from? And that's a big thing to watch for. Are they retreating away from, uh, those places of engagement that are appropriate for them? Are they seen? Watching for physical signs. 'cause little kids and bigger kids often express worries physically. Are they having changes in appetite in sleep or headaches? Are there emotional outbursts? And of course all kids and teenagers have that emotional outburst periodically. Um. That's a part of learning how to regulate feelings and emotions. But are these happening more and what's the language around that? Are they talking and are they, are there thoughts that penetrate about doom of the world? and one of the things that I think is important in the surveys that have been done, that have identified these big feelings for teens is that it wasn't surprising for me to know that teens have these extensive big feelings, but they said that it interferes with their daily functioning. And that's something for the grownups, that parent club to watch for.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, that's really significant. It's more than a fleeting thought you have.

Robin Cooper: Yes.

Ariana Brocious: once you recognize these, challenges in a student or a child in your life, what

would you recommend as a next step?

Robin Cooper: Again, curiosity is always the driver. validating their fears. As I said, my dad didn't do that. Yes, this is something of concern that I have too. Honesty. But honesty in modulating what is tolerable to their emotional capacities and not assuming that we can burden kids with carrying this and then always. I am with you. I am here to do everything I can to make you safe, to make the world that you are gonna inherit be better. And I think it's important for the parent club to model ways of engaging in activism and action. And so that activism and action for grownups can be very different. I spoke to a friend last night wondering how his 12-year-old grandson could tolerate it. His grandson always sees their engagement in activism as a guide and then joining kids in what they can actually do. What's happening in the clubs in your high school? How can I help you with that? Do you need me to drive you to those events? Can we go together, littler kids or even teenagers? Let's sit down and write a letter now to one of the people who has power here. Our legislators, our leaders. We can do that together.

Ariana Brocious: Robin Cooper is co-founder and president of Climate Psychiatry Alliance. Thank you so much for joining us on Climate One and sharing these excellent tips.

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, sometimes the best way to communicate is to listen. Building trust with communities can make big projects possible.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: I remember listening and thinking, I'm going to cry because, like, you know, I live here. I fight for this community. I love this community. And so their trust and their faith in our leadership means everything to me

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

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Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And I'm Ariana Brocious

Kousha Navidar: Let me give you a hot take: When people talk about climate, we focus a lot on the talking: the messaging campaigns, the speeches, the tactics targeting individual action. But what we don't talk about enough is the listening.

Ariana Brocious: Sorry, what? JK!

Elizabeth Yeampierre [yahm-pee-air] has spent almost thirty years proving that. As executive director of UPROSE in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, she didn't start telling people what **she** wanted, she spent a year just listening to what the community actually needed.

Kousha Navidar: That listening turned into a fight against a highway expansion, and a push for green space. Now, she's helped get an even bigger project off the ground, Sunset Park Solar. It's a rooftop solar project that depends on something harder to build than infrastructure: trust.

Ariana Brocious: Right, because you can have great ideas, but if people don't trust the messenger, it doesn't matter.

Kousha Navidar: Yeampierre's approach offers a different model of climate communication. It's built less on persuasion and more on patience and relationships. And, of course, showing up. I talked to Yeampierre last year about what it takes to make a project like Sunset Park Solar happen.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: in that time, um, the organization got filled up with people, particularly young people from around the block. We spent about a year listening to find out what people needed and what was real clear at that time was that they were about to expand the Gowanus Expressway, which had about 200, 000 cars going through there every day and 25, 000 trucks and.

Kousha Navidar: a big interstate that goes right along the, the, the water in Brooklyn. Right.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Yeah, it's a, it's a, it's a Robert Moses construction that divided the community, and, uh, was just dropping tons of co pollutants into people's lungs. And so it became clear early on was that there wasn't an organization working on environmental justice. And we wanted an organization that didn't compete with others, but collaborated and met unmet needs. And so, uh, the young people were really concerned about, the ability to breathe and people in the community said the same. And that's sort of how we then go into, uh, the environmental justice movement and or, and up pearls then starts fighting against the unfair sighting of, um, of environmental burdens in Sunset Park. Uh, so. We didn't, that wasn't the history of the organization. And I certainly had never taken an environmental class in my life. Uh, but it was what people said they needed and we have transferable skills. And so we started training people to organize. We started learning policy. We started moving infrastructure and we started winning.

Kousha Navidar: Uh, tell me about winning.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: we literally file a lawsuit against the state to stop the expansion of the Gowanus expressway. Uh, we fight for 15 years for doubling the amount of open space, which we do, uh, by getting a Bush terminal park, which is 23, uh, acres and, and people from other places may not think that's a lot, but in a deeply, a densely urban community, it's a lot. Uh, we are able to expand the median, the 4th Avenue median.

Let's make the community more pedestrian friendly. We facilitate the design of a community led greenway. We stopped the sighting of a 520 megawatt power plant that would have been the size of 3 football fields. We stop our elected official from. fighting against, um, legislation that, uh, would have prevented our community from being safe from lead paint. Like it was one thing after the other and every win led to another, uh, because nothing is more addictive to the community than winning. Our elders came to us and they asked, um, that, uh, this, this, the state had taken away one of the buses and they wanted their buses to be Back and they said, we can't get on the trains. Trains are not accessible to people with limited mobility or disabilities. We need our bus back. Uh, and we organize a coalition and got the bus back.

Kousha Navidar: Well, you know, Elizabeth's quote really stands out to me listening to you. It's a few things. One of them is that this was community led, right? Like when you entered in the mid 90s, uprose, the community was the one saying, we want to focus on literally our ability to breathe. And, and the second is this kind of intergenerational, but very community based. Based work in sunset park. So I gotta ask, tell me a little bit about sunset park. What's it like to live there? What's it like when you walk down the street? I mean, I know a little bit, cause I ride my bike around a lot, but you know, for listeners, go ahead.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: So it's what's important. Thank you for asking that question, because the truth is that we see ourselves as staffing the community that while the community is working 2 or 3 jobs or raising their children that we're there and we get our marching orders from them and we

staff. them. But Sunset Park is, you know, I refer to it as Sancocho, which is this Latin stew that has all these different flavors and is just amazing and nourishing. It is a Latino mix, you know, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, um, Ecuadorian South, you know, Central and South American, Asian, mostly Chinese and Fujian. It is a working class community in the largest significant maritime industrial area in New York. And if you go to the park, you're going to see the Chinese dancing, doing ballroom dancing. You're going to see the Mexican community getting ready for quinceaneras. You're going to see. See the Caribbean's in a corner with their drums out. It is a community that sort of tests everything that people think about, uh, diversity. Um, it, it, you know, we speak different languages. Uh, our children are playing with each other. Our elders are playing Mahjong and dominoes. Uh, it is, I think, I don't know, it is what I had envisioned growing up, New York City should, should be.

Kousha Navidar: And also living in Brooklyn, uh, I imagine a lot of the same gentrification pressures that maybe Manhattan has been facing for a while. Sunset Park definitely faces as well. Is that fair to say?

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Absolutely. I mean, I think that a lot of folks, uh, the chamber of commerce, uh, industry city, a lot of developers have, uh, basically been promoting sunset park as the destination location for the privilege. And if they did that, we wouldn't just lose our small business. And we wouldn't just lose our communities. and just so, you know, when communities are uprooted and displaced, it's, it rips social cohesion and makes them more likely to die from extreme weather events. The other thing that would have been, uh, impacted is that, um, we would have lost the significant maritime industrial area, which is the largest in New York and really has to be building for a climate future. It has to be building for climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience. It should be the place where green manufacturing is happening. It's had a whole legacy of extraction of harm but the potential that exists there for moving it from an extractive economy to a regenerative one that not only serves the local community through jobs and through cleaner air, but also addresses the climate needs of the region is vast.

Kousha Navidar: and this idea of having climate resilience be within the DNA of the way that a community rises up, and develops, I think, is crucial. And that kind of takes me into. This, this project, which I find so interesting, Sunset Park Solar. Like I mentioned, I, you know, Elizabeth, I love riding my bike around Brooklyn, and I've actually biked close by the Brooklyn Army Terminal, where this project is taking place. So walk me, through the highlights of the program. I guess we could start with installing solar panels.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Yeah, so thank you for asking because We're really excited about this project. Remember that everything we do, we hope will be replicated, um, and that other communities will learn and do the same or even do better because we really need to lean into collective care and we can do it even through infrastructure, which may not sound sexy to some people, but to us is very exciting. Infrastructure can be the sexiest of things in urban planning.

get very excited. So this was an idea we had about 5 years ago about how do we take our rooftops and turn our rooftops? Um, because we're, you know, we're in a densely populated place and we don't have a lot of open space or and we don't have site control. We don't have a lot of space. Spaces that we can use to redevelop, to address whether it's, uh, renewable energy, whether it's, uh, drinkable water, uh, food sovereignty, a wellness. We are limited in space. So we were looking at our rooftops and thinking about how can we make sure that we are bringing renewable energy into Sunset Park, uh, and creating community wealth. At the same time, and the community had also told us right after Superstorm Sandy that they wanted to get them past this thing about changing the light bulb that all anybody ever told them to do to address climate change was to change the light bulb as if they were responsible for climate change and as if that was enough. So this project sunset

park solar then is a community led collaboration between the developer partner working power and the New York City economic development Corporation.

And its purpose was to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, alleviate. Energy burdens, bolster a local energy economy, protect low income households from unpredictable energy price fluctuations. And for me, also reducing coal pollutants, the fact that you could have access to energy. Um, that is not harming the health of the local community. It's a 725 kilowatts of clean, renewable energy. Um, it, um, it was capital raised by uproars and working power 1. 8 Million dollars for this. With a tax credit financing that is currently at 900, 000 K. and it would provide subscribers with up to 20 percent of discounts in the electricity bills, energy bill savings for 170 households over the project's 25 year lifetime. And

Kousha Navidar: And those are households in Sunset Park, you're saying,

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Yeah, and.

Kousha Navidar: and work there.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: Right, and it's we, we already have 170 households that have subscribed and we have a wait list of 360 plus residents, that the revenue 1 Million dollars plus from the project is going to be reinvested in the community wealth fund and that will allow community residents to directly allocate resources to local priorities, which we hope will be climate related.

Kousha Navidar: Wow.

Was it difficult, you know, with, with, with these projects where there's a lot of stakeholders involved, but also community led trust is always so important. And I think here, especially trust from the most, among the most important stakeholders, which is the people living in Sunset Park, I imagine, uh, took some work. What was that, that, that trust process like? Yeah.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: it is difficult to build trust. I live in Sunset Park, and I'm accustomed to opening big fat envelopes from energy companies that are written in fine print and are very, um, you know, a very misleading and, uh, and difficult to understand. And our community just goes with what. They, they go with what they know, because it's like the devil, you know, right? And so we really needed to do, like, a lot of community learning circles to share with the community what this offered. We were honest about the fact that we were doing this for the 1st time that it may take longer than we anticipated. We told them we were learning as we were going along and we wanted to make sure that they understood that. That what was involved that we would keep them informed if there were changes that there were challenges, um, you know. I think I think it helps that the organization has been in the community for so long and has deep roots and that, um, they know who we are. They know we're not going anywhere., but asking people to. Uh, part with their money, uh, especially when they're struggling every single day to put, uh, food on the table and to do it with something that is new. that takes a lot of trust. And so, so we answered all the questions. We stayed in touch. The whole process was., was disrupted by, COVID and so it slowed us down but 5 years later, like,, I think a few months ago when I met with some of the folks from the community, the excitement was palpable. They were like, it doesn't matter. This is good. This is necessary. This is a. Especially necessary right now, I remember listening and thinking, I'm going to cry because, like, you know, I live here. I fight for this community. I love this community. And so their trust and their faith in our leadership means everything to me personally, on a personal level.

Kousha Navidar: So then tell me, how replicable do you think a project like this is? I mean how much do you talk to other communities about what you're doing?

So, you know, we have this plan called the grid and part of it is to move away from fossil fuel dependency. And so we've looked at different rooftops and the one that we're looking at right now is the Jack Lee Gleason bus depot. And that building on 36th street and 5th avenue, if we were able to access that rooftop, we would be able to service a thousand families. Right and so we're going to use everything that we learned from the smaller array, uh, that serves 170 families and we've developed a proposal for that rooftop. We've also looked at, um. Uh, parking lots, everything from, um, the Liberty view parking lot to industry cities, parking lot to see if in those places, we can have sort of like a private public relationship where the owners of those properties would put in, um, solar canopies that would benefit small businesses and sunset park. Part of this is not just putting down the infrastructure and benefiting the community, uh, but also raising climate consciousness. And giving hope, letting people know that there are solutions and that they're not just aspirational, but that they're operational.

Kousha Navidar: you had mentioned that there were some really messy conversations that you had to have when you were trying to get, uh, this current project that you're looking at forward. Can you tell me quickly, maybe just one of those messy conversations and how you navigated it? Yeah.

Elizabeth Yeampierre: common assumption. That's more grassroots organizations. Neither have the capacity, uh, nor, uh, the intelligence to be able to move projects like these and., it's unfortunate, but that's always been the case. And the truth is that most of the change that has been happening, to address climate change has been led by small grassroots organizations that are leading with a vision and that are leading with wide community support. So, we dispel all the myths and all the stereotypes, um, and, uh, and we keep it moving. And, uh, and I think that this project is an example of that.

Kousha Navidar: Elizabeth. And uh, you know, it has been such a pleasure getting to. Learn about Sunset Park Solar and more getting to hear how your kind of multidimensionality approach to these community led climate resilience projects, at least in New York City are coming to light.

Kousha Navidar: Elizabeth Yampierre is executive director of UPROSE. Elizabeth, thank you.

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, it's important to pay attention to how we talk about the climate crisis, because well-chosen words and phrases can make a big difference.

Susan Joy Hassol: I really don't like the term natural disasters because these things are now decidedly unnatural, so I call them unnatural disasters. We've always had extreme weather, but now it's more extreme.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: And I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: Today, we've shared conversations about how to talk to kids and young adults about climate, and the importance of listening to a community. Now, let's turn our attention to the words themselves.

Kousha Navidar: The way you say something can matter almost as much as what you're saying.

Ariana Brocious: Susan Joy Hassol is director of Climate Communication, a non-profit science and outreach project that's part of the [Aspen Global Change Institute](#). She's contributed to the U.S. National Climate Assessment and is a leader in how to talk about climate disruption.

Kousha Navidar: In an article she wrote for Scientific American, called "The Right Words are Crucial to Solving Climate Change," Hassol suggested alternatives to some of the main terms used in climate discussions. She explained this approach to Climate One's Austin Colón.

Austin Colon: So I want to start with, uh, an article you wrote in Scientific American titled The Right Words Are Crucial to Solving Climate Change. This article has a handy chart showing commonly used terms like natural gas and what the public thinks they mean, and what words you think would be better. And so I'd like to go through a couple of these with you, but let's start with the big one. Climate change. You suggest an alternative. Why?

Susan Joy Hassol: climate change is a term that scientists use to mean any type of change in climate at any time in Earth's history for any reason. And so when people hear climate change, they think, well, that sounds natural because there has been natural climate change. So I think what we're dealing with now is really human caused climate disruption that makes it more clear that this is not just that background kind of natural climate change. This is something that humans are doing. And I also don't like when people say it's caused by human activities because I think that's very vague. So what are those activities? It's the burning of coal, oil and gas, and the destruction of forests. We have to be very clear about what the cause is because we've known that for a long time.

Austin Colon: Right. And I will say though, I noticed that climate change is in the title of the article, curious whose choice that was or how that ended up there.

Susan Joy Hassol: Yeah, so people still use the term climate change, and what I tell people is, if you're gonna say climate change, just to make sure everyone knows what you're talking about, make sure you say human caused climate change. On the other hand, because of how politicized this issue has become, if you say the term climate change people react, as soon as they hear that term, they shut down. So maybe in some cases it's better not to say those words and to talk about extreme weather and the disruption of our, of our climate system and the kind of thing that's not gonna trigger that immediate partisan reaction.

Austin Colon: Right. you kinda have to meet people where they are oftentimes. let's go to another phrase, how about greenhouse gas emissions? What do you think would be a better way to say that?

Susan Joy Hassol: Yeah, so I, I call it climate pollution. You know, People generally think of air pollution as something they can see and smell like sulfur dioxide, nitrogen, oxides. Those are the pollutants that caused acid, rain, and urban smog. And we were able to put scrubbers on coal-fired power plants and do things to get rid of those, right? but the air pollutants that cause global heating are invisible carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and the only way to stop emitting them is to stop burning coal, oil and gas. And of course, we now have cleaner and better forms of energy that are also cheaper. So there's no reason not to make that transition from dirty energy to clean energy. So I think when you talk about. Greenhouse gas emissions. It's a sciency sounding thing, and it kind of depends on people understanding the metaphor of the greenhouse effect. So I tend to call it heat trapping pollution

Austin Colon: All right. That makes sense. Yeah, it really gets to the heart of exactly what's happening. one of them that you pointed out was my personal pet peeve because I spend a lot of time with my family in South Florida where they call, you know, this recurring flooding, nuisance flooding. I mean, it sounds like, oh, it's not a big deal.

It's like swatting away a mosquito or something. what would you say is a better way to say nuisance

Susan Joy Hassol: Yeah, I, I agree with you. This is not just a nuisance. When the streets of Miami are flooded, the water's up to your knees. Businesses are. Closing, you know, all kinds of problems. It's way more than a nuisance. So I call it recurrent flooding or sunny day flooding, because this is stuff that happens even when it's not raining every time there's high tide because of sea level rise, which is again caused by human caused climate disruption.

Austin Colon: Yeah.

Susan Joy Hassol: You've got a flood, so recurrent flooding or sunny day flooding, but yeah, we've gotta get rid of that nuisance flooding.

Austin Colon: Yeah. And of course that brings us to, what people often call natural disasters. And that's probably a pet peeve of yours too. Like they don't seem very natural.

Susan Joy Hassol: yes, it's a big pet peeve of mine. I really don't like the term natural disasters because these things are now decidedly unnatural, so I call them unnatural disasters. We've always had extreme weather, but now it's more extreme. We're seeing more of the kinds of weather that cause these disasters, and so we shouldn't call them natural because they're not natural. You know, similarly, people will say, oh, this is a new normal, and that bothers me because that sort of normalizes it and it also makes it sound like we've reached a new steady state when in fact it's much worse than that. It's gonna keep getting worse until we stop emitting this heat trapping pollution. So I like to say we're in a new abnormal and it's going to keep changing and keep getting worse until we stop doing what's causing it.

Austin Colon: Right. And to speak to that a little bit, you happen to live in Asheville, North Carolina, which was devastated by Hurricane Helene And what was your personal experience with that storm?

Susan Joy Hassol: Oh, it was, it was really devastating for everyone here. Whole parts of town were underwater. You know, a hundred people died and so many people lost their homes. And in the parts of town that weren't flooded, like where I live, so many trees came down because the ground was already saturated from the days and days of rain.

And then when those strong winds came, trees just came down with the big root balls up in the air. They crushed houses and cars and and people. So it really was devastating to our power infrastructure, our water infrastructure. We didn't have power for about a month. We didn't have water for several months, and when you have to go stand in line and bring home a five gallon bucket of water for the day, it's a very different story than just. You know, a storm coming through, and of course, whoever thought in the mountains of Western North Carolina, we'd be hit by a hurricane. It's kind of crazy, right? And such heavy rainfall and such strong winds. Of course, our local economy has taken a huge hit, which continues to this day. Nine months on, we're still having issues with our infrastructure and with our economy.

Austin Colon: I imagine that, that area of the country, a lot of people saw as climate safe

Susan Joy Hassol: Yes. People thought of this as a, as a climate haven because we're, we are far from the coast, so we don't have the hurricane risk or so we thought we're up in the mountains so we don't have the really bad heat, extreme heat that they have down in the Piedmont and the flat. Land, and so we did think that we were in a place that was relatively safe. Also, it's a very moist climate here, so we thought we were pretty relatively safe from fires. But you know what? There is no place that's safe anymore. We are now suffering from the kinds of floods and storms and wildfires that we just never thought we were really gonna have to face. When I first moved here about 15

years ago, I rented an old house that had no air conditioning 'cause we never needed it here. Now that's all changed. It is now nearly ubiquitous here because it has to be, it's just so hot and so humid. Another example, just recently they had the first ever heat alert from the National Weather Service in Alaska. And of course, nobody has air conditioning there because they've never needed it and they can't even open their windows because there's so, air is so smoky from the wildfires from Canada. So it's a bad scene. You know, when that kind of thing happens and people aren't prepared for it and the infrastructure doesn't exist to deal with it.

Austin Colon: going beyond words, there are adjacent issues that resonate more universally that should be talked about. like talking about drought when talking to farmers. what do you think of that strategy?

Susan Joy Hassol: I think it's essential. You have to talk to people about their priorities and what they care about and you know, if you frame climate change as an environmental issue. Then if you're not an environmentalist, you think it's not your issue. Most Americans don't consider themselves environmentalists, but right.

For farmers. You talk about drought for birders, you talk about what's happening to the birds for fish, for people who fish. You talk about what's happening to our cold water trout streams. Climate change is affecting everything and everyone, and we need to really reframe it from an environmental issue or a science issue or a political issue to one that's about protecting who we love and what we love. The places that we love. So I feel like that's really essential. You know, climate change is affecting everyone, everything, everywhere, all at once. We all want, you know? Right. We all want clean air, clean water, healthy forests and coasts. Everyone loves their kids. Climate change is affecting kids' health now, and it has long-term implications for their development. You know, our kids, they're living through ever increasing unnatural disasters, leading to evacuations, school closures, and other things that really upend their lives. And you know, more kids are suffering from allergies and asthma, and both of those are exacerbated by climate disruption. We're seeing kids hospitalized from heat stroke, these kinds of things, so. That's more important, and I think a more impactful way to talk to people about climate change.

Austin Colon: Yeah. but many climate solutions like transitioning from fossil fuels provide immediate air quality improvements in health benefits. how do we help people understand these co-benefits, you know, without making the message too complicated.

Susan Joy Hassol: Yeah. Well, I never use the term co-benefits. That sounds to me like something to do with health insurance.

Austin Colon: It probably is.

Susan Joy Hassol: So, I like to say multiple benefits. There are so many benefits. Of clean energy. It's the things we wanna be doing anyway, right? It cleans up our air and our water. We don't have to do mountaintop removal and wreck the, the mountain streams. It's also cheaper, right? So solar and wind are actually the cheapest form of new energy. Do you know that more than 90% of all the new electricity generation coming online in the US and in the world. Is clean renewable energy, more than 90%. And the reason for that is not because of climate laws, 'cause in this country we have none. And still that's the cheapest form of energy. So that's why it's coming online.

Austin Colon: One thing I always find fascinating is that. Climate disruption is not something that people often bring up in, you know, polite conversation. Uh, but weather almost always is, and frankly, it's often the first thing that people talk about. and we did an episode on how local TV meteorologists work climate into their weather reports. And there were people in a couple regions

where the audiences were so hostile to the idea of climate disruption that station managers told the reporters to stop discussing it completely. one meteorologist even received death threats. what would your recommendation in that situation be like? How do you educate a hostile public?

Susan Joy Hassol: It is a very difficult question and it's the one that we've been dealing with for decades, just since this issue became so politicized. I've worked with the broadcast meteorologist, so I know about all that. I know the one that you're talking about that got the death threats and stuff, so it really is a major challenge, I think sometimes, not saying the words climate change. But still having them incorporate, talking about extreme weather and saying, okay, here we are. We're in the first heat wave of the summer. And did you know that a few decades ago, the United States saw an average of two heat waves in a summer, and now we see an average of six heat waves in a summer. So we are now suffering through three times the number of heat waves every summer. You don't have to say the words climate change, but you tell them. This is what's happening. People have to experience the evidence from of their own eyes, right? What they're feeling and experiencing. But you have to help them realize that this is not just summer, this is now a different story. Climate is changing, and we know what's causing those changes. So I think we do have to keep reminding people. Of what we're seeing and to put it in context, it's gonna be really hot today. You wanna see the graph of how many days, over a hundred we've had, from 50 years ago till today. And you see that line going up everywhere. I think people have a right to know the context in which they're living. But yes, it's still this hostile public problem. So I think the main thing is talking to people about who they care about and what they care about, and how it's being affected by human caused climate disruption, not about polar bears, not about saving the planet. It's about saving ourselves and everything we love and care about.

Austin Colon: Yeah, I mean there's, there's often a joke that, uh, I believe, George Carlin told that, you know, the planet is gonna be fine. we are the ones who are gonna have the issue. I think he said a little more colorfully than that, but you get the idea.

Susan Joy Hassol: Absolutely, and, and I couldn't agree more. So I always tell people it's not about saving the earth, it's about saving ourselves. You know, Thoreau said, what's the use of a house if you haven't got a decent planet to put it on?

Austin Colon: Right, So you focus on communicating both the urgency and urgency of climate action, but how do you balance conveying the seriousness of climate threats while also empowering people to feel that they can make a difference?

Susan Joy Hassol: Yeah, that's, it's tricky because the urgency is tremendous. The, the issue of climate change is not like some other issues. If we don't get it done this year, we can get it done next year. We are in a critical period of time. We have to do as much as we can, as fast as we can, and. The inflation reduction act wasn't enough, but at least it got us moving in the right direction. What's happening now to take away all of that good climate policy? It's gonna make us sprinting in the wrong direction. I.

Austin Colon: Hmm.

Susan Joy Hassol: so there is tremendous urgency every day that we don't act, we commit to a more dangerous and hotter future. And I don't think that's what any of us want. So the urgency could not be greater. So I think it's really important for people to understand that we can. Do something about this. You know, everyone can take up the mantle. Talk to everyone you know about climate change in a way that will resonate with them and reach them personally. Especially talk to your elected leaders and business leaders and make sure they know that you care about this and you wanna see them do the right thing. And then everything that we need to do about this is something

we should be doing. Anyway, right. Who doesn't want cleaner energy, cleaner air, cleaner water, healthier, more walkable communities, sending fewer kids to the hospital with asthma attacks and heat stroke. Who doesn't want that?

Austin Colon: Right, exactly. Do you think it's possible to depolarize climate disruption?

Susan Joy Hassol: Once again, I think we have to go back to what people care about. If they say they care about America being great and America being strong in the world, then certainly they've got to see That competing in the global clean energy race is really important. So do they care about, , national defense? The pentagon's very concerned about climate change. They call it a threat multiplier. So if you care about our defense, if you care about our place economically in the world, whatever it is you care about, climate change is affecting that thing. So that's what we have to keep bringing it back to and maybe sometimes not calling it climate change might be the right way. You know, most people like clean energy. The Poles show that people really do like clean energy, even if they're not interested in climate change. You know, there are plenty of people who have electric cars and solar panels on their roofs who are still not. On board with the reality of human caused climate change. They're doing it because it saves money. You know there are schools that have done it. The Kentucky Coal Museum covered its roof in solar panels. Yes, they did not do that because of climate change. They did it because it saved the money. Thousands of dollars a year. So sometimes we find a side door, right? If the front door is locked, instead of banging your head against that locked front door, which will only give you a headache, I know from experience, find a side door.

Austin Colon: Excellent. Well, I think we'll leave it there. Susan, thank you so much for this conversation. It's definitely gonna make me think about the way I talk to people about climate disruption. way more carefully.

Susan Joy Hassol: Well, thanks. I'm glad we got this chance to talk about it because really the future is in our hands.

Kousha Navidar: And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Bisciegli, and Kousha Navidar. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Ariana Brocious.