

Professor Will Steffen, is not unversed in crises of existential proportions. In his days of mountaineering, Will recalls his treacherous decent down Himalayan mountains. Up 7000 metres, the trek was unforgiving. A normally slow and arduous journey, his tentative steps were hastened by the storm enveloping the mountain he found himself on. His saving grace was his composure, his ability to analyse the risks calmly and rationally, without underplaying the situation. He survived to climb another day.

No longer stuck between a mountain face and a looming black cloud, Will now spends his time in the lab. A sterile environment, yes, but one on the forefront of another storm brewing: the climate crisis.

Professor Steffen is an earth systems scientist. More general than a climatologist, an earth systems scientist studies the interactions and responses of all earth's sub-systems and 'spheres'. As he describes it, "I look at climate in the broader context of what's happening to the planetary system as a whole, which also includes biosphere degradation, it also includes humans." It's an area of science considered particularly distressing given the apocalyptic nature of the findings.

With a consistent barrage of gloomy predictions and worrying research – only last week, the UN stated we are moving towards an "uninhabitable hell" unless leaders take climate action – Professor Steffen is confronted with a grim portrayal of the fate of our world. A portrayal that can unsteady the poise he so easily maintained in the Himalayan ranges.

Professor Steffen says, given this isn't just a battle for his own survival, the pressures of the job can be far greater than any he's faced mountaineering. "I do experience a lot of concern, stress, particularly since I've got a daughter and she's going to have to live through the worst of this."

When he bears witness to tragedies, like the mass bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, he remembers having this “combination of really feeling depressed and sad... also extremely angry that this could be avoided”.

But, he’s not alone in feeling like this. The irrevocable damage of climate change is not just having an impact on our planet, it’s also having a tremendous impact on our mental wellbeing. A survey done in Tuvalu, an island nation in the Pacific at risk of being subsumed under a rising sea level, found that 87% of respondents reported feelings of severe climate-anxiety impacting on their daily lives. In Australia, four in five young people are anxious climate change will have a negative impact on their future.

Where Tuvaluans may find themselves fearing a rising sea level and Australians are increasingly concerned with the rate of bushfires, Professor Steffen cannot pin down his worries to any one event. What he finds most disturbing is the fact that humanity has entered an era of development of which it has very little control over.

This period, he says, is a “new geological epoch that earth has moved into because of human activity”. It’s known as the Anthropocene era, a concept he helped define. Characterized by global warming, habitat loss, animal extinctions and changes in chemical compositions of atmospheres, soil and oceans. It is an age almost entirely determined by collective human activity.

Professor Steffen says we are now at a junction. “The fork in the road is 2020 and COVID 19 gives us the opportunity to take a different way out of this.”

With the Australian Government proposing a gas-led recovery, he says he’s not hopeful we will choose the right path, although “it’s still possible”.

He says the destruction of our climate is done by “greedy, wealthy people and their complicit governments”, but they won’t be the ones to save us from their actions. Instead, our hope lies in a “social tipping point”. A moment in which the vast majority of Australians “just say, alright, we’ve had enough of this and we actually do need to move”.

This tipping point, he says, will be provoked by “a combination of fear and anxiety” and a “determination to push even harder now because there’s so much at stake and so little time left”.

Susan Clayton, psychologist and author of the book, “Conservation Psychology”, agrees. “At moderate levels anxiety is an appropriate response to the issue and can help motivate behaviour.”

Although, she prefers not to “put responsibility on the individual”, saying “organizations and governments should be taking action to address climate change”.

It’s these powerful players’ lack of action that can compound someone’s emotional strains. “People may feel that their anxieties are not being considered legitimate,” she says.

Now in his 70s, Professor Steffen isn’t climbing as many mountains as he once was. He prefers non-technical climbs and hikes through nature reserves. Still hiking great heights – only without the fear of death lingering – he enjoys these moments as a brief respite from the strain of the office.