

(Sounds of rustling in bed, plus horns honking, fire sounds)

Him: What are you doing?

Her: Just watching a thing.

Him: What?

Her: This family got evacuated because of the fire and this dad is trying to keep his kid calm but there's fire everywhere. Look at this.

(A snippet of a youtube video of a dad and his young daughter talking)

Dad: *Uh we're gonna get out okay. And we're gonna leave.*

Him: What time is it?

Her: Uh, 2:30.

Him: Do you need to watch that right now?

Her: Listen to this: plays:

Kid: *We're gonna get on fire.*

Dad: *Hey guess what, we're not gonna catch on fire, okay? We're gonna stay away from it ...*

Her: Fuck.

Dad: *[sings] Baby it'll be alright*

Her: Doesn't it just make you feel sick?

Him: Want to try looking at something else before bed?

Her: This could actually happen, this actually happens. I don't want to evacuate a baby from a fire.

Him: I know. But I don't think this is helping anyone right now. Come on, let's look for something else.

Her: I just don't know if I'd be able to do that. I don't think I'd be good at that.

Him: *[sings] Baby it'll be alright.*

(She scoffs)

Him: Too soon?

Her: It's all too soon.

Katie Hayes: I wanted to look at what are the long-term effects of being exposed to some form of climate related hazard. And so that's why I chose to do it in High River. So I did the research five years after the 2013 flood that devastated the whole community and looked at the long-term impacts. A lot of folks talked about things like lingering trauma, post traumatic stress, anxiety every spring, anxiety every time it rains, depression, family breakdown.

Her: Katie Hayes researches the mental health effects of climate change.

Katie Hayes: 1998, the ice storm in Quebec. They did a longitudinal study of women who were pregnant, basically tracked the children as they developed over 10 to 15 years. And so what they found is pre-maternal stress, so stressors related to experiencing the ice storm had poor outcomes on the unborn fetus, so cognitive difficulties, neurological difficulty. So there are some biological components to consider in terms of stress between the mother and the child.

Her: We try to shield children from so much but they know the truth, even prenatally.

We see groups, young people, pledging not to have kids because of climate collapse. But of course, not everybody has the choice.

Katie Hayes: On a very personal note, my partner and I are struggling with infertility and so the decision is in a lot of ways being made for us and that comes with so much grief. So much anxiety. And also thinking myself, that, you know maybe this is a sign. Maybe I'm not supposed to. And I do constantly battle that, I constantly think about, do I have a right to bring a child into this world when, y'know right now the climate crisis that we're in is a really difficult thing to navigate.

And I feel so hopeless at the end of the day and I think, What what's the point? So I can't you know why we can't have a family. We can't have a child and, you know, think about all these wonderful things that that child is gonna do and have that sense of hope, and we can't have that. It's devastating, and it really it hits you every single day and every single way, And you think man, you know, in a lot of people are making these conscious decisions because you know, they don't see a future for their, for their children or for the youth today.

And I think it is such a scary place to be when that's a common thing that people are experiencing. That hopelessness is a state of complete and utter anxiety, and trauma that we're going through. And yeah, I mean, I grapple with that every single day that hopelessness, and hope.

Her: Hopelessness and hope.

My partner tells me to relax, tells me I should take a bath.

(We hear a tap go on.)

Her: I agree as long as he promises to use the bathwater after me.

I keep thinking about this as the future but it's already happening, it's been happening.

Hopelessness about conditions people have been living through for years.

People have been having kids through, for years.

Did you know women are more affected by climate change?

Globally I mean, not me.

But women are more likely to be displaced, to lose their work, lose their property.

More likely to die.

In the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, 70% of the casualties were women.

In the average natural disaster, women outnumber men 14 to 1.

Sometimes it's because they can't go out unaccompanied. Maybe they didn't get the warnings the men who were out of the house did. Maybe they were never taught to swim.

And sometimes, it's because they are home, inside, looking after seniors, the sick, or their children.

(The tap goes off.)

They say the impacts of climate change are felt most acutely by those who have done the least to contribute to the problem.

That won't be me.

That won't be my family.

We won't be the most affected I'm sure. But we won't be unaffected, I know that much.

I worry about the floods, the fires, but almost more than that, I worry about their tight chest.

I worry about the pit in their stomach. The shelter from worry that I can't give them.

I was a really happy, okay kid, and still, being 12 was a nightmare.

Adding to that, the dread, the desperation of not seeing a future for themselves.

Can I look them in the eye knowing I chose this for them?

And yet so many people have had kids in much worse situations.

I'm terrified my kid might feel even a sliver of the desperation so many people and their kids feel today, have felt through history.

A diminishment of their superiority.

In the words of Vinay Gupta, "What you people call collapse means living in the same conditions as the people who grow your coffee."

My kid would be better off than a lot of people. Maybe. Probably.
But would they be happy?

Britt Wray: The discourse is escalating in terms of emergency and panic and millions of children in the streets, screaming in the voice of despair that they feel abandoned and that their future has been robbed from them.

Her: Britt Wray is a researcher and writer who looks at what we call eco-anxiety, or climate grief, or sometimes, solastalgia: homesickness for the home that isn't there anymore. When I talked to Britt about the question of kids, she still didn't know for herself.

Britt Wray: So I am so sick of sitting on this fence, you know, I just want to fall off it on one direction or the other, because it's a really tricky decision to make, which is one of the oldest decisions through time where there's reproductive autonomy, right?

You know, there are questions around what it would mean when you already look at who the kids are today that are here, and you see how it's affecting them? What it means to then produce younger humans and what stress that will put on them. It's not just about, um, you know, dealing with the idea of climate disaster. It's about the kind of vicarious trauma that comes from living in a culture that does not have its stuff sorted out. That is doing nothing at scale to address this crisis that we know is threatening everything we love about the world, about nonhuman species and human life and ecosystems and there's, there's just a kind of ambient drone of anxiety...

(A hum starts up.)

Britt Wray: ...wondering what kind of stress and anxiety would then be in the next generation that I produce. And we have this window of time to try and rise to the occasion, but we know, we know already that it's too late for us to stave off what we would like to stave off. We're definitely going to blow past 1.5 degrees.

So we're really looking at a world of deep change, two plus degrees of warming and, um, within our, our century and the lifetime of many people is, is sometimes too overwhelming to really confront and think about. So when you do confront it and really spell out in human terms, what that means, it's a very precarious world for today's children.

Her:

77% of young people surveyed said that they consider the future to be frightening

56% agree with the viewpoint that humanity is doomed

More than 45% said the way they feel about climate change adversely affects their day-to-day lives.

Britt Wray: And what I'm speaking of is the kind of localized collapse that could lead to greater global predicament, hundreds of millions of refugees and you know, the kinds of political instability and, um, likeliness of war that come with things like that, whatever we're heading into, along with species extinctions that our livelihoods depend on. Um, if there's going to be something on the other side of it, then we can plant seeds.

I think there's no problem with having children to plant seeds, to be part of that future. It's just, you have to ascertain how comfortable you are.

Her:

yes we'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow
and we'll walk where the chalk white arrows go,
for the children they mark, and the children they know,
the place where the sidewalk ends.

Will all the children know? Are we creating a generation of kids living in existential dread? Will there be those moments of peace, discovery, untainted joy for them? How much will we tell them? How much will they find out anyways?

Britt Wray: At the same time, I do not think that the ethical imperative to have a child needs to be that your child's life needs to be as good as yours is. That is too high of a bar to set. Quality of life can decrease enormously and it can still be ethical and okay to have a child for sure. Um, we might be going to another place as a civilization where we have a quality of life that resembles something from way back in time.

It is not unethical to have a child just because the world would be very different, possibly much more unstable, politically insecure, and they will suffer, um, through a variety of planes of human experience. I don't think that that makes it unethical. I'm not an antinatalist. I don't think that we need to avoid suffering at all costs, cause there's still a lot of meaning and joy and beauty and being alive in a lot of different circumstances.

There's never the right time to have a child. And humanity has always faced enormous, um, crises. This is perhaps a different unprecedented one. I also think there's lots of beautiful things about having a child, no matter what, and looking at what kinds of human thriving has always been possible in difficult situations.

But actually, I mean, why do you have a child? Do you know that child? No. Are you really looking out for that child? No. You're having that child to satisfy a deep desire in you for belonging, connection, unconditional love, you're having a child for yourself.

Her: Since we talked, Britt had a baby.

My cousin Hannah had her baby.

So many smart and thoughtful people are doing it anyways. And doing it well.

If they can do it, can I?

Credits: Expectant is written and performed by Pippa Johnstone. Composition by Laura Reznek. Sound design and mixing by Robyn Edgar. Dramaturgical support from Karina Palmitesta. Next time on Expectant:

Marjory: There has never been anything like this in history. Um, so as a historian, I'm flailing, you know, so I don't think I have any words of wisdom from that point of view. Um, except that I suppose parenting is what everybody has always done, but it is also an act of hope. And I think that taking that away from what is human is really tragic to, to not give people another generation to hope for.