



Eco-anxiety

This resource discusses the mental health impacts associated with an awareness of climate change, but not climate change itself. For more information about the science behind climate change, consult the resource section.

How does climate change affect young people?

Adults keep saying: “We owe it to the young people to give them hope.” But I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic.

I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act.

I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if your house is on fire. Because it is.¹

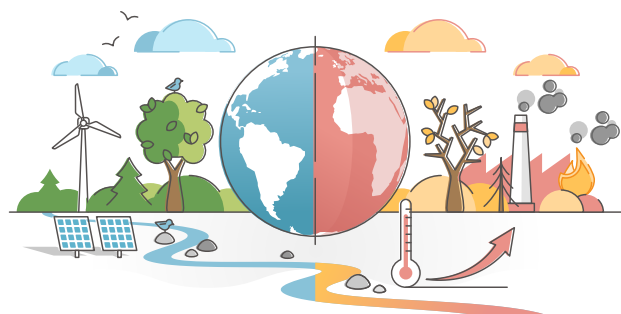
Climate change is seen as the biggest global health threat of the 21st century.² It threatens the physical and mental health of young people both directly and indirectly. These impacts can occur immediately or on a delayed basis.³

Physical health

Climate events, as well as climate change, can affect the physical health of children and young people.⁴

Climate events – such as fires, floods, droughts, hurricanes and tornadoes – can have an impact on physical health in countless ways. Some examples include blunt physical trauma during a tornado, respiratory infections after a typhoon, and exposure to toxins in contaminated water following a flood.⁴

Determining the physical health impacts of climate change itself is difficult because it is a gradual process, and it interacts with social factors like poverty and conflict.⁴ This means that climate change is more heavily associated with delayed and indirect health effects, which are harder to study.



Mental health

Exposure to climate-related changes and climate events can increase the amount of psychosocial risk factors that young people are exposed to, like school closures, food shortages, family stress and forced migration.³ These psychosocial risk factors then increase the likelihood that a young person will develop mental health problems. Also, an understanding or awareness of climate change can negatively impact the mental health of young people.³

What is eco-anxiety?

When young people develop a greater awareness of climate change and the devastating implications for the future, they may experience significant distress. This state of distress has been called “eco-anxiety” by researchers.^{5,6} Young people with eco-anxiety are anticipating the traumatic consequences of an event before the event has occurred.⁵



Eco-anxiety is more than just anxiety. This term typically encompasses feelings of fear, anger, exhaustion, loss, powerlessness, helplessness and despair.^{5,7,8} Researchers are still discussing terminology and gaining consensus on the various characteristics of eco-anxiety. For example, some researchers use terms like climate anxiety, climate depression, or solastalgia instead of or in addition to eco-anxiety.^{6,7,9}

How common is eco-anxiety?

Because eco-anxiety is a new concept that is still being researched, we do not know how many young people are affected. Based on the information we do have, we know this.

- Young people are very worried about climate change. In a global survey of youth aged 16 to 25 years old, 84% of participants were moderately to extremely worried about climate change.¹⁰
- Almost half of young people (45%) report that their feelings about climate change negatively impact their daily life and functioning.¹⁰
- Organizations in the United Kingdom and the United States report a growing demand for eco-anxiety treatment.⁵
- Young people are at greater risk of climate-related mental health problems than their parents because they will live through more years of climate crises.⁸
- Indigenous communities are also at greater risk, as climate change can lead to loss of cultural connections linked to the physical environment.^{8,11}

Is eco-anxiety adaptive?

Despair about climate change is as dangerous as denial about climate change: both lead to inaction.⁸

Anxiety can be a healthy reaction to climate change.¹² Because the climate crisis is a realistic fear – human actions are causing potentially irreversible damage to the planet – eco-anxiety has been described as an understandable response to a traumatic situation.^{7,13} Feelings of anxiety can indicate that the young person has a realistic understanding of the dire situation we are in. However, when levels of anxiety are so high that they interfere with daily functioning, eco-anxiety is maladaptive.

Young people can experience other maladaptive and adaptive emotions related to the climate crisis, such as apathy and anger. Apathy can be seen as a form of denial and disengagement or as a necessary coping mechanism that helps young people avoid overwhelming feelings of distress.¹⁴ Youth leaders of climate strikes note that many young people experience apathy due to a lack of education on climate change, over-exposure to pessimistic discourse and the feeling that they cannot make a difference.¹⁴

Anger is also common among young people. Youth activists expressing anger over climate change have been criticized as brainwashed, hysterical and unstable.^{12,15} Nevertheless, researchers have learned that anger and anxiety are important stages in the emotional journey toward action,¹⁴ which is necessary to address the climate crisis.

It is understandable that young people have big feelings about climate change. They are not overreacting. Feelings of anxiety and anger can compel young people to engage in research, climate activism, and individual and collective action.



Disavowal

The term “disavowal” is defined as simultaneously knowing and not knowing about a problem.¹⁶ Researchers argue that all of us are at different stages of emerging from disavowal about climate change. Eco-anxiety can be a sign that the young person is overcoming disavowal and becoming more realistic about the known impacts of climate change.¹⁶



What are interventions for eco-anxiety?

Types of interventions

Different types of interventions have been used to treat people with eco-anxiety, such as cognitive, meaning-focused, existential, emotion-focused and self-care interventions.⁵ However, there are few evaluations of these interventions and a lack of studies focused on young people.

The limited existing research notes that interventions focused on restructuring catastrophic thoughts, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, are not designed to treat anxiety responses to realistic threats like climate change.⁸ Instead of traditional models for treating anxiety, interventions aligning with the idea of grief may be more applicable for eco-anxiety. Service providers should allow young people to grieve, but also encourage them to identify goals, develop hope and seek support.⁸

Components of interventions

The worry that I have is anchored in reality. It isn't wrong to be scared.⁷

A study of adults experiencing eco-anxiety identified four treatment components people look for when seeking support.⁷

1. A person who understands what they are talking about
 - Participants reported they do not want to explain the realities of the climate crisis to a service provider and that they want to discuss climate change in depth without having to censor themselves. Having previous knowledge of climate change helps service providers create a safe space for people with eco-anxiety.
2. Validation for their emotions related to climate change
 - Participants noted that it was helpful when service providers validated and normalized their concerns about climate change. Others reported negative experiences when service providers dismissed their fears or redirected the discussion to focus on relational problems.
3. Assistance with learning to manage their emotions related to climate change
 - Participants found it helpful to explore their grief, anger and anxiety. Learning emotion regulation skills was also seen as helpful.
4. Finding meaning in climate-related actions and values
 - Some participants reported it was beneficial to develop a sense of agency and transform their anxiety into action.

How to help young people with eco-anxiety

When talking about climate change...

- **Educate yourself.** Do your own research about climate change so that you can better assist young people.^{5,7}
- **Notice your own anxiety.** Pay attention to your feelings and the sensations in your body. If you are not aware of your own anxieties toward climate change, you may minimize the young person's fear as a self-protection strategy.⁷
- **Tolerate discomfort.** Adults may feel uncomfortable with the emotions expressed by young people regarding climate change, particularly anger over the inaction of previous generations.¹⁷ It is important to set this discomfort aside and tolerate the young person's emotions.⁸
- **Give validation.** Remind young people that it is not wrong to be scared or angry. Their feelings are based in reality.⁵
- **Build hope.** Point to other major global problems that have been solved in the past, like closing the hole in the ozone layer and women's suffrage. Remind young people of concrete examples of success stories in collective action to counter climate change – for example, Bhutan, Suriname¹⁸ and Tasmania, Australia¹⁹ becoming carbon negative. Point to solutions to climate change, note their widespread public support, and remind the young person that people are working to implement these solutions.³



Encourage young people to...

- **Regulate their emotions.** Help them name their emotions and identify ways to cope, such as breathing techniques or physical activity.²⁰
- **Recognize and challenge their thoughts.** Teach young people to identify and modify their self-talk about climate change. Challenge catastrophic or black-and-white thinking.²⁰
- **Seek support.** Encourage the young person to seek appropriate social support.^{5,7}
- **Connect with nature.** Invite the young person to identify a space in nature that they enjoy and encourage them to visit it regularly. This is a commonly practiced technique in eco-therapy.⁵
- **Take action.** Help them brainstorm ways they can contribute to combating climate change. Taking action can help young people feel more in control, more hopeful and more resilient.²⁰

Resources



- Questions about climate change? Check out [this FAQ](#) put together by the New York Times.
- Check out [this information sheet](#) by the Australian Psychological Society on dealing with climate change distress.



References

1. Thunberg, G. (2019). Our house is on fire. In *No one is too small to make a difference* (pp. 16-18). Penguin Books.
2. Costello, A. et al. (2009). [Managing the health effects of climate change](#). *The Lancet (British Edition)*, 373(9676), 1693–733.
3. Sanson, A. V., Van Hoorn, J., & Burke, S. E. L. (2019). [Responding to the impacts of the climate crisis on children and youth](#). *Child Development Perspectives*, 13(4), 201–207.
4. Garcia, D. M., & Sheehan, M. C. (2016). [Extreme weather-driven disasters and children's health](#). *International Journal of Health*, 46(1), 79–105.
5. Baudon, P., & Jachens, L. (2021). [A scoping review of interventions for the treatment of eco-anxiety](#). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 9636.
6. Coffey, Y., Bhullar, N., Durkin, J., Islam, M. S., & Usher, K. (2021). [Understanding eco-anxiety: A systematic scoping review of current literature and identified knowledge gaps](#). *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, 3, 100047.
7. Budziszewska, M., & Jonsson, S. E. (2022). [Talking about climate change and eco-anxiety in psychotherapy: A qualitative analysis of patients' experiences](#). *Psychotherapy*. Advance online publication.
8. Pinsky, E., Guerrero, A. P. S., & Livingston, R. (2020). [Our house is on fire: Child and adolescent psychiatrists in the era of the climate crisis](#). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59(5), 580–582.
9. Albrecht, G., Sartore, G. M., Connor, L., Higginbotham, N., Freeman, S., Kelly, B., Stain, H., Tonna, A., & Pollard, G. (2007). [Solastalgia: The distress caused by environmental change](#). *Australasian Psychiatry*, 15(1), S95–98.
10. Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R. E., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., & van Susteren, L. (2021). [Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: A global survey](#). *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(12), e863–e873.
11. Petrusek MacDonald, J., Cunsolo Willox, A., Ford, J. D., Shiwak, I., Wood, M., Wolfrey, C., Baikie, M., Andresen, A., Nochacak, N., Piercy, W., Flowers, J., Gear, D., Jacque, G., Jacque, H., Groves, M., & the Rigolet Inuit Community Government. (2015). [Protective factors for mental health and well-being in a changing climate: Perspectives from Inuit youth in Nunatsiavut, Labrador](#). *Social Science and Medicine*, 141, 133–141.
12. Benoit, L., Thomas, I., & Martin, A. (2022). [Review: Ecological awareness, anxiety, and actions among youth and their parents – a qualitative study of newspaper narratives](#). *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 27(1), 47–58.
13. Pihkala, P. (2020). [Eco-anxiety and environmental education](#). *Sustainability*, 12(23), 10149.
14. Bright, M. L., & Eames, C. (2022). [From apathy through anxiety to action: Emotions as motivators for youth climate strike leaders](#). *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 38(1), 13–25.
15. Breen, K. (2019, September 2). [Maxime Bernier calls teen climate activist 'mentally unstable'](#). *Global News*.
16. Weintrobe, S. (2020). [Moral injury, the culture of uncare and the climate bubble](#). *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34(4), 351–362.
17. Hickman, C. (2020). [We need to \(find a way to\) talk about... Eco-anxiety](#). *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34(4), 411–424.
18. World Wildlife Fund (2020). *Suriname: The NDC we want*.
19. Mackey, B., Moomaw, W., Lindenmayer, D., & Keith, H. (2022). [Net carbon accounting and reporting are a barrier to understanding the mitigation value of forest protection in developed countries](#). *Environmental Research Letters*, 17, 054028.
20. Sanson, A. V., Burke, S. E. L., & Van Hoorn, J. (2018). [Climate change: Implications for parents and parenting](#). *Parenting*, 18, 200–217.

