



Eco-anxiety

“Climate change is the defining issue of our time”

The United Nations¹

What is eco-anxiety?

When you are faced with uncertain situations, you may feel some anxiety. Anxiety is a whirlwind of emotions that might include worry, guilt, stress, fear, and anger². The global crisis of climate change can affect your life to the extent that it causes distress and interrupts your daily activities. These feelings of anxiety about climate change are commonly called “eco-anxiety.”

It’s important to acknowledge the environmental racism and systemic vulnerability that specific groups experience from climate change. For example, there are direct environmental and cultural effects on First Nations peoples that impact their mental health and well-being.

Read on to learn more about feelings related to climate change and some evidence-backed suggestions on how to cope.

Did you know

Did you know that in 2021, 46% of Canadians said they were worried about climate change, with 28% saying they were very worried?^{2,3} If the state of our climate is making you feel anxious, hopeless, or angry in a way that impacts your daily life, know that you’re not alone.

Figure 1: The health risks of climate change; present and future⁴.

Examples of climate change’s effects on health



heat-related illness



respiratory illnesses



malnutrition and food-borne diseases



mental and psychosocial health



noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)



injury and mortality from extreme weather events



vector-borne diseases



water-borne diseases and other water-related health impacts

Note: This graphic is an adaptation inspired from an image on the World Health Organization’s website. An overview of climate-sensitive health risks, their exposure pathways and vulnerability factors. Climate change impacts health both directly and indirectly, and is strongly mediated by environmental, social and public health determinants. World Health Organization; [2021]. License: [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

What can you do to cope with eco-anxiety?

Eco-anxiety is a communal issue. It is not caused by a single person, but rather, by the impact of a global population. Although the most effective ways of coping with the effects of eco-anxiety require community, there are some things you can do to help yourself, others and the climate.

Did you know?

More than 70% of young people in a high-quality study believed their opinions and thoughts on climate change weren't being taken seriously⁵.



Find like-minded people



Join a support group.

Support groups provide a safe space to express yourself¹. Joining a support group allows you to feel accepted, have your feelings validated, and experience solidarity with others by gaining and providing support.



Get involved with an organization or institution that's making a difference.

Collaborating with organizations can help you better understand climate change and ways to reduce its effects¹. Whether it's through volunteering, a co-op placement, or a summer or part-time job, actively participating in exploring and developing climate change interventions can help expand your own view of the crisis.



Collaborate with others on projects on- and off-campus.

There are many ways to collaborate with others who stand behind the same cause. For example, you could join a university club, join an online climate action group, or use university resources to create action plans with a group¹. Working with groups provides multiple and different perspectives.

Take action

Increase your awareness by educating yourself.



Increasing your personal knowledge can help you better understand the climate crisis and ways to manage eco-anxiety.

Part of this is acknowledging that you may have feelings of discomfort to investigate⁶ feel better. Using these feelings of discomfort to motivate actions of research, project collaboration, or activism has been shown to help anxiety and introduce positive development skills⁵.

Check out your campus resources for information or to speak to someone about eco-anxiety and climate change or get started with some of the evidence-based resources below:

- Information on eco-anxiety: [Eco-Anxiety & How to Cope – Anxiety Canada](#)
- Understanding and coping with eco-anxiety: [Understanding and Coping with Eco-Anxiety – Mental Health Commission of Canada](#)
- Information on climate change: [What Is Climate Change? – United Nations](#)
- Talking to climate deniers: [Communicating on Climate Change – United Nations](#)
- Discussing climate change with the children in your life: [Engage, Educate and Empower: The 3 Es to discuss climate change with children – The Conversation](#)

Advocate for a cause that matters to you.



Advocacy is a proactive way to channel emotions and behaviours. Advocacy can come from personal values,

intergenerational conflict, and emotions surrounding eco-anxiety. Studies have shown that behaviour change is shaped by our emotional experiences⁶. Advocacy, in any form, allows for proactive behaviour change, and in some cases, for social change.

For example, Autumn Peltier, Anishinabek Nation Chief Water Commissioner, began her work advocating for clean water when she saw signs that warned of toxic drinking water while visiting Serpent River First Nation for a ceremony. Her advocacy work led her to speak at the United Nations about the issue of contaminated water on First Nations reserves in Canada.

There's so much you can do to make a difference. From attending protests to campus activism, you can help improve climate change while creating a sense of purpose and optimism for yourself and others⁵.



**“The best
antidote to
anxiety is
action”⁵**

Make lifestyle changes.



Becoming mindful of the personal lifestyle choices you make day-to-day and their impact on the environment is a great first step. From there, tweaking some of your daily habits to reduce your carbon footprint is a proactive, personal intervention that can help with eco-anxiety. Check out some of the examples below, keeping in mind that not every change will be suitable to your circumstances or lifestyle:

- Reduce your consumption of fast-fashion clothes or buy second hand instead.
- Switch your commute from driving to biking, walking, public transport, or carpooling.
- Consume locally sourced foods.
- Engage in composting practices to reduce food waste.
- Reduce your use of single-use plastic such as takeout containers and cutlery, water bottles, and cups by bringing your own reusable equivalents.
- Advocate for more culturally adapted mental health resources and tools for Indigenous Peoples⁷.
- Encourage the preservation of Indigenous traditional activities⁸.

Get the people you care about involved

Teachers and professors.

Discussing the climate crisis in the classroom helps young people better understand the world they are living in⁶. Since this isn't a topic that's discussed enough, it fuels students' eco-anxiety as they feel their concerns and emotions are invalidated.

Use your knowledge and involvement to introduce educational opportunities and resources into your school.

Family.

Conflict between family members' views on this topic is a key contributor to eco-anxiety. A proactive way to engage your family, in what is primarily seen as a youth issue, is by bringing your knowledge to them. Research shows that parents may be more invested than other authoritative figures, given their responsibility to protect their children and acknowledge their concerns⁹. Educating family and inviting them to participate in a climate change initiative can help change their mind and might even encourage them to take action.

Friends and peers.

Climate change, and topics surrounding the crisis, tend to have negative responses from governments³. Involving yourself in political interventions gives you a voice on a larger platform. Taking political action doesn't have to be only government-based – it can include participating in university student councils and clubs, for example. Working with your friends and peers promotes participation and builds a solid network.

“

The climate strikes provided an opportunity for adults generally, and educationalists specifically, to observe motivated [post-secondary students] who saw the need to challenge authoritarian expectations and demand political climate action”⁶.

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Take care of yourself



Sometimes it may feel like you're not doing enough or that the circumstances are beyond your control – and that's ok. Remember that your response to the climate crisis is perfectly reasonable. Start with small, intentional steps, look after your personal needs first, and practice self-care. Self-care could include spending time in nature, journaling about what's worrying you or trying a breathing exercise.

If you're experiencing eco-anxiety, you can reach out to one of our professional counsellors or volunteer crisis responders 24/7. We're Good2Talk whenever you need us!



References

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