

Eco-anxiety – a rapid review

Produced for 'Art and Agency - Eco-anxiety And Creative Responses to The Climate and Ecological Emergency

Introduction

This rapid review was produced to support a collaboration between researchers at the University of Exeter (Prof. Stewart Barr and Dr Lewis Winks) and Exeter based community interest company, Art and Energy. Throughout the course of the 12-month project, the collaboration focused on the interface between behavioural social science and the creative arts, to better understand and support the conditions for taking pro-environmental action, in the face of crisis and challenge. This review and the accompanying presentation enabled the researchers to inform the collaborative work with the most recent research insights regarding eco and climate anxiety.

What is eco-anxiety?

Eco-anxiety is a specific form of anxiety relating to stress or distress caused by environmental changes and our knowledge of them (Albrecht, 2011).

As scientific evidence of the severity of climate change increases, there are indications that this represents a significant psychological burden in the form of climate anxiety on the public (Whitmarsh et al, 2022).

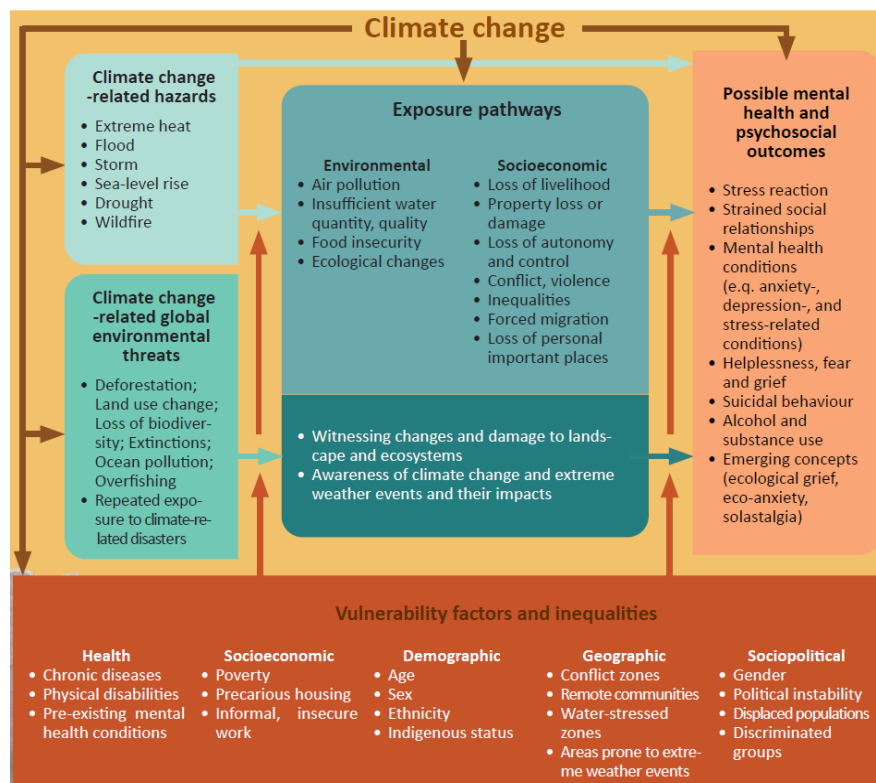


Figure 1 Mental Health and Climate Change, WHO 2022

A 2021 WHO survey of 95 countries found that only 9 have thus far included mental health and psychosocial support in their national health and climate change plans¹.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/03-06-2022-why-mental-health-is-a-priority-for-action-on-climate-change#:~:text=A%202021%20WHO%20survey%20of,and%20mental%20health%20services%20globally.>
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There is a growing awareness of the impact on mental health, the distress, confusion and anxiety that follows increased awareness of the climate and bio-diversity crisis generally (Bourque & Cunsolo Willox, 2014; Head, 2016; Ojala, 2012; Pihkala, 2020; Usher et al., 2019), with concern often centred on how this is affecting children and young people (Hickman, 2019b; Hoggett, 2019b; Lawton, 2019).

The Guardian (15/9/20) reported research showing an ‘explosion’ in anxiety in Britain over the past decade with rates of anxiety trebling amongst young adults, affecting 30% of young women aged 18 to 24. A 2020 YouGov poll commissioned by Friends of the Earth reported that 70% of 18–24 year olds are more worried about climate change than they were a year ago.

Eco-anxiety has been variously conceptualised over the decades. In the early 2000’s when the term was gaining popular usage in academic and non-academic circles, the term was more commonly associated with feelings of uncertainty regarding consumption-based behaviours. Concerns such as which product to purchase (i.e. with the greenest credentials) have concrete actions for relief. In this way, such forms of eco-anxiety associated with consuming products also come with options to help the buyer feel better about their choices.

In the present day, the term eco-anxiety, and associated terms relating to climate and ecological concern are more generally used in relation to more severe forms of distress related to environmental disaster. Often these challenges are complex and multifaceted, and importantly for those suffering with eco-anxiety, there is no obvious or immediate mechanism for alleviating the concern.

It is important to note that stresses and anxieties related to climate change and ecological crisis have been felt for many years, especially in the global south. We should recognise that the defining of ‘eco-anxiety’ although recent is only one way of conceptualising emotional impacts of environmental change.

Eco-anxiety can manifest in many forms and is but one broad term which can encapsulate many sets of feelings related to the plight of the natural world (see fig2). The three excerpts below illustrate various scenarios which may be seen to characterise ‘eco-anxiety’ and the allied term ‘climate-anxiety’:

- *A grandparent holds her new grandchild in her arms and feels anxious about how the little baby will cope in a future world.*
- *A high school student recounts how he is so deeply anxious about climate change that he has been prescribed antidepressants to help him cope with his symptoms.*
- *A middle-aged person, who usually spends much of her time outdoors, notices that she is going out into nature less often, because being there reminds her of all the losses and all of the threats to the environment.*

Adapted from Pihkala, 2019

“It would seem irrational not to have a heightened state of concern and anxiety when living with such ominous threats. In essence, **eco-anxiety is an indicator that our relationship with the beyond-human natural world is changing**—quickly, significantly, and on many levels”.

Predicting factors

Some groups will feel the effects of eco-anxiety more acutely. Young people are more likely to report heightened levels of eco-anxiety in the UK and North American contexts (Hickman et al, 2021; Whitmarsh et al, 2022). Females and younger people in general are more anxious about climate change than men and older groups. It has also been observed that people with stronger environmental values are generally more anxious about the predicament of environmental crisis (Searle and Gow, 2010). For young people in particular, feelings of powerlessness coupled with a lack of trust in governments is increasing climate anxiety.

Those who have direct experience of climate and ecological disasters (such as emergency workers, and those living in natural disaster-prone parts of the world) are more highly predisposed to eco-anxiety. Meanwhile, indirect experience of climate change has been shown to trigger anxiety, through the media (O’Neill, 2020; Whitmarsh et al, 2022).

It is also necessary to point out that research states a link between generalised anxiety and eco-anxiety – those experiencing anxiety may have a greater likelihood of experiencing eco-anxiety (Clayton and Karazsia, 2020).

Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Action

Emotion-focused coping:
reducing negative affect

Problem-focused coping:
Targeting the cause of the stress practically

Meaning-focused coping: development of trust in others to act

Figure 3: Types of coping with eco-anxiety. Problem-focused and Meaning Focused coping are associated with the development of pro-environmental behaviours (Ojala 2012; Ojala and Bengtsson, 2019).

As Hickman and Passmore state, anxiety and stress are understandable and proportionate responses to the climate and ecological emergencies – therefore the idea of ‘coping’ with anxiety is often directed toward the root cause of the concern rather than the symptoms. We should be careful with how much we see eco-anxiety as something to be ‘treated’. However, addressing the negative effects of climate and eco-anxiety might be a starting point – seen above as ‘emotion-focused coping’ strategies. Dealing with the causes of the stress individually and in groups can be more effective in the long run, and it’s this problem- and meaning-focused coping approaches which are associated with pro-environmental behaviours and where agency for effecting change might be found.

“[Eco- anxiety] may be both a psychological stressor, with a potential impact on mental health for some, whilst at the same time reflecting a rational response that can motivate pro-environmental behaviour.”

Whitmarsh et al, 2022

A complex relationship exists between nature connectedness and eco-anxiety. On the one hand, closeness to nature can help to alleviate feelings of distress and help people to find purpose and take action on a range of environmental issues. A close relationship with nature may help to mitigate effects of eco-anxiety including reducing stress and Eco-anxiety – a rapid review (May 2023)

improve cognition. Nature connectedness has also been seen to increase happiness and pro-environmental behaviours.

On the other hand, closeness to the natural world can heighten the sensitivity to loss and change therefore raising the prospect stress and anxiety (Phkala, 2019; Cianconi et al, 2020; Capaldi et al, 2014; Richardson et al 2020; Whitmarsh et al 2022).

Mindfulness can also mitigate eco-anxiety; **reducing stress and worry**, achieved through defining a ‘**new relationship to experience**’ resulting in acceptance rather than avoidance. (Cianconi et al, 2020; Capaldi et al, 2014; Richardson et al 2020; Whitmarsh et al 2022).

Both mindfulness and nature connectedness can help to mitigate the feelings associated with loss and environmental crisis, yet also offer opportunities to move beyond emotional coping into problem-focused and and meaning focused **engagement strategies** by coupling activities with opportunities to take action. Central to this is making a distinction between naive and critical or ‘active hope’.

Working with and taking action alongside others can offer opportunities to both mitigate the more immediate emotional effects of eco-anxiety while also taking action to address the root cause and build efficacy through a sense of personal agency. This can take the form of direct support from others to take action, sharing conversations, as well as creative expression. (Cianconi et al, 2020; Capaldi et al, 2014; Richardson et al 2020; Whitmarsh et al 2022)

Finally, Hickman (2020) suggests that we might reframe eco-anxiety as eco-empath or eco-caring. She suggests that we would not feel these responses if we did not care in the first place.

‘Living a life connected empathetically with the planet – [offering] some understanding of struggles of people living in countries that are facing the more immediate impact of the climate crisis’. (Hickman, 2020).

Selected Reading and References

Caroline Hickman (2020) *We need to (find a way to) talk about ... Ecoanxiety*, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34:4, 411-424, DOI: 10.1080/02650533.2020.1844166

Caroline Hickman, 2019 *I’m a psychotherapist – here’s what I’ve learned from listening to children talk about climate change* <https://theconversation.com/im-a-psychotherapist-heres-what-ive-learned-from-listening-to-children-talk-about-climate-change-123183>

Panu Pihkala (2020) *Eco-anxiety and environmental education*. *Sustainability*

Editorial (2019) *Eco-anxiety: How thinking about climate change-related environmental decline is affecting our mental health*; *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* (2019) 28, 1233–1234

Holli-Anne Passmore, Paul K. Lutz & Andrew J. Howell (2022): *Eco-Anxiety: A Cascade of Fundamental Existential Anxieties*, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, DOI:10.1080/10720537.2022.2068706

Climate Change and Mental Health Policy Brief (WHO)

Coffey et al (2021) *Understanding Eco-anxiety: A Systematic Scoping Review of Current Literature and Identified Knowledge Gaps*

Whitmarsh et al (2022) *Climate anxiety: What predicts it and how is it related to climate action?* *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 83 (2022) 101866

You can find out more about the Art and Agency project here: <https://lestari.org/case-studies/art-and-agency/>

Art and Energy are involved in a number of projects in the southwest of England focusing on arts, creativity and action on climate and ecological challenges. Find out more about their work here: <https://www.artandenergy.org/>

This project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council with support from the University of Exeter in 2023. We