

Climate Anxiety

10/17/2022

Climate Anxiety

By Jared Hawkins, Assistant Professor



Climate anxiety, or the fear or worry about the effects of climate change, is becoming increasingly common, especially for youth (Kaplan & Guskin, 2019; Panu, 2020). According to a recent survey by the American Psychological Association (2020), almost half of young adults report that stress about climate change affects their daily lives (American Psychological Association, 2020). Climate anxiety can increase negative thoughts and emotions, including sadness, fear, and anger (Marks et al., 2021). How can adults and youth healthily respond to their experiences of climate anxiety?

1. Express your concerns. People commonly avoid discussing the topic of climate change for fear of dismissive or argumentative reactions (Geiger & Swim, 2016). However, expressing your concerns in non-confrontational ways can help you connect with others, process your anxieties, and facilitate productive dialogues about environmental issues (Clayton, 2020).
2. Validate others' anxieties. Most climate anxiety is not unhealthy, but a normal response to real environmental threats (Panu, 2020). Responding to others' anxieties in a validating way can help others regulate their emotions and increase relationship trust.
3. Focus on hope. Ojala et al. (2012) found that optimism and trusting in humans' collective ability to address climate change can reduce negative emotions and increase motivation to make changes. On the other hand, denial or rumination about climate change have been found to be ineffective coping strategies (Ojala et al., 2012).

4. Seek experiences in nature. Spending time outside can help you maintain connection to nature, which has numerous mental health benefits, such as improved ability to manage difficult emotions (Martin et al., 2020).
5. Engage in efforts to mitigate climate change. Seeking education about climate change can help you learn productive actions that are within your control. Making environmentally conscious decisions and advocating for environmental sustainability can produce positive mental health effects (Bradley et al., 2014; Doherty, 2015).

For those with healthy levels of climate anxiety, feeling anxious about climate change is a useful response that can motivate you to take necessary actions to reduce environmental degradation (Panu, 2020). Listening to your anxiety and acting upon it in a healthy way, rather than trying to avoid it altogether, can help you play a meaningful role in promoting environmental sustainability.

References:

- American Psychological Association. (2020). Majority of US adults believe climate change is most important issue today. American Psychological Association Website.
- Bradley, G. L., Reser, J. P., Glendon, A. I., & Ellul, M. C. (2014). Distress and coping in response to climate change. *Stress and anxiety: Applications to social and environmental threats, psychological well-being, occupational challenges, and developmental psychology climate change*, 33-42.
- Clayton, S. (2020). Climate anxiety: Psychological responses to climate change. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 74, 102263.
- Doherty, T. J., & Clayton, S. (2011). The psychological impacts of global climate change. *American Psychologist*, 66(4), 265.
- Doherty, T. J. (2015). Mental health impacts. *Climate Change and Public Health*, 195-214.
- Kaplan, S., & Guskin, E. (2019). Most American teens are frightened by climate change, poll finds, and about 1 in 4 are taking action. *The Washington Post*.
- Marks, E., Hickman, C., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, E. R., Mayall, E. E., ... & van Susteren, L. (2021). Young people's voices on climate anxiety, government betrayal and moral injury: A global

phenomenon. Government betrayal and moral injury: A global phenomenon.

Martin, L., White, M. P., Hunt, A., Richardson, M., Pahl, S., & Burt, J. (2020). Nature contact, nature connectedness and associations with health, wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviours. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 68*, 101389.

Ojala, M. (2012). How do children cope with global climate change? Coping strategies, engagement, and well-being. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 32*(3), 225-233.

Panu, P. (2020). Anxiety and the ecological crisis: An analysis of eco-anxiety and climate anxiety. *Sustainability, 12*(19), 7836.

Wang, S., Leviston, Z., Hurlstone, M., Lawrence, C., & Walker, I. (2018). Emotions predict policy support: Why it matters how people feel about climate change. *Global Environmental Change, 50*, 25-40.