

Eco-anxiety:

A hot topic in a warming climate

CLINICAL QUESTION

How is climate change affecting mental health, and what can health care practitioners do?

BOTTOM LINE

“Eco-anxiety” is an emerging term used broadly to describe the psychological distress caused by direct exposure to environmental change, or exposure to news related to the climate crisis. This is a growing concern amongst young people. There is ongoing research on how best to manage eco-anxiety and other climate-related mental health concerns. Current approaches include exposure to nature, establishing community, taking climate action, and fostering resilience.

EVIDENCE

- A 2021 survey (n=1000) found that 78% of Canadian youths (aged 16-25) report that climate change affects their overall mental health, with 37% reporting that their feelings about climate change negatively impact their daily functioning. (Galway & Field, 2023).
- In a survey of 815 people living in an area affected by Hurricane Katrina, 14.9% met criteria for PTSD 5-8 months after the disaster, and 20.9% had PTSD 1 year later. (Kessler et al., 2008). A survey of survivors of wildfires in the past 10 years from Canada, America, and Australia (n=126) found 77.88% had symptoms of PTSD and 49.2% reported insomnia (Isaac et al., 2023).
- A 2012 study in Quebec found that increasing mean temperature and humidity was associated with increased use of emergency departments for mental and psychosocial problems. (Vida et al., 2012)
- A 2022 systematic review found that higher eco-anxiety was associated with other health issues, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, and PTSD (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022).
- An Australian survey in 2021 (n=2,453) found that experiencing anger about climate change (“eco-anger”) predicted better mental health outcomes, pro-climate behaviours and activism when compared to eco-anxiety and eco-depression. (Stanley et al., 2021)

STRATEGIES TO COMBAT ECO-ANXIETY

- The American Psychology Association suggests the following evidence-based strategies for combatting eco-anxiety (Clayton et al, 2017):
 - Build belief in one's resilience
A 2015 survey (n=812) found that participants with higher perceived resilience had lesser ongoing depressive and PTSD symptoms after the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. (Shenesey & Langhirichsen-Rholing, 2015).
 - Find a source of purpose
In a 2013 study of low-income mothers who survived Hurricane Katrina, Lowe et al. found that pre-disaster sense of purpose was a significant predictor of post-traumatic growth, suggesting that it helped the mothers adjust and grow after a disaster.
 - Support social networks
A study of 627 participants affected by the 2019-2020 Australian wildfires found that having stronger social group connections before the disaster was associated with less distress and more resilience 12-18 months after the disaster (Cruwys et al., 2024).
 - Engage with activism
In a systematic review, climate activism was found to decrease the impact of eco-anxiety on symptoms of depression (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022).
 - Spend time in nature
A 2021 meta-analysis of 50 studies concluded that nature-based interventions (particularly gardening, green exercise, and nature-based therapy) are effective at improving mental health outcomes (Coventry et al., 2021).
- The American Psychology Association identified key actions that mental health practitioners can take to help eco-anxiety, including being a climate-literate and up-to-date provider; engaging other professionals in climate discussions; being climate leaders in their communities; and supporting national and international activism efforts (American Psychological Association, 2017).

CONTEXT

- The term "eco-anxiety", although not listed in the DSM-5, has been emerging as an overarching term for the psychological distress associated with the threats and impacts of climate change and related natural disasters. Various other terms are used in the literature, including environmental grief, environmental distress, climate change anxiety, and solastalgia. (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022)
- While eco-anxiety is not yet a diagnosable illness, it is characterized by symptoms such as obsessive thoughts, existential dread, guilt about one's own impact, anger/frustration, grief, and sadness over the loss of natural environments, feelings of depression, anxiety, or panic, trouble sleeping or concentrating, and changes in appetite (Mental Health Commission of Canada).

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