

Eco-Anxiety and Psychological Well-Being Among Young Adults: A Review of Psychological Literature

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is one of the most global issues affecting the world. The effects of climate change have taken the world by storm on a physical, social and psychological level. One of the emerging global psychological reactions to environmental degradation is climate change anxiety/eco-anxiety. Anxiety about the current and future state of the planet is a stress reaction that negatively affects the mental health and well-being of individuals dealing with an unstable environment. University students are particularly vulnerable to climate change anxiety (CCA) due to the high levels of environmental awareness and recent exposure to coursework and media reports regarding environmental issues. This review briefly discusses and critically analyses the current studies related to relationships between climate change anxiety (CCA) and the mental health of young adults. The underlying theories and information regarding environmental psychology, mental health and climate change will be covered, in addition to providing definitions of what eco-anxiety is. It will be discussed in relation to the mental health of university students and other young adults and the models of psychological well-being associated with high and moderate levels of environment concern. Moreover, it will examine possible coping strategies, the benefits of environmental support networks, the association between resilience and environmental awareness, and effects of environmental involvement on exacerbating as well as alleviating emotional reactions to Climate Change Anxiety. Recommendations and possible solutions will be put forward in relation to possible interventions into the mental well-being of individuals experiencing extreme climate change anxiety. Key recommendations and suggestions for possible future studies will also be included.

Keywords: *Eco-Anxiety, Climate Change Anxiety, Psychological Well-Being, Young Adults, Environmental Psychology*

Climate change is regarded as a major global challenge of the 21st century. Scientific reports often cite several environmental issues that have developed as a result of climate change such as global warming and more frequent events of extreme weather such as flooding and droughts. Biodiversity loss, deforestation and environmental degradation have also been mentioned. They have physical, mental and social impacts on human health, economy and well-being (Berry et al., 2010; Weber, 2016). With climate

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change phenomena arising more frequently and severely over time, its psychological and emotional effects on human beings will grow as well.

It is only in the last decade or so that climate change has become a focus in the field of psychology. With the increasing awareness of the impact that humans are having on the planet there are a growing number of people experiencing a range of emotions as a result of climate change including fear, sadness, anger, concern for the future of the planet and other feelings (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). As a result of this growing awareness researchers have started to look into the psychological effects that climate change has on people and have come up with a phrase to describe it that is now widely used in academic and professional literature: eco-anxiety. Defined as persistent fear or anxiety about the ecological and climate instability facing the world (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2020).

Feel anxious about the state of the environment or worry about the future because of climate change? Find yourself feeling hopeless, worried or even distressed because of the state of the environment? Although being environmentally aware is important to ensure the planet's safety and preservation, excessive worrying about environmental issues is a form of emotional distress which can affect psychological functioning. Common signs of eco-anxiety are: – Persistent worry – Inability to cope with feelings of anxiety and/or distress – Increased anxiety upon exposure to environmental threats. Ref: Clayton S, Karazsia GT (2020) Ecological concern and anxiety for climate change—Conceptualizing the potential consequences of worry for planetary health *Climate and Health*, Vol. 13(1) Verplanken B, Roy D (2013) Conflict between emotional and societal concerns: The case of recycling *Sustainable Development*, Vol. 21(5) 302-310

In May, a Royal Society report suggested that young people and university students may be most affected by eco-anxiety, and the reasons why are not hard to fathom. In order to tackle environmental issues, these topics are being taught in schools, are frequently the subject of news reports and are regularly aired on social media, and as a result, young people can develop a heightened sense of the impact of man on the environment, and the potential effects of environmental damage on the future of the planet. Research has shown that young people tend to have a strong sense of environmental responsibility, care about the impact of human activity and worry about the future of the planet. - Hickman et al., 2021 - Ojala, 2012 Young adults often consider themselves to be both Accountable and Hopeless in relation to environmental issues, which means that they regard themselves as responsible for making changes that would serve to mitigate problems and at the same time feel that they have little actual impact on these processes (Strömberg et al., 2017). A feeling of accountability can create the basis for experiencing strain caused by ecological issues, which can manifest itself as anxiety, irritation or other kinds of mental tension, as was suggested in the study by Pihkala (2020) and is elaborated upon by Stanley et al. (2021).

It is crucial to understand the relationship between eco-anxiety and psychological well-being. Psychological well-being refers to the self-reported emotional experiences, level of life satisfaction, meaning in life, and psychological functioning (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Understanding the relationship between environmental concerns and psychological well-being can provide insights that can aid researchers and mental health professionals in addressing the impacts of climate change on individuals with climate change-induced distress.

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Enhanced understanding of eco-anxiety could impact the development of educational programs, mental health interventions and environmental action programs that help individuals to deal with climate change concerns while fostering environmentally helpful actions and psychological well-being.

Concept of Eco-Anxiety

Meet Eco-Anna, a mascot created to highlight the issue of eco-anxiety, a relatively new concept studied in psychology. Eco-anxiety refers to emotional pain and distress caused by worry about the current state of the environment and climate change. While eco-anxiety is technically an anxiety disorder, it is thought to be legitimate and proportionate to the threats people are facing.

Eco-anxiety is a state that refers to several psychological reactions, explains Canadian researcher Eric Darier. It is characterised by a multitude of emotions including fear for the future, sadness, anger and even feelings of guilt. Eco-anxiety is caused by worry for the future and fear of the state of the planet and its ecosystem due to environmental damage and the catastrophic effects of changes to the climate.

Eco-anxiety is often referred to as ecological grief or climate distress. Ecological grief describes the emotional response we experience when an environmental change affects us on an emotional level — essentially when we see an ecosystem being destroyed, and a species being driven to extinction, and feel immense grief and sadness over it.

The increasing number of media reports and scientific studies concerning climate change are associated with increasing levels of eco-anxiety. We argue that the sheer quantity of stressful environmental coverage is not the cause of their distress but rather serves to heighten their emotional and appraisal reactions to threatened environments.

Currently, eco-anxiety is often reduced to a psychological problem, a pathological condition. But many scientists today say that eco-anxiety can also be seen as a legitimate emotional response that tells us we care deeply about the environment and for the future of our planet.

Psychological Well-Being

Positive psychological functioning: General psychological well-being (GWB) refers to a broad spectrum of mental health that encompasses more than the absence of mental illness. GWB relates to the extent to which a person's emotional, cognitive and social functioning is positive.

One of the most influential frameworks of psychological well-being was developed by Carol Ryff. She articulated six dimensions of psychological well-being. The six dimensions are as follows:

1. Self-acceptance
2. Positive relationships with others
3. Autonomy
4. Environmental mastery
5. Purpose in life
6. Personal growth

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People with good psychological well-being generally feel more satisfied with their lives, experience more positive emotions and are more resilient, with improved coping mechanisms in relation to stress and enhanced interpersonal relationships.

This chapter explores how environmental factors affect the five components of well-being. First, the relationship between global environmental concerns and the basic components is examined. It is argued that fear of global warming can lower real life satisfaction and increase psychological stress. Finally, the chapter examines how individuals who participate in environmental protection gain a feeling of meaning and development.

Eco-Anxiety Among Young Adults

Young adults are among those most affected by eco-anxiety. A significant body of research suggests that university students tend to be environmentally aware and concerned about climate change.

Most schools within the education system cover environmental issues, so students get very well informed about the effects of climate change and environmental problems. While having this knowledge is very important to ensure that people act and feel more responsible in relation to our environment, it also has a very emotional impact.

Studies indicate that many young people are uncertain about what their future holds because of climate change. It has been argued that concerns about sustainability may affect career choices, life style options and long-term life planning.

The question of political identity is an evolving one for young adults, and environmental and climate protection activism is not uncommon in this group. Members may experience a sense of responsibility and empowerment through their activities within an environmental group.

Factors Influencing Eco-Anxiety

Several psychological and social factors influence the intensity of eco-anxiety.

- **Environmental Awareness:** People with more knowledge about climate change tend to be more emotionally engaged by climate change issues.
- **Media Exposure:** Frequent exposure to environmental news and documentaries may increase perceptions of environmental threat.
- **Personal Values:** Those who feel strongly about the environment are likely to be more affected when environmental damage occurs.
- **Social Support:** Support from friends, family, and community groups can help individuals cope with environmental concerns and reduce psychological distress.
- **Coping Strategies:** Researchers have identified various coping strategies used by individuals experiencing eco-anxiety.

Problem-focused coping involves taking action to modify or address the environmental problem in the actor's environment. Many examples of problem-focused environmental coping behaviours exist, such as reducing consumption of resource-intensive goods and energy; becoming involved in citizen movements to protect the environment; and supporting environmental policy-making efforts.

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Emotion-focused coping strategies are designed to reduce the level of emotional distress that an individual experiences. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies include mindfulness, expressing the emotion, and seeking social support.

Helping people to cope with eco-anxiety is a priority. Another way to do this is to help individuals find meaning in their lives through engagement with environmental protection and activism, by joining with others to take action.

Connect with an environmental community to lower feelings of isolation and increase your psychological resilience.

Implications for Mental Health and Education

Mental health professionals should recognize eco-anxiety as a legitimate emotional response rather than dismissing it as irrational worry. Counselling approaches can help individuals process environmental concerns and develop adaptive coping strategies.

Municipal departments for education and ecology, non-governmental organizations and universities should join their efforts to cope with the negative impact of eco-anxiety on young people. For example, the Vladimir region's universities have environmental education programs that coincide with special counselling services aimed at helping students develop stress-coping mechanisms and learn how to become active participants in environmental protection.

Encouraging students to participate in sustainability initiatives can empower them and reduce feelings of helplessness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the early literature about psychological consequences of environmental change, the major focus has been on emotional reactions to environmental degradation. In a series of papers, Albrecht et al. (2007) introduced the concept of "solastalgia" to describe emotional pain or distress people experience when they are confronted with the decay of their own land. The concept of solastalgia helped pave the way for understanding the new environmental concept of eco-anxiety.

A study delving into the psychological impact of climate change reveals that rising global temperatures can elicit a variety of emotional responses, ranging from fear, anger and guilt, to sadness. The study's authors, Arnett Doherty and Sonia Clayton, said emotional responses can occur because of the awareness of the environmental problem itself, concerns for coming generations and perceived challenges for maintaining the environmental system. The study was published in the journal *Climatic Change* in October 2011.

Illustrative photo: The new Climate Anxiety Scale was created by Clayton and Karazsia (2020) and assesses how people psychologically respond to climate change. Their research showed that climate anxiety is "a syndrome of cognitive emotional and behavioural modes associated with serious environmental disorder and discursive context of climate change anxiety" and that it is "manifest in two principal forms: cognitive-emotional and functional environmental symptoms. In particular, those with higher levels of climate anxiety report feeling anxious or distressed about the future a lot of the time and having trouble concentrating because they are worried about the environment.

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Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) Consider Ecological Grief as another form of psychological response to environmental loss. They describe Ecological Grief as the emotional pain people feel when they lose their ecosystem, species or special connection with nature. As one might expect, this feeling is likely to be heightened for those with the strongest emotional connections to the environment.

Other studies looked at the psychological effects of eco-anxiety. For that, researchers refer to the scale of psychological well-being developed by Ryff (1989). According to this, psychological well-being has six components, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations and self-acceptance. However, the way these components are affected by environmental issues is not yet fully understood.

According to Ojala (2012), young people seem to cope with feelings of worry regarding climate change by experiencing hope and doing activities for the environment. A way to achieve resilience and meaning through coping activities.

Stanley et al. (2021) found that people's emotional response to climate change is linked to their levels of environmental activism and engagement in behaviours related to climate change. For example, people with a moderate level of eco-anxiety are more likely to become engaged in conservation activities.

Too much eco-anxiety can have a negative effect on our mental health. According to Pihkala (2020) strong climate anxiety can leave us feeling powerless, stressed and depressed. As mentioned before, this feeling of powerlessness arises when individuals feel that the environmental issues that trigger their eco-anxiety are uncontrollable.

Research also examined the role of social support and collective action in reducing eco-anxiety. The authors found that involvement in environmental communities and sustainability activities can provide a feeling of connection to others and a shared sense of environmental stewardship that can help to alleviate feelings of loneliness.

In general, our literature review points out that eco-anxiety constitutes a psychological phenomenon with ambivalent effects on psychological well-being.

DISCUSSION

Recent developments related globally to climate change are briefly reviewed with particular reference to the emerging literature concerning eco-anxiety as a relevant psychological response. Environmental concerns are becoming increasingly relevant to the everyday lives of young adults and their levels of awareness concerning ecology are escalating.

There are a number of potential ways that eco-anxiety may influence psychological well-being, based on existing literature. For instance, the perception of environmental threats as being uncontrollable may elicit feelings of distress, worry and hopelessness (e.g. Brokl, 2008; Corbett, 2005; Orr, 1992). These feelings may then undermine psychological well-being through the reduction of global life satisfaction and/or the deterioration of emotional stability.

While worry about the environment often gets a bad rap, it may also have the positive effect of motivating behaviour that really can help bring about change and enhance well-being at

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the same time. People who turn their eco worries into positive action perhaps by getting involved in conservation projects or making other lifestyle changes to reduce their environmental footprint may experience not only a sense of greater life purpose but also psychological flourishing.

Schools, universities and the mental health sector have a key role to play in helping young people, as well as adults, to deal with eco-anxiety. Environmental education must be coupled with psychological assistance to help pupils develop stress-resistance mechanisms, and to foster hope and problem-solving competencies.

Nature can be a space for community engagement, environmental education and even therapy that turns people's eco-anxiety into action.

Future Research Directions

While research on eco-anxiety has increased in the last few years, there is still much to be uncovered. Researchers call for more longitudinal studies on how eco-anxiety develops and its effects on long term mental health.

It is crucial to continue this research to investigate possible cultural differences in environmental concern and psychological responses to climate change. Further studies may explore possible protective factors for the negative psychological effects of climate change, such as resilience and optimism, and participation in community activities to mitigate the impact of climate change.

CONCLUSION

Eco-anxiety is a relatively new term describing a psychological reaction to environmental destruction and climate change. While very high levels of eco-anxiety can potentially be harmful to mental health, people with manageable levels of eco-anxiety are more likely to be active in their communities and to change their behaviour to address environmental issues. Addressing the relationship between eco-anxiety and psychological well-being is important for the successful development of interventions aimed at mental health and sustainable behaviours. Building individuals' resistance to Eco-anxiety while at the same time enhancing their social networks, participation in the environmental movement, and sustainable behaviours can empower people to turn their worries about the state of the planet into engines for action and sustainability.

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Conflict of Interest

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