

Eco-anxiety: climate change affects our mental health – here’s how to cope

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A climate protest in Ontario, Canada. Ali Jabber/Shutterstock

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As a psychologist, I have been researching, writing and talking about psychological and social responses to climate change for over ten years. An increasingly common response appears to be extreme worry.

The University of Bath recently published the results of its [2023 Climate Action Survey](#). Out of almost 5,000 respondents, 19% of students and 25% of staff said they were “extremely worried” about climate change, while 36% and 33% stated they were “very worried”. Climate worry was higher compared with results from the previous year’s survey.

In 2021, a [global survey](#) of how children and young people felt about climate change found similarly high levels of worry. Most of the 10,000 participants reported feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, helplessness and guilt.

This phenomenon is called [eco-anxiety](#), and it’s no surprise that so many people suffer from it. Wherever we are, more of us are now starting to experience the effects of the climate crisis in some way, whether this be drought, food shortages, flooding or extreme weather. Calling the climate crisis a crisis has also gone mainstream after years of being on the margins, and is now front and centre of [wildlife documentaries](#), [films](#), [news media](#) and [celebrity culture](#).

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Eco-anxiety can’t be ‘fixed’

Being worried or anxious about the climate and ecological crisis is a [reasonable and predictable response](#) to a dangerous situation. We should expect an increase in distress and complex emotional responses.

This is an important point for me and many other psychologists and psychotherapists that engage with the climate crisis as a [profound societal and psychological challenge](#). It means that we should be wary of trying to accurately [measure](#) distress-related responses like eco-anxiety as individual traits.

When we do, the issue too easily becomes about the individual and the solution to fix them. This is often done by helping them adapt to reality through therapy and even medication.

But in framing the problem this way, we [collectively engage](#) in a form of denial. Can we, in good conscience, come up with “tips” for dealing with [eco-anxiety](#) if they are only aimed at finding ways to make the bad feelings go away and ignore their source?

I think we can. Distress can be overwhelming and debilitating. We do need to find ways to manage it both individually and collectively, while recognising that eco-anxiety is, in many ways, a “healthy” response.

Here are some tips for coping with eco-anxiety whenever the despair gets too much.

1. Acknowledge difficult emotions

Remind yourselves that anxiety and other emotions reflect a healthy psychological response to the fact that we are living in a time when so much of what we accept about the nature of a good life, progress, and what the future holds is unravelling.

By acknowledging these difficult emotions in yourself and others, you are less likely to engage in [denial and defence mechanisms](#). These mechanisms include minimising the scale of the problem, blaming others and deepening support for opposing viewpoints.

The counterproductive nature of these mechanisms in our ability to collectively deal with societal problems is [well-documented](#). For example, if everyone redirects the responsibility of climate action to others, then climate solutions are unlikely to get much traction.



Discourses of climate delay. Léonard Chemineau, CC BY-NC-ND

2. Recognise that it’s normal to feel overwhelmed

Doing things that reduce your carbon footprint is a common response to eco-anxiety. This might include recycling more or buying goods with reduced packaging. It can also be a stepping stone to other, more substantial lifestyle shifts like eating less meat or avoiding flying.

Much of this behaviour happens socially, so it can create conversations with others and shift social norms. The more we break the collective silence around the reality of the climate crisis, the more likely we are to see it as a shared problem. This in turn is the basis for political engagement and imagining a different kind of future.

But it is important to recognise that it is normal to feel overwhelmed both by the difficulty of removing ourselves from existing carbon-intensive lifestyle choices, such as shopping, holidays, driving, flying and buying stuff, and by the lack of visible results on a wider scale that follow from the changes we might already be making.

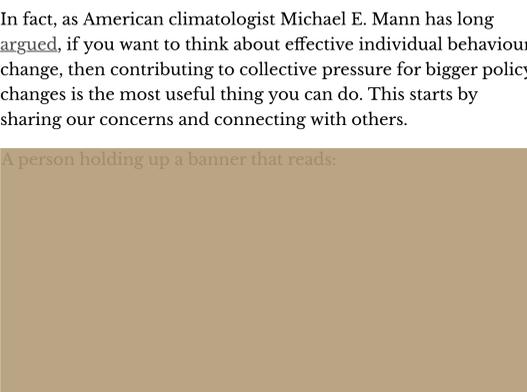
There is a [long history](#) of vested interests asserting the mantra of personal responsibility in maintaining the status quo. From those pushing tobacco to fossil fuel companies, a [key strategic emphasis](#) has been to “blame the consumer”, such as the endorsement of “tips” for reducing individual consumption.

This focus deflects from the need for bigger economic, social and structural change. After all, a structural problem requires a structural solution, not an individual one.

3. You’re not alone

It is best to think of eco-anxiety as something that we share, both collectively and culturally. We are in the midst of a planetary problem, with an accompanying planetary-scale emotional charge. You are tapping into what millions of other people are feeling too, however difficult it is to express.

In fact, as American climatologist Michael E. Mann has long [argued](#), if you want to think about effective individual behaviour change, then contributing to collective pressure for bigger policy changes is the most useful thing you can do. This starts by sharing our concerns and connecting with others.



Talking about your concerns with others is a good start. AndriiKoval/Shutterstock

One final tip. Never lose sight of why you care so much in the first place. Eco-anxiety stems from [biophilia](#) – a love of all life.

So slow down, keep [noticing nature](#) and voicing what you care about. Whatever loss we are already mourning, whatever we are scared of losing, there is still a world out there to care for.

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