

ISK CLIMATE CHANGE & HEALTH SERIES

Eco-anxiety Issue

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What is eco-anxiety?

Researchers are currently working on making the language around eco-anxiety more precise, asking questions like, what’s the difference between eco-anxiety and eco-anger? What about climate distress, environmental anxiety, or climate dread—is “eco” the right word if the anxiety extends beyond the ecological consequences of climate change? However, for the purpose of this month’s issue, we’ll use the following definition: eco-anxiety describes a constellation of emotions and states of mind that result from awareness of the negative impacts of climate change and environmental destruction.

Eco-anxiety is complex and can look a lot of different ways, which is one reason researchers are keen to pinpoint what kind of language we use to talk about it, and when. In one review of the literature, researchers created the word cloud on the right to show the words and phrases individuals use to describe their feelings in relation to eco-anxiety. The largest words/phrases are used most often and the smallest least often.



Word cloud showing language used around eco-anxiety (Coffey et al., 2021)

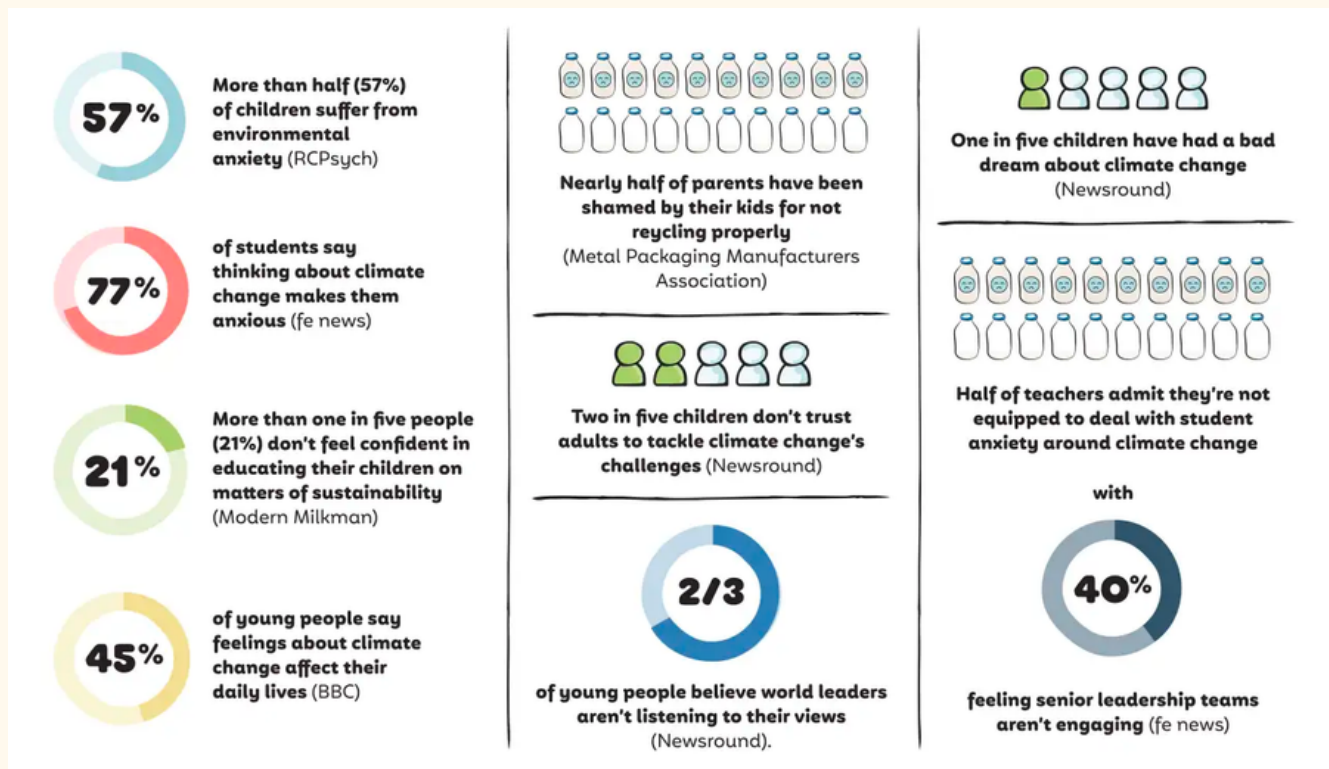
The eco-anxious mind

An individual experiencing eco-anxiety might display common signs and symptoms of generalized anxiety, including irritability, trouble sleeping, panic attacks, and reduced appetite (Coffey et al., 2021). Just as generalized anxiety tends to interact with different emotions, such as grief or anger, eco-anxiety does the same. Eco-anxious individuals might feel a sense of grief or loss in relation to the changing environment, especially when it comes to their homes. Indeed, *Solastalgia* describes the distress caused by environmental change or destruction in one’s home; in other words, we can experience a homesickness for the way things used to be. In Michigan, this might be related to having less snowfall in the winter or having pleasantly warm summer days increasingly replaced

by scorchers. It could also be related to pollution, such as the increased danger of exposure to chemicals or Harmful Algal Blooms in Michigan's Great Lakes and other waterways. Eco-anxiety can also be characterized by feelings of anger, helplessness, powerlessness, and guilt, where many people believe their everyday lives contribute to the harm they're anxious about, but do not feel they can change (or don't know how). These emotions can lead to an overall feeling of depression, or dread and paralysis in regards to the future.

Who experiences eco-anxiety?

While anyone can experience eco-anxiety, it is most common in children/young people, people who experience traumatic or otherwise devastating effects of climate change first-hand (e.g. natural disasters or loss of livelihood), and people who are involved in research, work, or activism around climate change and environmental destruction (because they are exposed to the facts and figures more often than others). Eco-anxiety can also create interpersonal tension when one individual experiences it at a higher level than another. The statistics below demonstrate the extent to which children and young people are impacted by eco-anxiety-related emotions, and how adults in their lives can struggle to support them, or struggle to feel that they are doing enough themselves.



Infographic showing statistics related to eco-anxiety in children and young people, as well as how these emotions interact with adults in their lives. Image from The Modern Milkman.

A double-edged sword

We probably agree that more anxiety for ourselves and our clients is not ideal. However, most eco-anxiety researchers are clear about one thing: we need eco-anxiety. The Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) explains this well, saying it “does not view eco-anxiety as a clinical condition, but an inevitable and even healthy response to the ecological threats we are facing...” (2022). Researchers emphasize that treating eco-anxiety as a pathology will only encourage denial, avoidance, and/or inaction. Similar to other healthy forms of anxiety, eco-anxiety is part of what pushes us to create solutions, take action, and make changes that help solve issues arising from climate change. In short, we are sensing danger, and we're not wrong. So, what's the best way to approach treatment of eco-anxiety?

Treatment of eco-anxiety

Experts agree that the best way to treat eco-anxiety is to address its underlying causes. Therefore, meaningful, collective action on mitigating and adapting to climate change is seen as an important step. As individuals, for ourselves and our clients, we can help enable this by supporting local social groups that mobilize for climate action, or by voting or advocating for measures (such as policies) that enable collective climate action.

In the meantime, it's important to address the individual emotions associated with eco-anxiety. Enabling ourselves and our clients to acknowledge and accept the reality of climate and environmental change and process the grief, despair, fear, anger, and other emotions that arise as a result, is crucial to reducing anxiety and paralysis. Joining and encouraging clients to join social groups with other individuals who show concern for environmental issues is also recommended, as researchers cite real or perceived isolation as a factor that exacerbates eco-anxiety.

How to Deal with Eco Anxiety

- Limit your media consumption
- Stick to a few key topics
- Let yourself experience anger
- Explore realistic lifestyle changes
- Be patient with yourself and others
- Connect with nature
- Get involved with your community
- Remember that you're not alone
- Use humor
- Journal
- Maintain hopeful thinking
- Practice self-care
- Learn and engage in resilience techniques
- Have an emergency plan(s)
- Attend therapy

Eco-anxiety coping mechanisms. From *Choosing Therapy*.

Here are some recommended resources for learning about and addressing eco-anxiety, including resources used in this newsletter:

[CPA's Handbook of Climate Psychology](#)

[Eco-anxiety TED Talk from Clover Hogan](#)

[Paper on eco-anxiety in children](#)

[The Psychology of Climate Anxiety](#)

[Eco-anxiety: what it is and why it matters](#)

[Eco-anxiety article from World Economic Forum](#)

[Eco-anxiety: what it is and how to deal with it](#)

[Paper on understanding eco-anxiety](#)

[Eco-anxiety treatment - from Psychiatric News](#)

Here are some resources for Kalamazoo-based climate action groups:

[Kalamazoo Climate Crisis Coalition](#)

[Citizens Climate Lobby - Kalamazoo chapter](#)

[Alliance for the Great Lakes](#)

Coping with eco-anxiety will likely be different for everyone. The list on the left offers some suggestions for reducing the negative impacts of eco-anxiety. Léger-Goodes et al. (2022) also offer a three-pronged approach to eco-anxiety:

1. **problem-focused coping**, where individuals focus on taking action and making solutions.
2. **emotion-focused coping**, where negative emotions associated with eco-anxiety (fear, guilt, loss, etc.) are processed and managed.
3. **meaning-focused coping**, where individuals simultaneously acknowledge the negative realities of climate change and reframe the problem to focus on positive aspects, find meaning in the challenge, and evoke positive emotions.



Let's talk

This month, talk to your colleagues about eco-anxiety:

- Do they experience eco-anxiety?
- Have they heard clients describing eco-anxiety?
- Do they have any ways of addressing eco-anxiety for themselves or with clients?
- Do they know of any social groups in Kalamazoo centered on climate change concern and/or action?
- Do they experience solastalgia?