

Eco-anxiety and Wildfire



EXTENSION
College of Agriculture,
Biotechnology & Natural Resources

Megan Kay¹, Caitlyn Wallace², Maria Sorensen,³ Christina M. Restaino⁴

¹Outreach & Content Coordinator, University of Nevada, Reno Extension, Living With Fire Program

²Licensed Clinical Social Worker/Therapist

³Program Assistant, University of Nevada, Reno Extension, Living With Fire Program

⁴Assistant Professor and Natural Resources Specialist, University of Nevada, Reno Extension

As the impacts of climate change and environmental disasters such as destructive wildfires become more apparent, negative feelings about these challenges is increasing. Psychologists call this “eco-anxiety.”



Smoke from wildfires covering the City of Sparks, Nevada. (Adobe Stock, by gchapel.)

What is eco-anxiety?

Eco-anxiety, defined by the American Psychological Association as “a chronic fear of environmental doom”, arises from strong feelings about the effects of climate change and the human activities that intensify it. This anxiety can manifest in a range of emotions, including guilt, grief, and other distressing emotions. Many people, especially those under 25, are experiencing eco-anxiety. A 2021 study found that 84% of young people worry about climate change (Hickman et al., 2021).

As climate change intensifies, so does the risk of extreme environmental events such as frequent, intense wildfires. When these fires threaten homes and lives, and wildfire smoke impacts air quality, it is natural to feel anxious about the future and the planet’s well-being. The spectrum of emotions associated with eco-anxiety range from mild concern to extreme distress. Some experience “anticipatory trauma,” fearing terrifying or life-threatening environmental disasters. Climate change can also lead to multiple forms of trauma, including current trauma from ongoing events, historical trauma and PTSD tied to past events, and secondary trauma commonly known as “compassion fatigue” that occurs when someone is significantly impacted by the trauma of others. As awareness of climate change’s consequences grows, so does anxiety, especially when people feel guilty or powerless in facing these challenges.

Coping with eco-anxiety

Coping with eco-anxiety involves various strategies, some more effective than others. Traditional anxiety management techniques focus on the person learning to see their fears as less threatening. These methods often fail with eco-anxiety because the dangers of climate change are pressing and cannot be dismissed. Common, but less helpful approaches include denial, avoidance, passive responses, and distancing which might offer temporary relief from overwhelming emotions but are not healthy long-term solutions. Instead, effective coping can involve acknowledging fear and distress as valid emotions and exploring ways to live with these feelings. Coping with eco-anxiety doesn’t require us to overcome fear, but to find constructive ways of living with it.

Strategies for coping with eco-anxiety:

Processing emotions

Learning to process your emotions is crucial for coping with eco-anxiety. Rather than trying to dismiss or overcome the range of emotions associated with eco-anxiety, it is helpful to acknowledge that distress is a natural and valid response to climate change. Distress itself is not the issue; the challenge is figuring out what to do with it. By exploring, understanding and sitting with these emotions, we can avoid seeking unhealthy coping mechanisms. Seeing a climate-aware therapist can help with support in exploring these feelings in a healthy way. You can also process your emotions through art, writing or music, or by talking with trusted friends and family.

Collective experiences and social support

Connecting with others who share your concerns about climate change can help alleviate feelings of isolation. Climate cafés offer spaces to express your feelings about climate change. Building a supportive social network can make eco-anxiety feel more manageable.

Cognitive interventions and the need for trust

Activating hope and trust in yourself and others to act on climate change can help maintain a positive outlook. Cognitive interventions focus on fostering positive emotions, such as hope, even while acknowledging the negative aspects of climate change. For example, while some species are endangered, others are being restored. Balancing awareness of both positive and negative developments can help reduce eco-anxiety.

Taking action

Building a sense of agency and empowerment through activism can be a powerful way to alleviate eco-anxiety. This might include community involvement, using alternative transportation, switching to green energy, educating others, and supporting climate-focused organizations. While there are many ways to act, it's important to choose actions that suit you and your community. It's also important to be mindful of potential negative feelings, such as disillusionment and burnout, that can arise from participating in direct action.

Preparing for wildfire

One effective way to get involved and help communities become more resilient to wildfires is to prepare your home and family and to work towards creating fire-adapted communities. Visit livingwithfire.org to learn how to prepare for wildfires. The Fire Adapted Nevada Partnership is also a great resource for learning about creating fire-adapted communities in Nevada.

Scan the QR codes to the right to learn more. Visit LivingWithFire.org for wildfire preparation tips, and forestry.nv.gov/fan for resources on building fire-adapted communities in Nevada.

What is a climate café?

A climate café is an informal, open and confidential space where people can share their emotional responses to climate change and environmental emergencies. It's a place for reflection and exploring thoughts and feelings, rather than focusing on taking action. Check your local events calendars for a climate café near you.



(Adobe Stock, by Marcos.)



Learn more about eco-anxiety

Scan the QR code to the right to listen to Episode 12 of the Living With Fire Podcast. In the episode, Caitlyn Wallace, LCSW dives into eco-anxiety, breaking down key terms and discussing insights and strategies for coping with eco-anxiety.



References:

- » Budziszewska, M., & Zuzanna Głód. (2021). "These Are the Very Small Things That Lead Us to That Goal": Youth Climate Strike Organizers Talk about Activism Empowering and Taxing Experiences. *Sustainability*, 13(19), 11119–11119. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131911119>
- » Climate Café 101. (2019). Climate Psychology Alliance North America. Climate Psychology Alliance North America. <https://www.climatepsychology.us/climate-cafe-101>
- » Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, E., Mayall, E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., & Susteren, L. van. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(12), e863–e873. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196(21)00278-3)
- » Lawrance, E. L., Thompson, R., Newberry, J., Page, L., Jennings, N. (2022). The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing: A Narrative Review of Current Evidence, and its Implications. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 34(5), 443–498. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2022.2128725>
- » Ojala, M. (2012). Hope and climate change: The importance of hope for environmental engagement among young people. *Environmental Education Research*, 18(5), 625–642. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2011.637157>
- » Togneri, H. (2022). From "powerless and alone" to finding "all the great people who care": a co-operative inquiry with young people exploring eco-anxiety and constructive ways of coping -ORCA. Cardiff.ac.uk. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/152217/1/Thesis%20-%20Hannah%20Togneri%20-%201720282.pdf>
- » Yadav, R., Kumar, D., Kumar, A., & Luthra, S. (2023). How does anticipatory trauma reaction and climate-friendly behaviour make an affect at the individual level? The role of social norms and self-efficacy. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 32(7), 4028–4045. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.3352>



EXTENSION
College of Agriculture,
Biotechnology & Natural Resources



The University of Nevada, Reno is committed to providing a place of work and learning free of discrimination on the basis of a person's age (40 or older), disability, whether actual or perceived by others (including service-connected disabilities), gender (including pregnancy related conditions), military status or military obligations, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, genetic information, national origin, race (including hair texture and protected hairstyles such as natural hairstyles, afros, bantu knots, curls, braids, locks and twists), color, or religion (protected classes). Where discrimination is found to have occurred, the University will act to stop the discrimination, to prevent its recurrence, to remedy its effects, and to discipline those responsible.

Copyright © 2024 University of Nevada, Reno Extension

A partnership of Nevada counties; University of Nevada, Reno; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture