

WHAT IS ECO-ANXIETY?

Adapted from InnerGreenDeal

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century and it can affect mental health either directly through the experience of environmental traumas or indirectly through the experience of emotional distress and anxiety about the future. Over the last two to three years, reported cases of eco-anxiety have risen dramatically across the world, especially as the threat of climate change and its environmental impacts have become more regularly reported in the media and online.

The term eco-anxiety relates to anxiety, that is specifically triggered by a fear of environmental damage or ecological disaster, but also involves other distinct components. Research identified 6 categories relating to eco-anxiety:

Worry: Worry of the future and next generations which included worry for one's own descendants and for the next generation.

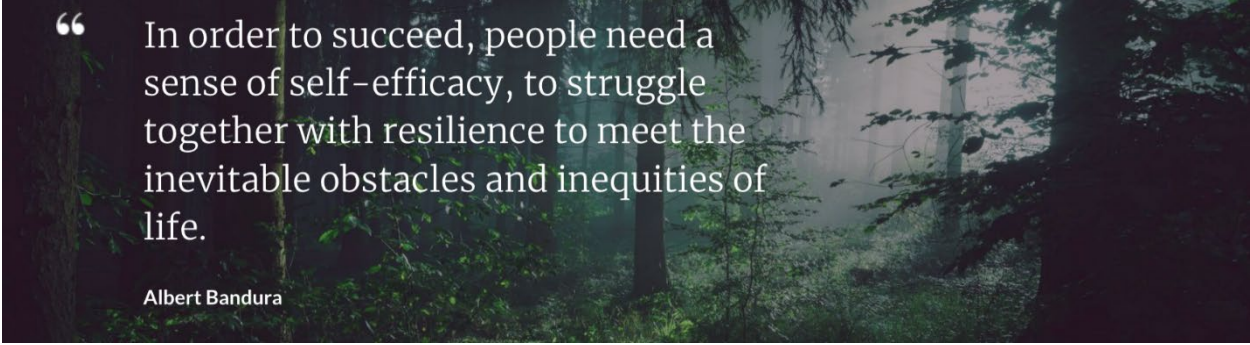
Empathy: Empathy as "secondary suffering": the participants experience negative emotions because they see others suffer, for example populations or animals.

Conflicts with family, friends, or colleagues: These conflicts can be derived from the different attitudes or behaviours regarding climate change mitigation, often accompanied by negative emotions, usually anger or frustration.

Being disturbed by the changes of the environment: Disturbances such as droughts or warmer summers can result in physical symptoms like swelling of body parts, panic attack-like symptoms associated with heatwaves or lead to confusion or uncertainty.

Mental health symptoms: These are in line with the symptoms of anxiety disorders such as panic disorder and mood disorders.

Helplessness and frustration: This is partly caused by the magnitude of the challenge and partly by the lack of control over it.



“ In order to succeed, people need a sense of self-efficacy, to struggle together with resilience to meet the inevitable obstacles and inequities of life.

Albert Bandura

If people suffer from serious anxiety, it will be difficult to be sustainable and capable either psychologically or physically. However, eco-anxiety may also be seen as a possibility, as a crucial signal that people feel the seriousness of the ecological crisis. Thus, eco-anxiety and climate anxiety emerge as both potentials and problems, depending on their manifestations.

There are of course very practical ways in which we can counteract tendencies of eco-anxiety:

- Meet like-minded people that are supportive.
- Cultivate gratitude for what is there.
- Move into common sustainable actions to sense self-efficacy.

Summary

Research suggests that climate change can lead to considerable negative mental health issues. These effects were amplified by the increasing coverage and circulation of media reports. The term eco-anxiety is the attempt to include all its various negative manifestations related to anxiety such as worry or helplessness. What has also shown is that although negative emotions in respect to climate change may be present, people often times have counteracting coping mechanisms in place. Especially retaining the sense of self-efficacy is helpful, which can be strengthened through action and utilising supporting social structures. Important to mention is that negative emotions can also function as a driving force for change or act as a mere determinant that the topic is important for an individual.

Sources:

Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/23/10149>

Identifying Types of Eco-Anxiety, Eco-Guilt, Eco-Grief, and Eco-Coping in a Climate-Sensitive Population: A Qualitative Study <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8875433/>