

# Understanding and Coping with Eco-Anxiety

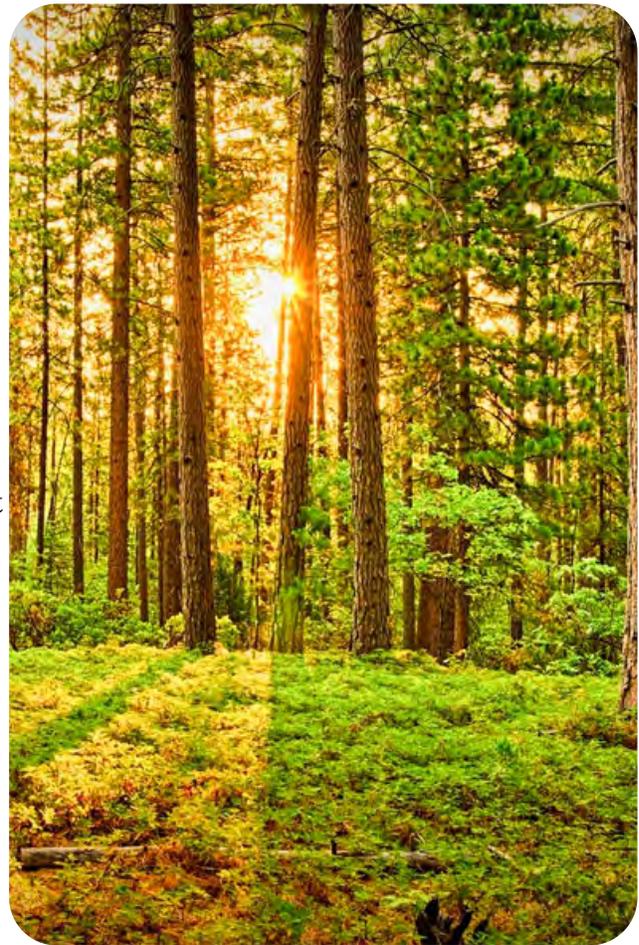
The natural environment is changing, and people are worried about what it means for the future. That worry, which is increasingly becoming severe enough to cause distress and dysfunction, is called *eco-anxiety*.

The American Psychological Association defines eco-anxiety (aka climate anxiety) as “a chronic fear of environmental doom.”<sup>1</sup> This fear can stem from direct experience of extreme weather and environmental change (e.g., floods, forest fires, hurricanes, drought) or exposure to climate change information through news media and other sources.<sup>2</sup>

## Eco-anxiety symptoms

While not yet a diagnosable mental illness, many experts characterize eco-anxiety through a variety of symptoms. These include:

- Obsessive thoughts about the climate
- Fatalistic thinking (“It’s too late to save the planet, why bother?”)
  - One-third of Canadians believe it’s already too late to curb climate change.<sup>4</sup>
- Existential dread
- Guilt related to your own carbon footprint
- Anger or frustration toward older generations or government officials who have not done enough to curtail climate change
  - The lack of progress on climate change in recent decades often fuels resentment toward those perceived to have misused their time and power to alter the environmental trajectory.
  - In a large survey of youth across 10 countries, 65 per cent agreed with the statement: **Governments are failing young people.**<sup>5</sup>
- Feelings of depression, anxiety, or panic
- Grief and sadness over the loss of natural environments<sup>6</sup>
  - This is sometimes called [solastalgia](#), a sort of homesickness that arises when a person’s home environment is damaged or otherwise altered by environmental change.
- Trouble sleeping or concentrating;
- Changes in appetite



## Who is most at risk?

**Youth.** Young people expect to suffer more of the consequences of climate change more fearful for their futures.<sup>7</sup>

**Indigenous peoples.** Nature plays an important role in both the culture and everyday Indigenous communities.<sup>8</sup>

**Marginalized communities with the fewest resources to deal with the crisis.** This includes groups such as displaced persons, people with existing mental or physical health conditions or people of lower socio-economic status.<sup>9</sup>

**People who work closely with the land.** Workers like farmers, fishers, and hunters as researchers may experience its changes more acutely.<sup>10</sup>

**People who live in higher-risk regions** face a greater risk of extreme effects climate change than others (e.g northern communities, coastlines).<sup>11</sup>

**First responders.** Those working on the front lines of weather disasters have first-hand experience with the consequences of the climate crisis.<sup>12</sup>



## How can I cope?

While there's no prescribed “cure” for eco-anxiety, sources suggest using the following strategies to help manage your symptoms.

### Supporting yourself

#### **Get the facts – but don't oversaturate:**

While it's useful to be informed, “doomscrolling” or submersing yourself in a stream of negative headlines can make eco-anxiety that feels distressing or debilitating. Consider resources like the [Climate Atlas of Canada](#) or [The Narwhal](#) for information.

**Acknowledge your emotions:** Don't deny the valid emotional responses you're having to climate change. It's natural to feel some worry, sadness, or stress when it comes to the future of the environment. Try to recognize these feelings as they arise and use them as motivation to take action. It's also OK to be frustrated by the hypocrisy that can arise with climate change activism. But spotting mixed messaging can also be a way to build your knowledge base.

**Focus on what you can control:** As with any anxiety, dwelling on “what if” scenarios may lead to feelings of helplessness and uncertainty. To get back a sense of control, focus on the actions you can personally take – including education or activism – to reduce your own carbon footprint.

**Connect with others who share your concerns:** Engage with like-minded people who can offer support. Research suggests that building a sense of community may help reduce the adverse mental health impacts of climate change.<sup>13</sup>

**Seek additional help when you need it:** If you're concerned about the impact your symptoms are having on your life, reach out for additional support. A conversation with a mental health professional and virtual resources like those from [Wellness Together Canada](#) can make a big difference. For Indigenous communities, [Hope for Wellness](#) offers a 24-7 Canada-wide helpline and chat service.

**75% of people living in Canada consider climate change a global emergency.<sup>3</sup>**

# Supporting others

## Encourage loved ones to voice their concerns:

If climate change is an unusual topic in your family or social circle, expressing feelings of eco-anxiety can feel taboo. To help break down that stigma, start the conversation, share your own concerns, and encourage others to do the same. When [talking to children](#), be prepared to answer their questions about climate change and help them understand what it means for them.

**Develop an action plan with friends:** Work with friends to create an action plan that contains steps and activities you can all feel good about. Doing so can help renew a sense of hope and control within the group and may also strengthen the social connections that promote and protect mental health.

**Share hope:** When you see or hear of an encouraging news story, initiative, or idea about curbing the effects of climate change, share it! Fostering a sense of hope can help channel eco-anxiety into action (instead of fatalism).

**Direct others to mental health resources when they need them:** If you're concerned about a loved one's changes in mood, motivation, or day-to-day functioning, consider directing them to the additional mental health resources mentioned in the previous section.



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