

Climate anxiety vs general anxiety

Background:

- Climate change is a present reality that means significant and lasting changes in the Earth's climate, particularly related temperature, precipitation, and weather patterns. This includes extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, storms, and wildfires.
- It is primarily driven by human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes, which increase the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.
- The feelings arising from the climate crisis can be very diverse; therefore, we use the term "climate anxiety" as an umbrella term that encompasses all reactions and feelings stemming from climate change. This includes all the emotions that people may experience in response to the impacts of climate change and the uncertainty surrounding the future of the planet.
- Below, we outline the differences between other anxieties and climate anxiety to help understand their varying impacts, origins, and approaches needed.

The difference with other anxiety:

- When it comes to a general anxiety-inducing stimulus, it is possible to reframe the size of the threat. However, in the case of climate anxiety, this is not appropriate. In this case, it is important to address how to cope with the anxiety and to reframe how a person can live and manage in this situation.
- Climate change as a stressor differs from other anxiety-inducing stimuli for the following reasons: 1) the existence of a real threat, 2) its continuously evolving nature (unlike an exam for which all study materials are known in advance), and 3) its globally shared nature, which is not the case for many other anxiety-inducing stressors (Clayton 2020)
- If other anxieties do not motivate reducing one's environmental footprint and making environmentally aware choices, then climate anxiety may lead to more environmentally considerate behaviors (Sangervo *et al* 2022).
- Other anxieties are unlikely to challenge the fundamental aspects of life, social systems, and justice to the same extent as climate anxiety. This is why daily activities may appear to be futile. For instance, one might question the purpose of attending school, planning for retirement, or planting trees in their garden for the future if a healthy and livable environment is at risk. (Dodds 2021)

- In cases of general anxiety, there is a fear of the unknown; however, when it comes to the changes caused by the climate crisis, there are no positive outcomes; the changes to our planet are mostly harmful. (Zhang *et al* 2011)
- General anxiety is a subjective fight-or-flight response to a situation that may feel real to one person but not to another. However, we all experience changes caused by the climate crisis, such as heatwaves, in similar ways, even though we may perceive them differently.
- In the case of climate anxiety, it is understood that negative changes are imminent, and their extent is likely to be much greater than what we are currently experiencing. In contrast, with other forms of anxiety, one cannot be truly certain about the occurrence of future negative events. For example, anxiety before an exam, which may not go poorly at all, differs from the anxiety regarding whether I will have access to clean drinking water and sufficient food in 20 years.
- Climate anxiety is influenced by various societal and systemic factors, including climate policies. For example, the choices made by governments can either reduce or increase feelings of anxiety about climate change. This means that climate anxiety is not just a personal issue; it is also connected to broader social issues. The feelings people have about the climate crisis are linked to fields like social sciences, environmental sciences, and psychology. (Whitmarsh 2022)
- Climate anxiety varies based on the situation. It can be shaped by how society responds to climate change. If people ignore it or think it's not a big deal, anxiety may be higher. However, if society recognizes that climate change impacts our everyday lives, anxiety may be lower. (Crandon *et al* 2024)

Why is it important to address climate anxiety?

- Young people are more aware of climate change due to the information available to them. While this awareness may lead to climate anxiety, it is not ethical to withhold information about climate change and environmental conditions. Instead, we should focus on teaching them how to cope with the negative feelings that may arise.
- To ensure that an adult does not become overwhelmed during a conversation with an environmentally conscious young person—something that often happens today—the young person should not have to provide emotional support to the adult instead.
- A young person may struggle to handle strong emotions. If an adult ignores or belittles their worries and feelings, it can cause the young person to lose trust. As a result, they might be less willing to share their thoughts and feelings with others later on.
- It is normal to have reactions and difficult feelings related to the climate crisis, however, it is important that these feelings do not become permanent or interfere with daily life and coping mechanisms.

- When individuals experiencing climate anxiety have access to supportive conditions—such as support, emotional regulation skills, opportunities for meaningful action, distance from constant information— climate anxiety can serve as a powerful catalyst for the necessary changes at both individual and societal level (Maduneme 2024).

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