Grow Waitaha

Climate Anxiety and Young People

Supporting coping and resilience

May 2023

Acknowledgements

Authors:

Jordan Mayes (he/him)
Gabrielle Wall (she/her)

This document outlines the wellbeing and behavioural impacts of climate change on young people, in particular, the anxiety that they experience in response to climate change and its related phenomena. This is intended to support knowledge in the area of ākonga wellbeing and help educators provide support to young people experiencing climate anxiety.

The knowledge of environmental impact and loss because of climate change can be particularly debilitating for young people who feel a loss of control over the situation. The related psychological and behavioural outcomes can affect daily life for young people, and it's important that educators have some knowledge on coping and resilience that may help young people navigate a changing world. This report includes some recommendations for supporting young people to manage their anxiety surrounding climate change.

Grow Waitaha is a multi-year project designed to support schools in post-earthquake greater Christchurch through citywide educational transformation. This resource was written in 2022 by Jordan Mayes and Gabrielle Wall for the use of educators across Aotearoa.

We welcome ongoing feedback on how you have used this resource and what suggestions you would like to contribute. For feedback and suggestions please email:
jordan@dandgconsulting.co.nz or gabrielle@dandgconsulting.co.nz

Table of Contents

Climate Anxiety, Wellbeing and Behaviour 4

- Perceptions and Concerns of Ākonga 4
- The Effect of Climate Anxiety on Wellbeing 6
- The Effect of Climate Anxiety on Behaviour 7

Coping and Emotional Regulation 8

Environmental Action and Community 10

Other Guidelines in Research and Media 12

References 15

Climate Anxiety, Wellbeing and Behaviour

Climate anxiety, often referred to as 'eco-anxiety' in the literature, is "the anxiety related to current and predicated environmental damage or loss, particularly from the climate crisis" (Ojala et al., 2021, p. 37). It is not only an emotional response, but a combination of emotional responses and a cognitive knowledge that we (humans) have both caused the climate threat and are failing to sufficiently act to reduce it (Hickman, 2020). This positions people as both causative and helpless, especially as we are aware of the consequences of failing to act.

Ojala et al. (2021) relate climate anxiety to a sense of existentialism regarding:

1. The threat to the future of humanity.
2. Moral questions about whether it is right to live the way we do in relation to nature and other people.
3. Spiritual considerations of whether there is any point being an active citizen considering the seriousness and complexity of the problem.

> Climate anxiety is "the anxiety related to current and predicated environmental damage or loss, particularly from the climate crisis."
>
> Ojala et al., 2021

In a similar vein, young people's fears around climate change revolve around known and unknown future effects – the fear of losing control (Haase, 2017). While the effects of climate change may be considered quite debilitating, it is developmentally appropriate for someone to experience anxiety in the face of change and disruption, typical anxiety-producing stimuli (Clayton, 2020; Khan, 2021).

"It is important to avoid pathologizing the emotional response to climate change. A focus on mental health can imply that the emotional response is inappropriate, as well as directing attention towards individuals and away from the social causes and possible social responses to climate change." (Clayton, 2020, p. 3)

To suggest that young people are "irrationally anxious" in terms of experiencing climate anxiety is incorrect and potentially harmful, as it invalidates their emotional responses to anxiety-producing stimuli that they need to address. The Office for Climate Education (2022) suggest that it is important to consider anxiety when interacting with young people and supporting adaptive responses.

Perceptions and Concerns of Ākonga

Results from a study of 10,000 young people across 10 countries shed some light on the extent of climate anxiety in young people (Hickman et al., 2021). The countries included the UK, Finland, France, USA, Australia, Brazil, Portugal, India, Philippines, and Nigeria, and assessed 1,000 16–25-year-olds in each area to better understand the feelings, thoughts and functional impacts associated with climate change.

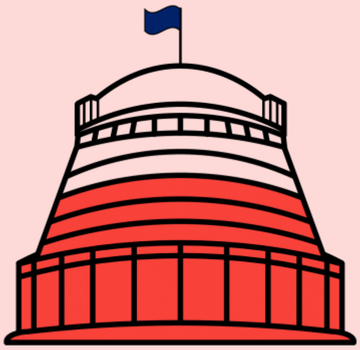
84% at least moderately worried about climate change

45% indicated their feelings about climate change affected their daily life and functioning

75% have negative thoughts about the future

55% have negative thoughts about having fewer opportunities than their parents

39% have negative thoughts about having children in the future due to climate change



65% thought government was failing young people

64% thought government was lying about the impact of actions taken

60% thought government dismisses young people’s distress

58% thought government response is betraying them and future generations

This reveals some of the cognitions of young people in response to climate change and how widespread the issue may be. This did not include (and cannot necessarily be compared to) a New Zealand population of young people but indicates the widespread opinions of young people feeling that current efforts are failing them and contributing to their negative feelings about the future.

The future is Ours

The Effect of Climate Anxiety on Wellbeing

45% of young people indicated that their feelings about climate change affected their daily life and functioning.

In terms of student wellbeing, the links are still being explored and tested. Negative emotional states associated with the experience of climate anxiety are likely to negatively impact wellbeing, and for young people, a lack of emotional regulation can heighten the anxiety response (Ojala et al., 2021). Hickman et al. (2021), in their study of 10,000 young people, also assert that inadequate government responses will continue to negatively affect mental health and wellbeing in young people. In that same study, 45% of young people indicated that their feelings about climate change affected their daily life and functioning, indicating a significant impact in overall wellbeing.

Climate anxiety has been associated with the concept of *grief*. Grief is the struggle and sadness of loss of relationships, whether people or places, and is an aspect of coping (Ojala et al., 2021). Teaching young people to grieve and allowing them to do so is important, but long-term eco-grief can result in negative outcomes.

In terms of wellbeing, it is also important to consider the effects of climate change on groups of people who are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Qualitative studies reveal patterns of more profound negative emotions, such as anxiety and grief, in groups of people who are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change and weather-related phenomena (Ojala et al., 2021). There is, however, a lack of research on how climate anxiety differentially impacts vulnerable populations, including people of colour, indigenous populations, those in island nations etc.

Resilience should also be considered alongside wellbeing, as climate change is a long-term stressor. According to a US study by Derr (2017), resilience in the face of climate change is fostered by access to nature, family and friends, and supportive networks. Coping and community are discussed in the following sections.

> Resilience in the face of climate change is fostered by access to nature, family and friends, and supportive networks.
>
> Derr, 2017

The Effect of Climate Anxiety on Behaviour

Student behaviour is also an important consideration when examining the effects of climate anxiety on young populations. As discussed earlier, climate anxiety is not necessarily a bad thing and should be considered developmentally appropriate for young people facing threatening stimuli. The anxiety experienced can be a motivator: Clayton (2020) asserts that climate anxiety can motivate behaviour, encouraging young people to act. Alternatively, some may experience *eco-paralysis*, and be unable to take effective action. The mechanisms of this are relatively unknown and require additional research. Clayton (2020) argues that self-efficacy, a perception of one's ability to *cope,* may be a more important predictor of behaviour; thus, those who are paralysed to act may be in a state of mind that nothing they do will make a difference.

Coping and Emotional Regulation

Research looking at mitigating the effects of climate anxiety has largely examined the effects of *coping*. Ojala (2012) highlights three coping strategies commonly employed in the face of climate anxiety:

Coping Strategies Commonly Employed for Climate Anxiety	
Problem-focused coping	Encourage environmental efficacy. This may have positive and negative consequences. If the goal is to encourage environmental efficacy, it may be positive for wellbeing. Young people who tend to experience negative wellbeing when thinking about climate change may experience increased feelings of stress and depression when engaging in problem-focused coping. The Office for Climate Education (2022) suggest that problem-focused strategies can leave people feeling discouraged and disillusioned rather than empowered.
De-emphasising the seriousness of climate change	Children adopting this approach experience a lower degree of environmental efficacy and do not behave as pro-environmentally as those adopting other strategies. It may alleviate anxiety to de-emphasise the seriousness, but it will not inspire positive change (which may be worse over time).
Meaning-focused coping	This is centred around micro-level coping by activating positive emotions rather than removing negative emotions. Children adopting this strategy experienced fewer negative effects from climate change and greater optimism and feelings of life satisfaction. Young people had a stronger sense of purpose than those using problem-focused approaches.

This emphasises the importance of acknowledging and addressing the climate crisis. Haase (2017) suggests that prolonged reflection in combination with hope and coping advice from caregivers and support people can have a healing effect, which resonates with the concept of meaning-focused coping. Clayton (2020) also suggests that hope based on optimism (rather than denial) mitigates negative feelings from climate change.

> Hope based on optimism (rather than denial) mitigates negative feelings from climate change.
>
> Clayton, 2020

The Office for Climate Education (2022) also suggests strengthening connections to nature and the outdoors as a means of coping. This can be therapeutic and improve wellbeing.

Khan (2021) suggests that emotional regulation can be an effective strategy to manage emotions such as fear and worry in the face of climate anxiety. They suggest strategies such as mindfulness, breath work, and focusing on offscreen/relaxing activities. Clayton et al. (2017) recommend cultivating self-regulation skills in people to reduce ongoing negative feelings that may impact long-term wellbeing. Emotion-focused strategies with young people help to manage the emotional side of climate anxiety, but it does not necessarily result in behavioural changes or actions that bring about change (Office for Climate Education, 2022).

> They suggest strategies such as mindfulness, breath work, and focusing on offscreen/relaxing activities. Clayton et al. (2017) recommend cultivating self-regulation skills in people to reduce ongoing negative feelings that may impact long-term wellbeing.

HELP YOURSELF TO THE PANTRY
Please don't harvest directly from the Garden you might ruin a childs projec

Environmental Action and Community

Climate anxiety motivates behaviour, and in turn, climate action. This validates worries while building confidence through empowerment (Sheldon-Dean, 2022). This can include small actions such as composting or recycling, to larger activities such as activism and protest, or engaging in local politics. Wilkinson & Wray (2021) suggest that people cannot focus on action alone to alleviate anxiety. Resources and support are necessary, including building community.

Clayton et al. (2017) assert that local experiences are important to support and engage in climate solutions as young people can relate to them better. A focus on the local environment and local initiatives may be particularly important for engaging young people in climate action as it makes the problem more tangible. There may also be a union of education and 'green' practices through learning about and encouraging things like sustainable transport and clean energy (Clayton et al. (2017).

People cannot focus on action alone to alleviate anxiety. Resources and support are necessary, including building community.

It is important to note that although engaging in activities in nature may be positive for mental health, this is not considered a long-term strategy and is a mitigating factor of anxiety only (Clayton, 2020).

Community plays an important role in supporting wellbeing. This acknowledges climate anxiety as a collective issue, and young people develop empathy and promote solidarity through events and collective actions (Office for Climate Education, 2022). This may reduce feelings of isolation, fear, and disillusionment. Schools might consider the role of Education Out of The Classroom (EOTC) opportunities to have students work together in authentic contexts.

One example of building community is the Climate Action Campus established in Christchurch. This idea was developed in response to the degree of climate angst from young people in Christchurch. Students may learn and work together in areas that align with their interests. Building a community and engaging in community action may be instrumental in alleviating climate anxiety while inspiring change. Read more about this campus and its background in a Stuff article by Walton (2021), included in the references.

Young people develop empathy and promote solidarity through events and collective actions.

Other Guidelines in Research and Media

Whalley and Kaur (2020) discuss worry and anxiety during global uncertainty more generally without a targeted focus on climate anxiety, but their ideas ring true for young people experiencing climate anxiety in the face of ongoing news of climate change. They recommend differentiating between real problem worries (things that require solutions) and hypothetical worries (catastrophising), as well as normal worry (helps solve problems) and excessive worry (creates exhaustion).

Recommendations:

- **Maintaining balance in life** – balance activities that provide pleasure, achievement, and closeness with others to avoid excessive rumination.
- **Practice identifying 'real problem' worry vs. 'hypothetical worry'** – If a problem cannot be solved right now, it may be better to focus on something else, including strategies to cope.
- **Practice postponing worry** – Not everything can be done right now. Set time aside to worry and postpone hypothetical worries.
- **Speak to yourself with compassion** – Write down your worries and provide alternative thoughts.

- **Practice mindfulness** – For example, focus on the gentle movement of your breath or the sounds you hear around you.

Khan (2021) also provides some guidelines for helping to reduce anxiety and empower young. people:

- **Discuss solutions** to build optimism and hope
- Show children that **it is not all on them** – they do not necessarily have individual responsibility for the climate crisis
- **Organise community activities**, e.g., local park clean-ups, petitions, book readings
- Let them know that you (adults) are **prepared**, and give them a **sense of control**
- **Spend time in nature** to regulate and increase motivation and hope.

Kamenetz (2022) provide six tips to help adults talk to children about climate change:

1	BREAK THE SILENCE – TALK WITH OTHERS	Talking to rangatahi about climate change (Kamenetz, 2022)
2	GIVE RANGATAHI THE BASIC FACTS	
3	GET OUTDOORS, CONNECT FACTS TO NATURE	
4	FOCUS ON FEELINGS – EMOTIONS-FOCUSED COPING, BECOME EMOTIONALLY LITERATE AND HAVE A TOOLBOX OF COMFORTING ACTIVITIES FOR WHEN CHILDREN ARE ANXIOUS	
5	TAKE ACTION – PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP	
6	FIND HOPE AND DEVELOP RESILIENCE	

References

Clayton, S. (2020). Climate anxiety: Psychological responses to climate change. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 74*, 1-7.

Clayton, S., Manning, C. M., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. (2017). *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance.* Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica.

Derr, V. (2017). Resilience in the Face of Climate Change. In Clayton, S., Manning, C. M., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance.* Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica.

Haase, E. (2017). Children's Emotional Responses to Climate Change. In Clayton, S., *Mental Health, and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance* Manning, C. M., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica.

Hickman, C. (2020). We need to (find a way to) talk about… Eco-anxiety. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *34*(4), 411-424.

Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, E. R., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B, Mellor, C., & van Susteren, L. (2021). *Young people's voices on climate anxiety, government betrayal and moral injury: a global phenomenon.* Retrieved from SSRN: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3918955

Khan, G. (2021, October 29). *Helping kids deal with climate anxiety.* Retrieved from National Geographic: https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/family/2021/04/helping-kids-deal-with-climate-anxiety

Khan, G. (2022) Think of the Children: The Young and Future Generations Drive U.S. Climate Concern - This Is Planet Ed 6 Tips 4: https://www.thisisplaneted.org/blog/think-of-the-children-the-young-and-future-generations-drive-u-s-climate-concern

Office for Climate Education. (2022, January 24). *Climate Change Education: How to address eco-anxiety with students?* Retrieved from Office for Climate Education: https://www.oce.global/en/news/climate-change-education-how-address-eco-anxiety-students

Ojala, M. (2012). How do children cope with global climate change? Coping strategies, engagement, and well-being. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 32*, 225-233.

Ojala, M., Cunsolo, A., Ogunbode, C. A., & Middleton, J. (2021). Anxiety, worry, and grief in a time of environmental and climate crisis: A narrative review. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources, 46*(1), 35-58.

Sheldon-Dean, H. (2022). *Kids and Climate Anxiety: Helping them handle big worries in healthy ways.* Retrieved from Child Mind Institute: https://childmind.org/article/kids-and-climate-anxiety/

Walton, S. (2021, April 7). *Former Christchurch mayor works with schools on shared 'climate action campus'.* Retrieved from Stuff: https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/124764693/former-christchurch-mayor-works-with-schools-on-shared-climate-action-campus/

Whalley, M., & Kaur, H. (2020). *Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty*. Online: Psychology Tools Limited.

Contact Details

www.growwaitaha.co.nz

growwaitaha@gmail.com

www.facebook.com/growwaitaha

Grow
Waitaha