



THE RISE OF ECO-ANXIETY

March 2021 Report

A snapshot of how young people in over 50 countries are responding mentally and emotionally to the climate crisis.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Force of Nature is a youth non-profit mobilising mindsets for climate action. Through our virtual programmes, we cultivate inner-agency, deliver tools in how to create change, and create communities at scale. We support leaders across business, education and policy to centre young people in delivering intergenerational climate solutions.

— special thanks to the entire **Force of Nature Team** ; including Phoebe Hanson, Alejandra Arias, Max Offerman, and Julia Sams. To Force of Nature's advisors, including **Caroline Hickman** of the Climate Psychology Alliance, as well as the **Report from the American Psychological Association** in conjunction with **Climate for Health and EcoAmerica** for their *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance* released in March 2017.

A NOTE FROM FORCE OF NATURE

This report is released as a collaborative effort on behalf of Force of Nature to amalgamate and contribute to the growing body of knowledge about how climate change profoundly affects mental health, especially amongst young people. We've now spoken to over 500 young people (ages 15 - 25) around the world about their experiences with climate change - both as a perceived and direct threat.

We draw on a combination of scientific evidence and lived experience to weave an authentic narrative that is approachable and actionable. Force of Nature is here to be a space of learning for young people to find effective solutions to the challenges defining our lives. Open sharing of scientific knowledge is imperative in the fight against the climate crisis. *All relevant references to non-original work are indicated.*



01

Eco-Anxiety: Our Briefing

“Environmental disaster is the biggest mental health issue of our lifetimes. And in our war against nature, young minds are the collateral damage.”

CLOVER HOGAN

TEDxLondon, “Denial or despair? How to rewrite your climate change story”

Young people today have not created this reality; we’ve inherited it. And we’re told we are the last generation with a chance to save the fate of our planet. It should come as no surprise, then, that there is an epidemic of mental health problems.

“Eco-anxiety” is on the rise, and young people seem to be some of the worst-affected. Research from 2019 shows that in the UK, 70 percent of 18-24 year-olds were experiencing “eco-anxiety” – helplessness, anger, insomnia, panic and guilt (Friends of the Earth, 2020).

definition box

eco-anxiety

feelings of helplessness, anger, insomnia, panic and guilt toward the climate and ecological crisis. Persistent and intrusive worries about the future of the Earth.

At Force of Nature, we’ve witnessed the same on a global scale. We’ve been talking to students in over 50 countries – from Tel Aviv through Jakarta; New York to Managua – and all of them have shared this existential dread that keeps them up at night.

It has become clear that this is not a small, bothersome worry; this is not an uncomfortable thought to be pushed aside; this is a mental health crisis demanding our **urgent attention, and action.**

This is true both of young people experiencing the direct impacts of climate change, such as flooding in Jakarta or fires in Australia, as well as young people for whom climate change is an *anticipated* threat.



“I feel constant anxiety that the climate is seriously worsening but there seems to be almost nothing you can do about it as an individual... and so many people don’t seem to care.”

CATRINA
19 YO

At Force of Nature, we've been collecting quantitative and qualitative data on the state of eco-anxiety amongst the young people in the world, sitting down with youth from all walks of life each week: young professionals, high school students, undergraduate laureates, artists, musicians, athletes, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters. The voices change, but the message is universal: **We need hope.**

The theory is simple: **we cannot run from our feelings anymore than we can run from the climate crisis.**

QUANTITATIVE INSIGHTS

Participants were asked to rank their response to a number of questions pertaining to their emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to climate change. Responses were collected from **over 500 students** in **52 countries**.

Some questions that participants were asked include...

A

I feel that climate change negatively contributes to my mental health.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 strongly agree

When I think about how much has to be done, I feel:

Exhausted 1 2 3 4 5 Energized

B

C

I understand why it is so difficult for me to take action against climate change.

strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 strongly agree

I would describe my overall feelings about the future as:

Pessimistic 1 2 3 4 5 Optimistic

D



I EXPERIENCE A FEELING OF HOPELESSNESS WHEN I THINK ABOUT

CLIMATE CHANGE.

4/5

I FEEL THAT FEAR OF CLIMATE CHANGE NEGATIVELY CONTRIBUTES TO MY MENTAL HEALTH.

3.9/5

I FEEL IN CONTROL OF MY RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE - IN OTHER WORDS, I DON'T FEEL OVERWHELMED BY IT.

2.9/5

I FEEL LIKE I HAVE A CLEAR IDEA OF HOW I CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SOLVING CLIMATE CHANGE.

2.9/5

I FEEL THAT MY INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS MAKE A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE.

3/5

Participants were scored based on **five main criteria:**

1. Understanding of eco-anxiety
2. Clarity on barriers to action
3. Autonomy over their personal response to climate change
4. Motivated mindset
5. Ability to tap into resilience



only

26%

of participants agreed that they “feel like I have a clear idea of how I can contribute to solving climate change.”

The response was clear:

+70% Participants experienced a feeling of **hopelessness** when they thought about climate change.

Fear of climate change negatively contributed to the mental health of the individuals surveyed.

On a personal level, they felt overwhelmed, lost and **powerless.**

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

The interaction between climate change and psychosocial changes can be difficult to grasp. The best way to understand it is to hear it, directly from those who are affected. The participants were invited to share their experiences with eco-anxiety. These interviews then underwent a discourse analysis for common themes.

Fear for future generations:

53 respondents cited 'future' when defining 'eco-anxiety' and the extent to which it resonates with them. Responses referred to fears of no future planet, a disastrous state of the planet and the lives of our future children and grandchildren.

“I don't want to have children because I don't know what kind of world I'll be bringing them into.”

YAASHREE
19 YO

Pervading sense of helplessness:

16 respondents used the word 'helplessness' to describe their relationship with 'eco-anxiety'. Responses primarily referred to personal turmoil surrounding inaction when it comes to the climate crisis and the impending thought of the destruction of our planet.

“I would define eco-anxiety as a sense of helplessness and lack of personal power in the oncoming climate crisis, combined with the knowledge that it will deeply impact my life [...] I have experienced eco-anxiety since I was an adolescent, and have experienced suicidal ideology as well as intense anxiety as a result.”

ANNA
20 YO

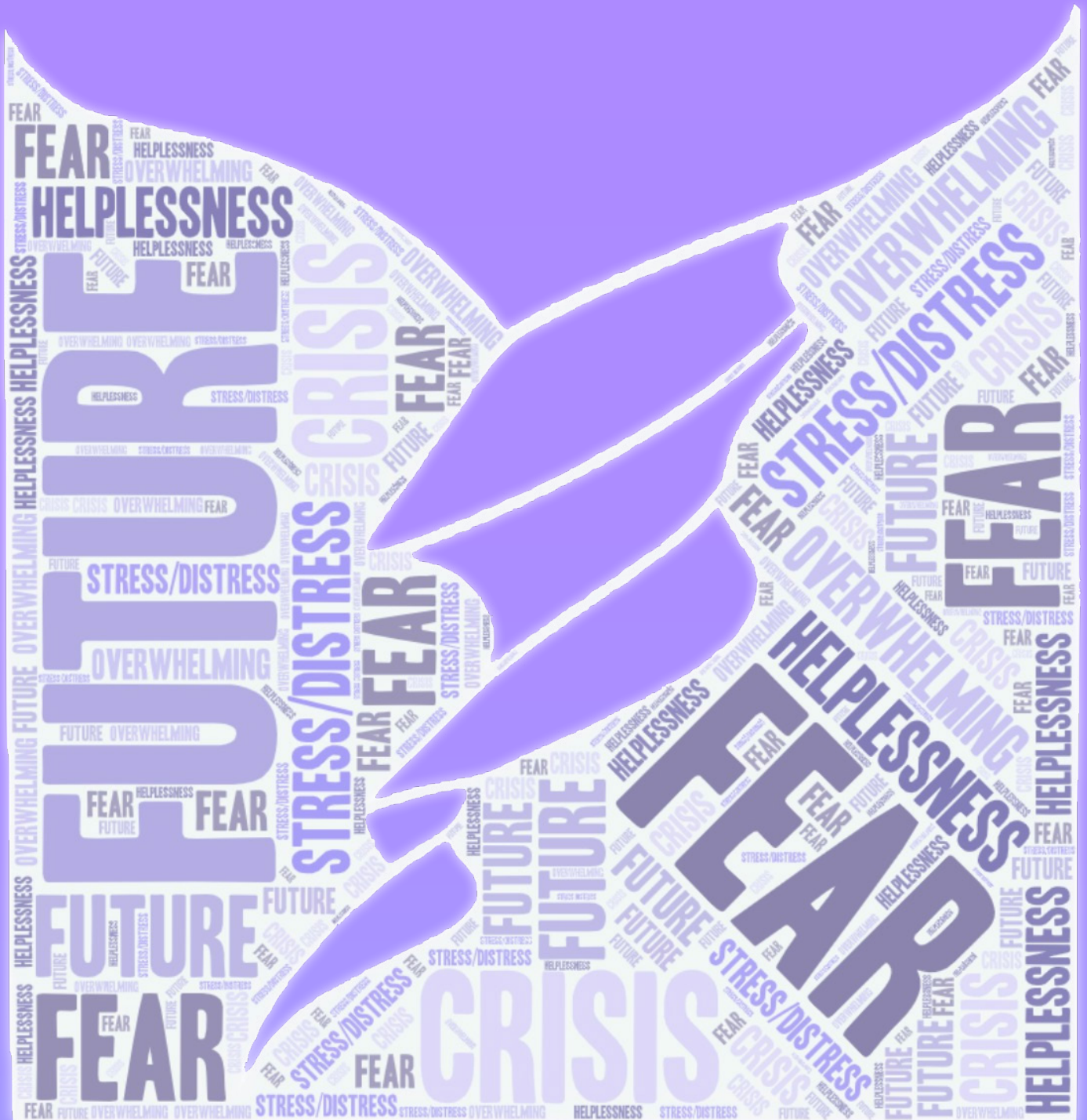
Trigger of distress:

19 respondents say that the term 'eco-anxiety' resonates with them in the form of 'stress' and/or 'distress'. Frequently linked to frustration, these emotions are often prompted when media covering climate phenomena is consumed.

“It does scare me to think about how far we have come, is there any way we can even change and make things better or we are too late?”

ANANYA
15-17 YO

Most common words found in 201 responses to “How would you define the term ‘eco-anxiety’? Does this term resonate with you, personally?”



We cannot run from our feelings anymore than we can run from the climate crisis. Yet we CAN see them, name them, accept them – then use the energy of these feelings to take action.

We need both **internal** and **external** sustainability.

Evidence suggests that, following natural disasters, growth after trauma can be fostered. This may be reflected in cultivation of greater resilience. People are incredible, and powerful, and strong – stories of resistance are all around us.

definition box

internal sustainability

forms of activism that are nourishing and resilience-based, rather than damage and sacrifice-oriented

external sustainability

encouraging a positive relationship between humans and the planet

So how can we channel this energy?

This inflection point, this point of emotional vulnerability, allows a **transformation to more sustainable lifestyles.**

However, this will not happen by itself: especially for young people in the throes of psychological development, it needs to be cultivated by **cognitive and emotional** abilities to articulate feelings – essentially, transform stories of grief and despair into a personal narrative.

Thought

Action

02

Our

Intervention

Force of Nature's *Climate Anxiety to Climate Action* workshops serve as a vehicle for young people to cultivate mindsets of agency, purpose and resilience. They have been designed as a safe space to feel heard, tune into emotions, and connect with other like-minded individuals who seek to make a difference.

On channeling emotions:

"The classroom helped me forge through my toughest feelings of frustration and anger; I can now output these feelings as meaningful actions towards fighting climate injustices."

On creating community:

"This classroom gives you a sense of community and that there are many like yourself, feeling the same way you do. You are not alone."

Force of Nature aims to help young people shift out of anger, anxiety, frustration and despair; **toward feelings of agency, determination, community and vision.**

The KNOWLEDGE FoN aims to impart

- The relationship between mental health and climate change
- How external influences impact our mindset
- The power of befriending feelings
- The impact of 'self-limiting beliefs': how they can activate or disempower us

The SKILLS FoN aims to cultivate

- Verbalise how we feel, and why we might feel a certain way
- Identify barriers to taking action
- Discern between beliefs that serve or hinder us
- Develop resilience to external factors, and autonomy over one's emotional response

The BEHAVIOUR SHIFTS FoN aims to create

- Rewrite self-limiting beliefs through action
- Act on newly-realised skills, talents and passions to deliver solutions
- Use our spheres of influence to inspire action in others

QUANTITATIVE INSIGHTS

Everyone comes to the Classroom in a different stage of their journey with eco-anxiety. Feelings of overwhelm, loss, and grief are all human psychological responses to the threat of climate change. However, many young people are left to face these feelings without the emotional and cognitive tools to effectively handle them. Force of Nature is a conduit through which young people are invited to channel their feelings.

Pre- and post-classroom surveys are administered to gauge:

1. The **self-described current state of eco-anxiety** amongst participants
2. The **psychological changes experienced by participants as a result of the online classroom**, including emotional, behavioural and cognitive responses to the threat of climate change.

Based on the students who participated in our classrooms, the following shifts were recorded through anecdotal data collected before and after the administration of our classroom:

- Students surveyed experienced an **overall 26% decreased** score when asked how strongly they identified with the statement "I experience a feeling of hopelessness when I think about climate change"
- Students surveyed overall experienced a **19% decreased** score when asked how strongly they agreed with the statement "I feel that fear of climate change negatively contributes to my mental health"

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

Having invited students to share their personal experiences with eco-anxiety, the post-classroom survey endeavours to:

1. Identify how students cope with eco-anxiety;
2. Delve into students' self-identified potential;
3. Reflect on students' emotions and wellbeing.
4. Realise students' mindset shifts in the face of climate change

The following are the **5 principal key takeaways of 71 alumni** of the Climate Anxiety to Climate Action Classroom:

A spark of self-realised potential



“We all have our passions and skills and can uniquely contribute; this class helped me see that.”

CASSIDY
19 YO

Engaging already-present skills



“Inspiring and reassuring. I now realise the importance of re-writing my own stories, overcoming self-limiting attitudes, and believing in the power of my own agency.”

TIM
24 YO

An open and honest safe[r] space



“I told [my best friend] about “Force of Nature” that this is the right platform where we can be optimistic, where we can find answers to our questions, where we can understand how [we can] contribute in solving the problem of climate change. I told him that our Mother Earth has given us the most beautiful planet in the whole Universe; now it’s our turn to do something for her.”

SUMIT
20 YO

A passionate and mobilised community



“It’s really exciting to see other young people who are disillusioned, and determined to do something about that. It helps strike the balance between nihilism and optimism; there’s a real range of exciting, human response to something much bigger and scarier than us as individuals.”

ELLIOTT
22 YO



“This classroom helped me realise that my actions do have weight and taking action is the only way to change the narrative.”

ELLIE
18 YO

Most common words in 71 post-classroom survey responses to “After joining this classroom, I feel like I have [this] unique set of skills that will allow me to contribute to solving climate change”:





03

Background Reading

“Climate change is the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century.”

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION

2019

There is growing awareness of the impacts of climate change and ecological breakdown on physical health; air pollution, zoonotic vectors of disease, and pervasive food scarcity. Reports such as the [Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change](#) have already elucidated the likely life course for a child born today, should the climate crisis continue vis-a-vis “business as usual”: increased rates of food insecurity, diarrhoeal diseases, threats to safety and security due to increased frequency of extreme weather events (Olson, 2020).

However, perhaps most overlooked is the impact of climate change on mental health. There are many individuals and communities already on the frontlines of the climate crisis (living through bushfires, droughts, floods, crop failure, forced migration), including UK flood-victims and [farmers facing coming droughts](#). Many report experiencing accompanying mental distress (grief, fear, anxiety, anger, dread and nihilism).

in numbers: the acute and chronic impacts of climate change

RUBONIS & BICKMAN '91

Early meta-analysis of studies on the relationship between disasters and mental health impacts.

Negative effects of climate change on an individual's mental health:

- Trauma and shock
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Strains on social relationships
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loss of autonomy and control
- Feelings of helplessness, fear, fatalism, solastalgia

- 7% and 40% of all subjects in 36 studies showed some form of psychopathology.
- General anxiety was the type of psychopathology with the highest prevalence rate
- followed by phobic, somatic, and alcohol impairment, and then depression and drug impairment

in numbers:

- According to a national YouGov poll in Jan 2020 commissioned by climate campaign group [Friends of the Earth](#), over 70% of 18-24-year olds are more worried about climate change than they were a year ago.
- In 2019 alone, [Oxford Language](#) reported a 4,290% increase in the use of the word 'eco-anxiety', highlighting [a growing interest](#) in mental health impacts related to climate and environmental change.
- As of 2020, over half of child psychiatrists surveyed in England say patients have environmental anxiety - quoting helplessness, anger, insomnia, panic and guilt (Watts & Campbell, 2020)
- [A survey by environmental charity Global Action Plan](#) revealed 1/3 of teachers are seeing high levels of climate anxiety in students, with 3/4 (77%) of students saying that thinking about climate change makes them anxious. 1/2 of teachers feel ill-equipped to deal with student anxiety around climate change.

Even where the threat from climate change is not physical or immediate, heightened mental and emotional distress is commonly associated with concern around environmental deterioration. The latter trend has been particularly evident in young people, in the UK and globally.

“Over the past few years climate change has increasingly brought a sense of anxiety. With the current crises being experienced throughout the world, you just need to look at the uncontrollable bushfires ravaging Australia - the impact is finally being seen as ‘real’. Increasingly, students are wanting to help but not sure how and this leaves them confused and anxious.”

SAM TARCA

Head of Year 9 in Trinity Church of England School

Alongside eco-anxiety, '[ecophobia](#)' has also emerged in our wider lexicon (representing feelings of powerlessness to stop imminent environmental catastrophe); among 'eco-anger', 'eco-despair', and '[solastalgia](#)' (an emerging form of depression or distress caused by environmental change, such as from climate change, natural disasters, and/or extreme weather conditions).

Caroline Hickman is a psychotherapist who has committed her life to understanding the relationship between our mental health and the health of our planet. She speaks to the role of grief in tackling the climate crisis.

Her research is largely around young people's sentiments towards climate change, and she is actively working to build resilience in the face of planetary problems. The first step, she says, is *understanding how we feel*.

In an interview for the Force of Nature podcast, Caroline recounts her conversations with children in the Maldives, who are already experiencing the direct effects of the climate crisis.

Caroline was struck by the grief and rage of these young people – but not just out of concern for themselves. The empathy of the young people was evident; they spoke at length about the impact on how climate change will bring a loss of identity and culture.



“These children said to me, we saw on social media that they had a funeral for a glacier in Iceland this morning. But who’s going to have a funeral for us?”

CAROLINE HICKMAN
CLIMATE PSYCHOLOGY THERAPIST & RESEARCHER

This is not a distant and theoretical problem for young people; this is their lived experience.

As with all global issues, the most vulnerable to the issue are also those who are often left out of the conversation.

FACTORS that increase vulnerability to the health effects of climate change

- Geographic location
- Presence of pre-existing illnesses or disabilities
- Socioeconomic and demographic inequality

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES are at risk of losing their cultural heritage

Climate change may threaten not only their physical home but also their lifestyle, including access to traditional food and culturally meaningful practices (Cochran et al., 2013). These impacts may find their manifestation in both direct and indirect causes of mental health distress.

YOUNG PEOPLE are an at-risk demographic

Crises often disproportionately impact the most vulnerable within our society. [Communities facing existing social inequalities](#) are disproportionately vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, and trapped within a worsening cycle of inequality. These groups typically lack access to resources required to overcome system shocks. Young people are increasingly aware that they are inheriting a future that will be significantly affected by climate change. Young people are also particularly vulnerable to emergence of mental health difficulties, with 75% of mental disorders arising before the age of 24.

Emotional disorders in young Britons were already rising in recent years, a trend exacerbated by lockdown, with young people's mental health among the hardest hit. Anecdotal evidence, the advice of psychologists, and the results of emerging [relevant research](#) suggest that "citizen responses", which confer resilience, are critical to young people's mental well-being in the context of climate change. This includes taking action, as well as connecting with like minded groups and nature. Yet there are barriers to young people engaging in these behaviours. Some are resource-related, others based on know-how in what they need to be effective, and perhaps none are more pervasive than those of mindset.

Our question now becomes: what role can each of us play to break down these barriers and support young people to practically shape solutions?

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