

Chapter 15

Influence of Eco-Related Anxiety and Climate Distress on Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

The concept of eco-anxiety, also known as climate distress, refers to a constant dread of environmental disasters brought on by recognizing how inevitably climate change would affect the environment. Eco-anxiety also involves raising concerns for one's own survival and those of future generations. The sense of unease or powerlessness over the impacts of climate variations or changes on the environment and one's own life is an aspect of eco-anxiety. Studying the influence of eco-anxiety, or climate distress, on mental health is crucial because it frequently occurs in the world and has a significant negative impact on people's functioning. Eco-anxiety has positive and negative effects on social behavior, cognition, productivity, and behavioral responses, all in turn, influencing the mental health and well-being of a person. The negative impact of climate change can be reduced by engaging in climate action.

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of changes or fluctuations in the environment on mental health is increasing. Evidence suggests that increases in temperatures and natural disasters have the ability to influence mental health and can even cause psychological distress. The ever-changing and instability in the environment gives rise to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, depression and anger. The chronic fear or anxiety regarding the changes caused by the environment or ecological damage is referred to as eco-anxiety or climate distress. According to the American Psychological Association, eco-anxiety is defined as the chronic fear of environmental calamities that is caused due to observing the inevitable influence of changes in the climate and the related worry for one's survival.

Climate distress or eco-anxiety involves the feeling of uneasiness or helplessness over fluctuations in the climate on the environment and one's own life. The discomfort could manifest as disturbing ideas or thoughts regarding impending doom or calamities. The uneasiness may also be caused by worrying about humanity and the effects of environmental changes on future generations or one's future and existence. The anxiety or distress produces physiological, emotional and behavioral components. Breathlessness and heart palpitations are caused due to panic rising from changes in one's environment. Other physiological changes could include allergies, and a rise in exposure to diseases. Eco-anxiety causes an increase in stress levels, anxiety, trauma, helplessness, etc. The influence of eco-anxiety on mental health has an influence on the increased use and addiction to substance abuse. Eco-anxiety is not listed in the 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' (DSM-5), hence, it is not regarded as a disorder or a condition that can be diagnosed. This makes it more important that people are aware of what eco-anxiety is and take steps to reduce its negative consequences.

People do not experience eco-anxiety equally. High stress, depression, feelings of nervousness and guilt, disturbances in sleep and frequent uneasy thoughts among other symptoms are caused due to fear of environmental fluctuations. Eco-anxiety causes one to feel suffocated and breathless or trapped. Among people who face guilt concerning the environment, adults with children tend to possess greater feelings of fear and uneasiness thinking about the future.

According to a systematic review done by Boluda-Verdú, et al. (2022), eco-anxiety is defined as people's reactions of worry, fear, guilt and concern towards climate change threats and degradation of the surrounding environment. The authors included a sample of 12 articles for review. Some authors regard eco-anxiety as a normal response and do not require clinical diagnosis, whereas, others view eco-anxiety as a vital factor in influencing mental health. Eco-anxiety was found to be linked with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia, anxiety and stress. Eco-anxiety

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