

When Climate Change Affects The Psyche: What We Know About Eco-Anxiety
Reporting The Zeitgeist, Fall 2022
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For Courtney Burke, it began when she was evacuated in 2017 due to a fire near her house in Northern California; suddenly she started experiencing insomnia and abrupt bouts of panic. For Peyton Sachs, it was when his hometown of Las Vegas reached 117° in the summer of 2021 and he wondered if it was even a safe place to live. For Meryl Phair, its onset dates back to 2012 when Hurricane Sandy hit New York City, leaving 44 people dead and forcing her to rethink her everyday habits.

It, in this case, refers to what's become known as "eco-anxiety." In short, it's anxiety in response to climate change and its unknown future implications. These 20-somethings are just a few of the seemingly growing number of citizens globally experiencing the adverse mental effects of our warming climate and its accompanying natural phenomenon.

"Eco-anxiety" as a term first was published in 1989 by Alaska's *Sitka Daily Sentinel* in an [advertisement](#) by landowners apprehensive about environmental-awareness groups with billionaire executives, stating that "The biggest winners" of Earth Day "are the well-paid evangelists of the 'eco-anxiety industry.' Whenever they preach a new 'crisis,' their groups' contributions go up." These days, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "apprehension about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change." Though not currently recognized by the DSM-5 as a psychiatric disorder, anyone who has experienced an onset of anxiety symptoms or existential dread prompted by environmental threats has likely felt eco-anxiety. And, honestly, how could you not? According to the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), 2021 was the 45th consecutive year with intercontinental temperatures above the 20th century average -- a rate that has increased by an average of 14 degrees per decade since 1880 and 32 degrees since 1981. The [World Meteorological Organization](#) also reported that in 2021, global mean sea-level reached a record high,

rising an average of 4.5 millimeter per year from 2013 to 2021. At this rate, by 2100, up to [410 million people](#) are potentially at risk from coastal flooding and erosion.

While the term eco-anxiety has been thrown around in a sort of trendy, new-age way—[The Cut](#) recently examined sobriety and climate change while [The New York Times](#) dove into its presence in the therapy office—it can be a serious and potentially debilitating condition that calls for the guidance of a medical professional.

Dr. Ariana Moran, a Brooklyn-based psychologist specializing in climate psychotherapy and a member of the [Climate Psychology Alliance of North America](#), opts for a broader term: “I prefer to use the term 'climate distress',” she said, in part because while “eco-anxiety” may be the presenting concern, she has observed that most are experiencing a range of emotions – from anxiety to grief, shock, rage, helplessness, overwhelm, the ability to maintain relationships and more. After her own experience with climate distress during her final year as a doctoral candidate in 2019, Dr. Moran committed her private practice to helping others with similar anxieties, amassing clients nationally from Maine to Oregon. “I believe that every generation suffers differently from the generations that came before,” she notes in regards to the influx of young patients with environmentally-induced fear. She notes that while many sufferers’ symptoms present as generalized anxiety, the explicitly climate-related ones include existential dread (despair about the unknown state of the world), fear of the future (or what she calls a “doomer” mindset), and struggling to make life decisions both large and small – such as where to move, what to eat, and whether or not to have children.

For Phair, a graduate student at NYU and the author of a biweekly climate newsletter called [Field Notes](#), the anxiety didn’t begin all at once. Its onset is traced back a decade ago when she lived in Massachusetts and was close enough to the destruction of Hurricane Sandy that a new reality set in, one where climate change proved a pressing and unavoidable concern. She went vegetarian in 2017, aware of her own water and carbon emissions, and has never owned a car due to carbon footprint. “The frequency of natural disasters ... wildfires, and heatwaves has made me more anxious about

climate change than I've felt before," Phair said. "It's really felt like we're living through climate change now, not something that is going to happen in 100 years." Her everyday routine is now heavily contingent on sustainability: turning off lights whenever possible to conserve energy and using single-use plastics as often as she can.

It's safe to say that general unease about the state of the world has always existed, but according to Dr. Moran, eco-anxiety symptoms are most prevalent in Millennials and Gen Z—both who grew up at the height of the climate crisis—and those who have an ecological work background (think environmental researchers and conservationists) who are now faced with the dystopian truth of their fears coming true. "There is a term called 'pre-traumatic stress,' which refers to people who haven't yet directly experienced adverse climate-related impacts but are aware of the problem and experience high levels of anticipatory distress," Dr. Moran said. Simple daily occurrences like reading the news or considering transportation options – should I take the bus or ride a bike? – meet large-scale events like future planning and natural disasters to create a concoction of anxiety-derived triggers.

Rising concern and global unrest has pushed some to channel their anxieties into action through raising awareness and promoting advocacy. Activists like Greta Thunberg and court cases like [Juliana v. United States](#) – which asserts the government's accountability for violating the youngest generation's right to life, liberty, and property through their dismissal of climate science – have brought the climate discussion to the forefront of the political and social sphere. On an international scale, [Fridays for Future](#), a youth-led action group that organizes school strikes for climate justice, is dedicated to promoting awareness and advocacy with protests organized in upwards of [200 countries](#) since 2018. "What generally brings youth to the table as activists is fear, anxiety, and frustration brought on by growing up in a news cycle that includes, on a daily basis, new disasters and horrors that are happening because of climate change and the lack of action being taken by governments to slow emissions and protect our futures," said Anna Kathawala, Co-Director for Fridays for Future in New York City.

Individual action is just as important in catalyzing change. Following her awakening to the climate crisis, Phair turned her educational focus to environmental journalism, learning about sustainable solutions and innovation surrounding ways to exist in harmony with the Earth. “Understanding the crisis and making it part of my life has eliminated some of the fear,” she states. And while the gears of capitalism and overproduction of fossil fuels show no signs of ceasing, there remains a generation ignited by fear and encouraged by hope. “The beauty of unsustainable practices is they are unsustainable and will eventually not be able to continue,” Phair said. “They are finite, while nature remains an infinite source of regeneration that will outlast us all.”

Such mindsets are healthy according to Dr. Moran, who encourages patients to join climate-aware communities and channel their fears into action. “I firmly believe in the contagious nature of healing,” she says. “Once you are able to heal then you will notice healing happening all around you.”