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# IT'S NOT ONLY THE ENVIRONMENT WE NEED TO PROTECT – IT'S OUR MENTAL HEALTH TOO

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change has long surpassed being a threat and we are amid a climate emergency. It can feel overwhelming with local and global messages and campaigns about going green, recycling, reducing carbon emissions, and saving the planet. What is often missed is how we care for ourselves while living in a state of global warming and its far-reaching consequences. The increasing awareness and concern about the environmental crisis, coupled with the visible effects of climate change such as extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and ecosystem disruptions, contribute to feelings of distress, helplessness, and fear about the future. Climate change can directly and indirectly cause disruptive human pathologies that are physical and mental.

Although the climate crisis is a global one, it has incontestably more destructive and noticeable effects on communities living in the Global

South, which have been marginalised and have fewer resources to adapt or respond to natural catastrophes. The global call to reduce carbon emissions puts limits on countries in the Global South to grow economies to equitable and comparable levels, with people already experiencing inequitable access to healthcare and whose livelihoods are affected by climate change events

## ECO-ANXIETY AND ECO-DISTRESS

Climate change can have profound psychological impacts on individuals and communities, giving rise to a phenomenon known as eco-anxiety. Sometimes referred to as eco-distress or climate anxiety, eco-anxiety refers to a chronic fear of environmental doom and a sense of loss or impending catastrophe due to the worsening state of the planet. It can manifest in various ways, including anxiety, depression, feelings of grief, anger, or guilt related to personal carbon

footprints, or the perceived lack of action taken to address climate change. In countries such as South Africa, we are also susceptible to feeling powerless in the fight against climate change due to other immediate pressing challenges such as lack of resources, unaffordable living costs, and not having the means to contribute to climate action.

There are many examples of climate-induced events in the South African context. Since 1980, there have been 86 weather-related disasters, which have affected more than 22 million people and have cost more than R113 billion in losses. In 2018, Cape Town weathered the "Day Zero" water crisis, nearly becoming the world's first major metro to run out of water. Record-breaking water scarcity like that experienced during the water crisis exacerbates urban fires. Fires are further exacerbated by densely populated low-income housing and reliance on fire and gas

for cooking. In April 2022, a year's worth of rain fell in two days across the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape causing floods and landslides. More than 400 people died because of the floods, which also destroyed more than 12,000 houses and forced an estimated 40,000 people from their homes.

The psychological impact of climate change can extend beyond eco-anxiety. Natural disasters and environmental disruptions can lead to trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues among those directly affected. Displacement due to climate-induced events like hurricanes, floods, or wildfires can cause long-term psychological distress, especially in vulnerable populations.

### **MULTIFACETED CLIMATE-INFORMED MENTAL HEALTH CARE**

As much as there is a need for urgent climate action, there is also an urgent need to address mental health and care associated with eco-anxiety. To address the climate change – mental health crisis, care should entail the provision of eco-informed policies, engaging communities in eco-activism, integrating eco-awareness into research praxis and knowledge building, and eco-therapeutic counselling services and interventions.

Eco-informed policies form the foundation of climate action, and these refer to institutional, governmental, educational, and health policies. Engaging communities in eco-activism can foster a sense of agency and empowerment through activism, community engagement, and sustainable practices that can mitigate eco-anxiety. Young people, who are reported to be most affected by climate change events, have been at the forefront of climate action and visible in awareness raising. Encouraging climate action and promoting environmental stewardship not only benefits the planet but also provides individuals with a sense of purpose and hope, potentially alleviating some of the psychological impacts associated with climate change. Eco-awareness

in research and knowledge building is to acknowledge the agency of the environment in research praxis. Theories have long acknowledged the role of the environment and it has taken on many forms from being defined as a space occupied by persons (such as the home environment or work environment) to a habitat where people find themselves in nature. However, acknowledging the environment does not often go as far as thinking through the agency of the environment or naming the environment as an active role player in research praxis. In my recent work informed by the theory of new materialism, we modelled the intra-related dimensions that affect one another and converge to produce behaviours in response.

Mental health professionals are increasingly acknowledging the significance of addressing eco-anxiety and related climate-induced distress. Therapeutic practices that integrate eco-therapy, mindfulness practices, and resilience-building techniques can help individuals cope with their eco-distress. It is a difficult area to work in for two reasons. First, while in other trauma work, clients may be able to change environments, move to safer spaces or deal with the consequences of past traumas. When working with eco-anxiety, there is no place for safety from climate change and its catastrophic consequences. Second, if a counsellor is not attuned to the context-specific consequences of climate change or dismissive of anxiety linked to climate change it can compromise the treatment of clients.

Although not formally recognized as a disorder in the DSM-5 the symptoms are those commonly associated with anxiety, depression, and grief. While climate anxiety is largely considered an adaptive response, it is also acknowledged that maladaptive climate anxiety can occur when symptoms cause severe distress and greatly interfere with an individual's occupational and social roles. Current guidance prompts counsellors to rely on their expertise in treating anxiety, depression, and grief as they would

when associated with other traumas and phenomena. There is a need for further capacity development in the mental health fraternity to address eco-anxiety and the mental health consequences of climate change. While organisations such as the APA have some guidelines available, there is a need for local contextually relevant guidelines. The Climate, Environment, and Psychology Division of the Psychological Association of South Africa (CESD, PsySSA) have taken on this task, and we welcome any input from others on this project.

### **CONCLUSION**

The pressing issues posed by the intersection of climate change and mental health demand immediate, diverse strategies. The intensifying climate emergency has triggered a rise in eco-anxiety—a persistent dread of environmental calamities—and deep emotional strain due to the deteriorating state of our world. This anxiety isn't just an individual burden but also a shared challenge, with communities in less affluent regions disproportionately affected by their limited resources and heightened vulnerability to climate-related incidents. The psychological repercussions, such as trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and enduring distress from natural disasters, underscore the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support. Addressing eco-anxiety necessitates a holistic approach that integrates eco-informed policies, community engagement in eco-activism, eco-awareness in research practices, and tailored eco-therapeutic interventions. Collaboration among policymakers, communities, researchers, and mental health experts is crucial in confronting the entangled issues of climate change and mental well-being. Collectively, with sustained efforts and collaboration, we can strive towards a more resilient and mentally healthier future in the face of the climate crisis.

**References available on request.** 