

Climate change worry good for planet

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A study by psychologists at Bath has found that people who excessively worry about climate change should not be stigmatised.

Those who overly worry about the environment are sometimes labelled by sceptics as being mentally unstable or pathological, which is suggested by terms such as 'mass neurosis', 'tree huggers' or '[global warming](#) hysteria.'

Researchers from Department of Psychology set out to unravel this stigma and instead demonstrate that even high levels of ecological worrying are constructive.

The study, which is published in the journal *PLoS ONE*, was conducted via an online survey posted at university websites in the US and Europe last year. 132 participants took part with an average age of 26.

It assessed ecological worrying, environmental attitude, prevalence of pro-environmental behaviours, pathological worrying as well as basic personality traits.

The study revealed that global warming, pollution, extinction of species, resource depletion, and deforestation were the five most prevalent worries. Importantly, it suggested that there is nothing wrong with having these worries even when this occurs habitually.

Professor Bas Verplanken, who led the study, said: "Habitual worrying in other contexts is associated with pathological mental conditions, such as [generalized anxiety disorder](#). However, in the present study a near-zero correlation between habitual ecological worrying and pathological worry was expected and found."

The study used validated instruments, and had sufficient statistical power to detect such a relationship if there had been one.

It is undoubtedly the case that environmental threats from [climate change](#) affect some people's personal feelings of well-being and may cause stress and anxiety. Specific populations have also good reasons to be worried and anxious, if they are directly exposed to health risks or increased morbidity rates linked to climate-related events, such as flooding, mega storms, heat waves or droughts.

However the vast majority of people who are concerned about climate change impact vicariously through media exposure to information about risks, devastating events elsewhere, or debates and negative future consequences.

Professor Verplanken said that whereas pathological worrying is characterised by detrimental outcomes such as anxiety, negative affect, stress and impaired health, constructive worrying is associated with

outcomes such as positive mental health, functional cognitive operations and behaviours and under some conditions better performances.

He said: "Repetitive worrying is more likely to be constructive if it is focused on finding solutions and problem solving, rather than mere rumination on problems and negative consequences.

"Worrying also tends to be constructive if it is accompanied by feelings of personal competence and efficacy, which may lead to finding solutions. These conditions are more likely to prevail among segments of the population which are deeply concerned about the environment, such as those who feel affiliated to the ecological or green movement. We found a significant correlation between habitual worrying about ecology and a personality structure characterized by imagination and an appreciation for new ideas."

Participants in the study were also presented with sixteen pro-environmental behaviours, and indicated how often they had performed these activities in the last year. They included: taking shorter showers; switching off the water tap while brushing your teeth; switching off electrical appliances instead of leaving them on standby and taking a used or reusable shopping bag when shopping.

The pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours can be interpreted as manifestations of the potentially adaptive qualities of worrying, which involve taking initiative and attempts at problem solving.

Professor Verplanken concluded: "We consider this study as a 'proof of concept'. By identifying the existence of a healthy form of worrying in the environmental domain the study may contribute to a more rational debate on climate change and to prevention of stigmatization of people who are genuinely concerned about our habitat and are prepared to do something about it."

More information: www.plosone.org/article/fetchObject.action?uri=info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0074708&representation=PDF

Provided by University of Bath

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