

You're not the only one feeling helpless: Eco-anxiety reaches far and wide

January 15 2020, by Fiona Charlson and James Graham Scott



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

You're scrolling through your phone and transfixed by yet more images of streets reduced to burnt debris, injured wildlife, and maps showing the scale of the fires continuing to burn. On the television in the

background, a woman who has lost her home breaks down, while news of another life lost flashes across the screen.

You can't bear to watch anymore, but at the same time, you can't tear yourself away. Sound familiar?

We've now been confronted with these tragic images and stories for months. Even if you haven't been directly affected by the bushfires, it's completely normal to feel sad, helpless, and even anxious.

Beyond despairing about the devastation so many Australians are facing, some of these emotions are likely to be symptoms of "[eco-anxiety](#)".

If you're feeling down, you're not alone

Research on [previous bushfire disasters](#) shows people directly affected are more likely to suffer mental health consequences than those who have not been directly affected.

After Black Saturday, about one in five people living in highly affected communities experienced persistent post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), depression or psychological distress.

Recognising this as a critical issue, the Australian government has announced funding to deliver [mental health support](#) to affected people and communities.

But living in an unaffected area doesn't mean you're immune. In addition to contending with rolling images and stories of devastation, we've seen flow-on effects of the bushfires reach far beyond affected areas.

For example, schools and workplaces have been closed, people have been forced to cancel their summer holidays, and sports matches and

community events have been called off. This disruption to normal activities can result in uncertainty and distress, particularly for children and young people.

What is eco-anxiety?

Distress around the current fires may be compounded by—and intertwined with—a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety in relation to [climate change](#)-related events.

The American Psychological Association defines [eco-anxiety](#) as "a chronic fear of environmental doom".

While concern and anxiety around climate change are normal, eco-anxiety describes a state of being overwhelmed by the sheer scale, complexity and seriousness of the problems we're facing. It can be accompanied by guilt for personal contributions to the problem.

The Australian bushfires may have signaled a "tipping point" for many people who held a passive attitude towards climate change, and even many who have held a more active view of climate denialism. In the face of current circumstances, the crisis of climate change now becomes almost impossible to ignore.

While eco-anxiety is not a diagnosable mental disorder, it can have significant impacts on a person's well-being.

Whether you think you're suffering from eco-anxiety or more general stress and depression about the bushfires, here are some things you can do.

We're pretty resilient, but support helps

We're now living with the environmental consequences of a changing climate, and this requires people to adapt. Fortunately, [most of us are innately resilient](#) and are able to overcome stress and losses and to live with uncertainty.

We can enhance this resilience by connecting with friends and family and positively engaging in our communities. Making healthy choices around things like diet, exercise and sleep can also help.

Further, supporting those who are vulnerable has benefits for both the person giving and receiving assistance. For example, parents have a critical role in listening to their children's concerns and providing appropriate guidance.

Become part of the solution

Seeking to reduce your own carbon footprint can help alleviate feelings of guilt and helplessness—in addition to the positive difference these small actions make to the environment.

This might include walking, cycling and taking public transport to get around, and making sustainability a factor in day-to-day decisions like what you buy and what you eat.

Joining one of the many groups advocating for the environment also provides a voice for people concerned about the changing climate.

Finally, there are many ways you can provide assistance to bushfire relief efforts. The generosity shown by Australians and others internationally has provided a sense of hope at a time when many are facing enormous hardship.

Seeking professional help

Some people, particularly those living with unrelated [psychological distress](#), will find it harder to adapt to increased stress. Where their emotional resources are already depleted, it becomes more difficult to accommodate change.

Although we don't yet have research on this, it's likely people with pre-existing mental health problems will be more vulnerable to eco-anxiety.

If this is you, it's worthwhile seeking professional help if you feel your mental health is deteriorating at this time.

Whether or not you have a pre-existing mental health disorder, if you're feeling depressed or anxious to a degree it's affecting your work, education or social functioning, you should seek advice from a health professional.

Evidence-based psychological interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy [reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression](#), improving mental health and well-being.

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