Climate change also affects mental health. Call it eco-anxiety.

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Anna Lynn Heine has thought about dropping out of Eckerd College in St. Petersburg more times than she cares to admit.

Or she'll work on an essay and wonder what is even the point.

Anxiety about the planet's future has also kept the 21-year-old from enjoying dinner with family or drinks with friends. A plastic cup can send her into an existential spiral.

"Where did this food come from? Where's this plastic going to go and how many fossil fuels were burned for it to arrive at my table?" she'll ask herself. "And is this going to go to a landfill if I don't finish it?"

Mental health professionals have a term for the stress and grief many feel about the planet's future: eco-anxiety. The American Psychiatric Association defines it as "chronic fear of environmental doom." It can lead to anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

A *Nature* study published in September surveyed 10,000 young people in 10 countries and found that most respondents are "very worried" or "extremely worried" about climate change. Nearly half of them said climate anxiety impacts their daily lives.

Heine is an environmental studies major in Jo Huxster's climate change communications class at Eckerd College. The assistant environmental studies professor said almost every student in her class has eco-anxiety.

Huxster's course examines the psychology of climate denial and the ways different sectors—the media, government, corporations—discuss climate change. Students learn how to run an organizing campaign to address climate policy and ways to talk about it with climate denialists and the apathetic.

Heine, who mostly grew up in Miami and Key West, said she's most anxious about the rising threat of natural disasters due to climate change and the suffering that will occur along class and racial lines.

She mourns for her hometown of Miami, where scientists predict sea level rise will displace nearly a third of the current population by the end of the century.

"It's going to be a painful ending," Heine said, "and it's going to happen in an unjust way."

'What do you have control over?'

Anxiety about the planet's future increasingly comes up in Orlando therapist Kaley Sinclair's sessions with clients.

Sinclair, a licensed mental health counselor and trauma specialist, said her adolescent and young adult clients discuss feeling a sense of doom about the environment. Those with young children, or thoughts of having kids, contend with the guilt of forcing the next generation to inherit a hotter, less inhabitable world.

Many, she said, are childhood trauma survivors, who struggle with a pervasive feeling of being unsafe.

Sinclair didn't learn to treat climate anxiety or grief in graduate school, but realized that the number of clients needing professional help will only grow. In February, she registered with the Climate Psychiatry Alliance, a professional group that offers resources and training.

The Alliance created the Climate-Aware Therapist Directory, a resource to help people find therapists who have pledged to recognize the climate crisis is a threat to physical and mental health. There are about 100 therapists in the directory, but Sinclair is one of just two in Florida.

About a third of her clients have shared anxiety or grief about the environment. Her response is tailored to each client, but she encourages

them to stay grounded in the present and think about constructive ways to improve their feelings.

"Okay, what do you have control over?" Sinclair tells them. "What can you do to try to make an impact while validating that a lot of things are outside of your control?"

Huxster tells her students the best thing any individual can do is to talk about the climate crisis. About 70 percent of the U.S. population knows climate change is real, she said, but only 30 percent talk about it. She hopes to direct attention towards effective climate action: transitioning away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy and electrifying transportation.

"Your own carbon footprint is very small," Huxster said. "What's most important about your actions is how they affect the actions of the people around you."

'We didn't create this problem'

Love for the ocean brought one of Huxster's Eckerd students, Anya Cervantes, from suburban Massachusetts to Florida to study the environment. Fear for the oceans fuels her eco-anxiety.

The 22-year-old is a licensed scuba diver. She finds peace underwater, among swaying coral, a vibrant ecosystem that supports a quarter of all marine life.

"It's a spiritual experience for me," she said.

Her dream is to see Australia's Great Barrier Reef, which is already 60 percent bleached due to heat stress. She hopes she'll make it in time to see what remains, but she also feels guilty for wanting to go at all (The

United Nations predicts that airplane emissions of carbon dioxide will triple by 2050).

Huxster's class has helped Cervantes think about ways she can combine her passion for environmental justice and her second major, visual arts, into a career that could help address the problems the world faces.

While the 22-year-old can't imagine not dedicating herself to alleviating the climate crisis, she's also frustrated about the pressures placed on her generation to solve it.

"The younger generation is almost put on a pedestal to save the planet," she said. "It's like, we didn't create this problem."

'I would rather try'

For Huxster, researching climate change—contending with the dire data on a near daily basis—creates a source of anxiety. She has a 2½ year old son and worries about what the future will look like for him and the people he will know.

But her work also makes her feel good. This semester, she said three students decided to pursue careers in translating climate science to different audiences. Every year, more students sign up for her 25-person course than it has space for.

The professor dedicates the last week of her class to discussing eco-anxiety and grief.

Students share how they feel and read a chapter of Per Espen Stoknes' book "What We Think About When We're Trying Not To Think About Global Warming."

The chapter, titled "It's Hopeless but I'll Give It My All," discusses taking action even when the odds are overwhelming.

Heine admits that she needs to find a way to care about the climate that's sustainable for her mental health. And so that she can continue to wake up every day and do the work.

She knows she won't drop out. She will finish the essay. And she plans to have kids.

"I wouldn't prevent new life that could build things to be better just because of fear. I would rather try to continue to build the future."