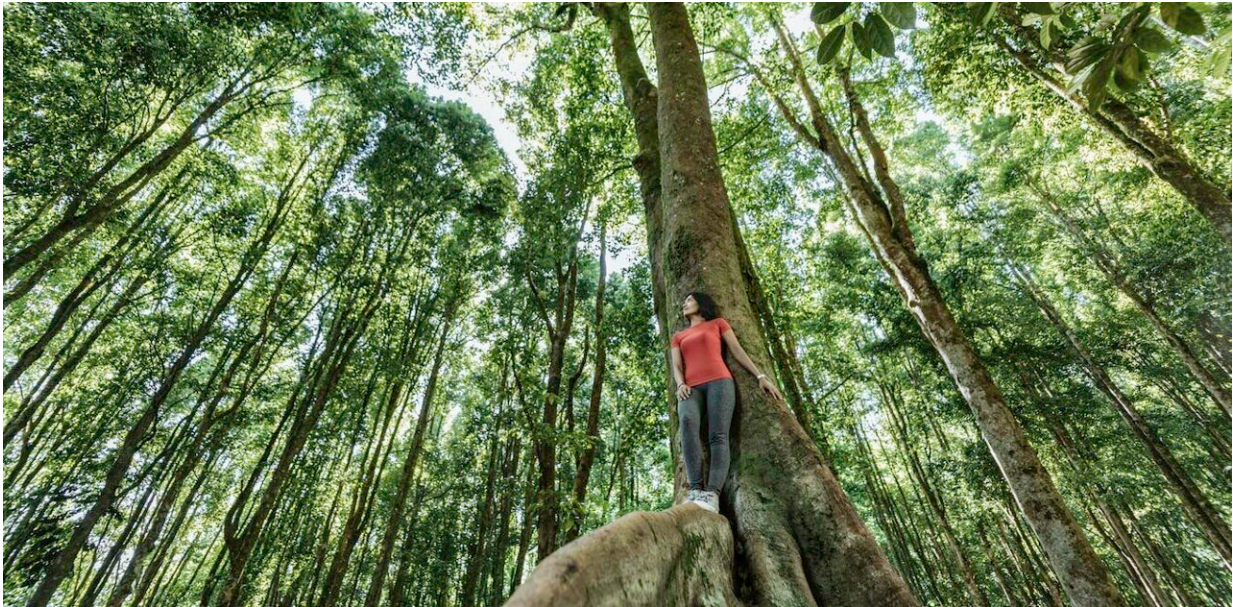


Keeping your cool in a warming world: 8 steps to help manage eco-anxiety

September 18 2023, by Karen Magruder



It's easy to feel overwhelmed by climate change. Credit: Martin Puddy/DigitalVision via Google Images

In a world facing [environmental challenges unprecedented in human history](#), it's no surprise that eco-anxiety—a pervasive worry about the current and [future state of our planet](#)—has become an [increasingly prevalent mental health issue](#).

As people witness the devastating [impacts of climate change](#),

[deforestation](#) and loss of [biodiversity](#), it's only natural to feel [overwhelmed and disheartened](#). I happen to live in Phoenix, Arizona, a "[heat apocalypse](#)" city with [dwindling water supplies](#), so I have some skin in the game.

But amid doom-and-gloom predictions, there is hope. As a therapist and clinical social work professor, I have seen firsthand how paralyzing [eco-anxiety](#) can be, and I'm dedicated to finding solutions. Here are a few evidence-based tips to tackle your climate woes.

What is eco-anxiety?

[Eco-anxiety](#) is a broad term that encompasses dread about environmental issues like pollution and disposal of toxic waste, as well as climate-specific fears, such as [increasing rates of extreme weather events](#) and [sea-level rise](#).

[Common symptoms](#) of eco-anxiety include worry about future generations, [trouble sleeping or concentrating](#), feelings of frustration and a sense of helplessness. These feelings can range from mild and fleeting concerns to [deep despair](#), panic attacks and [obsessive-compulsive behaviors](#).

Sound like you or someone you know? There are a number of tools that can help people cope with these feelings, summed up with the acronym UPSTREAM.

Understanding and self-compassion

Be kind to yourself and know that [you are not alone in these feelings](#).

Caring about the world you live in does not make you a "crazy" alarmist.

In fact, [growing numbers](#) of people across the globe feel the same way, with [two-thirds of Americans reporting](#) being at least somewhat worried about climate change in recent polls.

It makes sense that people would feel nervous when [basic needs](#) like safety and shelter are threatened. Give yourself grace, because [beating yourself up](#) for these very valid feelings will only make you feel worse.

Participate in the solution

It can be hard to feel empowered when environmental harms are [taking a toll on your mental health](#), but the escalating global crisis still demands urgent attention. Instead of burying your head in the sand, use that mental discomfort as a catalyst for action.

Individual efforts to [reduce your carbon footprint](#) matter. [Joining larger movements](#) has the potential for even more significant impacts, as well as the [potential to buffer anxiety](#), research shows. Volunteer your own unique passions, talents and skills to advocate for systemic changes that will benefit the planet and humanity.

When you feel anxious, use that energy as fuel for the fight. Harnessing eco-anxiety in this way can [reduce your sense of powerlessness](#).

Self-talk

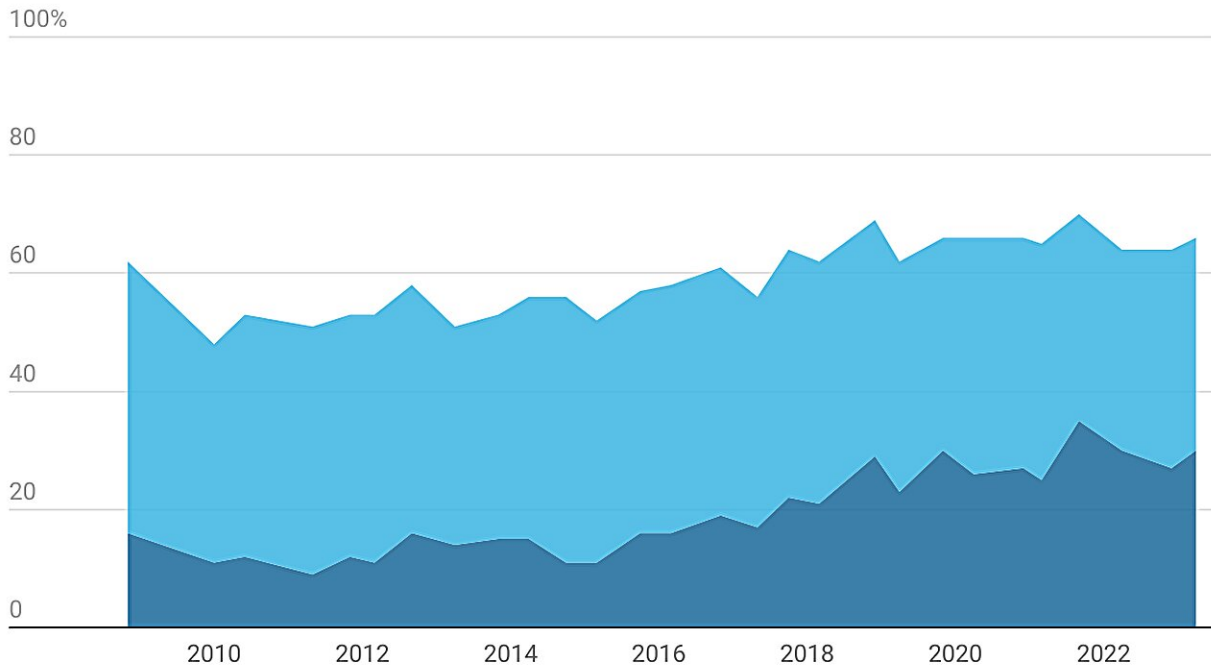
The weight of the climate crisis is heavy enough as it is—don't let your brain make you feel even worse.

When it comes to thinking about [climate change](#), a realistic mindset puts us in a "just right" psychological Goldilocks zone. Don't [numb your psychic wounds](#), but also [don't over-catastrophize](#).

More Americans are very worried about global warming

In over a decade of surveys, Yale and George Mason University have asked adults across the U.S. if they were worried about global warming. Those "very worried" have risen to about 30%.

Very worried Somewhat worried



April 2023 survey involved 1,011 adults with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

Chart: The Conversation/CC-BY-ND • Source: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication • Created with Datawrapper

Credit: The Conversation

As a therapist, I often help clients identify and reframe [unhelpful thinking patterns](#). For example, while it is true that there are many environmental problems to grapple with, there is [also positive](#) news, so don't discount it. Recognize and celebrate victories big and small.

Trauma: Process it so you can heal

The climate crisis has been conceptualized as a [collective trauma](#), and many individuals are struggling with [eco-grief](#) from climate impacts that have already happened. Processing past trauma from events like weather disasters is a crucial step in enhancing your ability to cope with new experiences.

Even people who have not yet experienced significant climate impacts directly may have [signs of pre-traumatic stress](#), a clinical term for the distress experienced in anticipation of a high-stress situation. A licensed [mental health](#) professional can help you process these emotions.

Reduce isolation

It's no secret that having a strong social support network is a [key ingredient for happiness](#). Surrounding yourself with compassionate, like-minded friends is also key to sustained efforts in doing your part to make a difference.

Consider joining or starting a [Climate Cafe](#) or similar group to talk about [climate](#) concerns. Visit a [10-step climate grief meeting](#). Join a local environmental organization. Or simply call up a friend when you need a listening ear.

Ecotherapy

Get outdoors and enjoy nature.

Go for a quiet walk in the woods and observe nature all around you—it's a Japanese practice for relaxation known as [forest bathing](#). Spend time [gardening](#). [Exercise outdoors](#) or otherwise spend time outdoors in a place that is relaxing and restorative for you.

Acts of self-care

Self-care is paramount when it comes to managing the emotional toll of eco-anxiety.

Engaging in [self-care practices](#), such as getting adequate sleep, eating healthy and having fun, helps us maintain a sense of balance in the face of overwhelming environmental concerns.

Remember what they teach you on airplanes—you should always put on your own oxygen mask before helping other passengers. Likewise, when we come from a place of wellness, we are [better equipped to handle the stresses of eco-anxiety](#) and make a difference in this area.

Mindfulness

Because eco-grief is focused on the past and eco-anxiety is future-oriented, reconnecting to the present moment is a powerful way to combat both.

By cultivating [mindfulness](#)—a nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment—people can become more attuned to their thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations in response to eco-anxiety triggers. This heightened [self-awareness](#) helps people to acknowledge worries without becoming consumed by them.

Mindfulness practices, such as [meditation](#) and [deep breathing](#), provide a [calming and grounding effect](#), helping to [reduce stress](#) and alleviate feelings of helplessness. Moreover, mindfulness fosters a [deeper connection to nature](#) and an appreciation for the [present moment](#), which can counteract the sense of despair associated with future environmental uncertainties.

In the face of [eco-anxiety](#), these strategies can build resilience, reminding everyone that they have the power to shape a more sustainable and hopeful future.

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