

5-1-2022

Climate anxiety does not need a diagnosis of a mental health disorder

Navjot Bhullar

Edith Cowan University, n.bhullar@ecu.edu.au

Melissa Davis

Edith Cowan University, melissa.davis@ecu.edu.au

Roselyn Kumar

Patrick Nunn

Debra Rickwood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

[10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00072-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00072-9)

Bhullar, N., Davis, M., Kumar, R., Nunn, P., & Rickwood, D. (2022). Climate anxiety does not need a diagnosis of a mental health disorder. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 6(5), e383. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00072-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00072-9)

This Letter to the Editor is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026/691>

Climate anxiety does not need a diagnosis of a mental health disorder

In a recent Correspondence in *The Lancet Planetary Health*, Sampaio and Sequeria¹ state that “climate anxiety is not yet considered a mental health disorder” and might be a risk factor for mental disorders, which is something that we contest. The authors further claim that “climate anxiety occurs mainly in lower-income countries located in areas that are more directly affected by climate change”,¹ which we regard as doubly incorrect: first, there are no substantial differences in climate anxiety between countries with different average incomes,² and second, it is misleading to aver that lower income countries are more directly affected by climate change. Rather, the issue is one of impact visibility and adaptation capacity.

Climate change is a problem that requires creative solutions for raising public awareness, behaviour change, and governmental action. However, care must be taken not to pathologise climate anxiety as a mental health disorder, because this conveys the wrong message that it is an individual's problem, or a problem caused by some type of dysfunction within the individual, requiring therapeutic intervention, perhaps even medication. Stein and colleagues³ caution against classifying behavioural variations as a disease or disorder. The nature of climate anxiety perceived through different cultural lenses⁴ might also prevent it from satisfying diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder, and it is difficult to evidence this anxiety as being excessive, due to the genuine threat of climate change to individual and collective wellbeing.

Climate anxiety is shown to be associated with distress in children and young people, and rightly so given that they are expecting to

live longer and will by mid-century experience first-hand the disruptive consequences of anthropogenic climate change.⁵ We argue that, for some, climate anxiety might act as a catalyst to collective action against climate change, providing a functional use to motivate people to respond appropriately. It is the moral imperative and ethical responsibility of today's adults, especially those in positions of influence, to ensure adequate support and resources are available for young people as needed and to acknowledge their anxiety as a valid emotional response to a very real threat to their future, without being told that something is wrong with them. What they are experiencing is an authentic response to external stimuli, which should be validated and mobilised for collective action against climate change. We certainly should not be pathologising this very real problem.

We declare no competing interests.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an Open Access article under the CC BY 4.0 license.

*Navjot Bhullar, Melissa Davis,
Roselyn Kumar, Patrick Nunn,
Debra Rickwood
n.bhullar@ecu.edu.au

Discipline of Psychology, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA 6027, Australia (NB, MD); School of Law and Society, University of the Sunshine Coast, Sunshine Coast, QLD, Australia (RK, PN); Discipline of Psychology, University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT, Australia (DR); Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation, Melbourne, VIC, Australia (DR)

- 1 Sampaio F, Sequeria C. Climate anxiety: trigger or threat for mental disorders? *Lancet Planet Health* 2022; **6**: e89.
- 2 Ogunbode C, Pallesen S, Bohm G, et al. Negative emotions about climate change are related to insomnia symptoms and mental health: cross-sectional evidence from 25 countries. *Curr Psychol* 2021; published online Feb 16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01385-4>.
- 3 Stein DJ, Palk AC, Kendler KS. What is a mental disorder? An exemplar-focused approach. *Psychol Med* 2021; **51**: 894–901.
- 4 Scott-Parker B, Kumar R. Fijian adolescents' understanding and evaluation of climate change: implications for enabling effective future adaptation. *Asia Pac* 2018; **59**: 47–59.

- 5 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Summary for Policymakers. In: Masson-Delmotte V, Zhai P, Pörtner H-O, et al, eds. Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty. Geneva: World Meteorological Organization, 2018: 32.

