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EXPLORE: URBAN NATURE

Climate Change and Mental Health: A Teacher's Guide

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CLIMATE
CARES

Mental health in the climate crisis

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CLIMATE CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH: A TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide was developed for the Natural History Museum by the Climate Cares team at Imperial College London's Institute for Global Health Innovation and the Grantham Institute. It is intended to support use of the set of activities in 'Climate Change and Mental Health - Class Activities'. If you have concerns about student wellbeing in relation to any of these themes, reach out to the staff member responsible for leading on mental health at your school.



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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges of our time, alongside the broader ‘ecological crisis’ of biodiversity loss and pollution. It will affect each of us over the coming years, either directly or indirectly, and will require changes in our lifestyles and societies to mitigate against and adapt to its impacts. In the United Kingdom, many people are already experiencing more frequent and severe flooding events, and changes to weather patterns such as more frequent heatwaves. Experiencing these effects can have impacts on mental health and emotional wellbeing, including new diagnoses of mental illness, or worse outcomes for those already diagnosed.

For many people, simply hearing about climate change and its implications can be distressing. The range of thoughts and feelings that can come up is understandable but can reduce the desire and ability to take action, and for some people the distress may be at a level that it impacts mental health and wellbeing.

Young people, including school-aged children, are thought to be particularly affected by worry or distress and a range of strong emotions about climate change. Such responses are understandable and should not be alarming in and of themselves. However, it is important that we provide appropriate support and space to acknowledge and process these responses, and to guide these thoughts and feelings into constructive narratives, coping strategies and actions that can protect the young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Even in adults, climate change has been associated with a range of emotions, including anger, fear, frustration, despair, anxiety, hopelessness, grief and feeling overwhelmed. Emerging evidence suggests young people are particularly affected. They are the generation that face the greatest threat from climate change, but most are yet to reach positions of power so they may not see how they can respond to the threat. Parents, teachers and mental health experts, as well as young people themselves, have shared their stories of high levels of anxiety, anger and loss. These experiences have been given a variety of new terms, including ‘eco-anxiety’ or ‘climate anxiety’, ‘ecological grief’ and ‘solastalgia’. It is also worth noting that climate denial and feeling fatalistic – that nothing we can do will make a difference so we don’t need to try – are also coping strategies, albeit maladaptive ones. People who feel a strong connection to the environment seem to be particularly affected. This can in some ways be a cause for hope, as the concern shows a care for things beyond ourselves, and in particular for the natural world. It is important to acknowledge to young people feeling ecoanxiety that their concerns arise from a place of care and empathy, and to catalyse this concern into action.

There are mixed results on whether feelings of anxiety specifically about climate change relate to symptoms of more generalised anxiety, stress, and other mental health diagnoses. However, research from the Climate Cares team at Imperial College London found that even for young people who have low or no anxiety in daily life, climate change is still a cause of moderate distress on average and was significantly higher than distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in this group. For many young people, the levels of distress are moderate and don’t interfere significantly with their daily life. For some children and young people however, the distress may be overwhelming,

with impacts on their sleep and daily functioning. For example, a BBC survey found that 1 in 5 children reported experiencing nightmares associated with climate change, and a [global survey](#) of 10,000 young people aged 16-25 found 45% reported that their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily lives (28% in the UK). Climate Cares [research](#) found that compared with the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change was more likely to evoke interest and engagement, guilt, shame, anger, and disgust; and distress associated with guilt, feeling responsible, and lacking agency. The young people (16-24) also reported feelings of fear, sadness and helplessness about both issues, and were worried for the future, and about changes to the environment and public health. Even amid the pandemic, media reports on climate change were a greater source of distress than those on COVID-19, highlighting the importance of the way we talk about these issues.

Some level of worry or even distress about climate change seems to be predictive of both greater support for climate action in society, but also greater feelings of personal responsibility and ability to contribute to change. Having a greater sense of agency to contribute to change and taking action to respond to the issues of the climate and ecological crises themselves may reduce anxiety and improve mental health and emotional wellbeing. It is also worth noting that not all the emotions associated with engagement with the issue of climate change are negative or distressing – there can be positive and welcome feelings too, for example from being connected with or inspired by others, seeing other positive benefits flow from climate action, or learning new skills. The Climate Cares study found over 50% of young people responding experienced improved wellbeing through eco-friendly practices.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN WHEN WE ARE TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT THE CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL CRISES, OR ENGAGING WITH NATURE? WHAT CAN WE DO?

First, it is good to be aware that when we discuss these issues, a range of thoughts and feelings can come up. These are natural, usually a healthy response to processing the information, and should not be pathologized (seen as an illness). You will also have your own thoughts and feelings about these issues, and actions you may take in response. It may be helpful to reflect on these yourself before exploring these topics with your students. They will have likely already heard a lot about these issues from various sources, and it may be helpful to consider what they already have heard or believe. While most may be accurate, there are some reports from psychologists of individuals believing climate change is an even bigger threat than scientific evidence suggests (for example, that it will guarantee the end of human civilisation). Provide students with space to express how they are feeling and acknowledge where they are at, and that these are understandable responses that show they care. Don't downplay the seriousness of climate change or dismiss their concerns and feelings. The narratives we hold about climate change can affect the way we feel and act. Consider exploring what some of these are. For example, narratives like 'I'm too small to make a difference', or 'no-one else cares about climate change' are untrue and disempowering. Conversely, it is not the responsibility of any one child to save the world, and it is important to work together with others and take care of ourselves.

Second, there is evidence that connecting with like-minded groups, spending time in nature, [having peer role models](#) and taking action to help contribute to change are all supportive of mental health and wellbeing. There are some wonderful examples of really creative projects from children and young people to share their thoughts and feelings about climate change and take action together, e.g.

see [‘Children and young people’s views on climate change: the eight projects’](#).

Third, there is evidence that ‘meaning-focussed coping’ is helpful in both reducing anxiety about climate change while supporting behaviour that cares for the environment, in particular for children and adolescents. Meaning-focussed coping can include strategies to draw on beliefs, values and goals to sustain wellbeing, including finding benefits in difficult situations, having faith in humanity (including scientists and those supporting the environment), and revising goals. Hopefulness and agency seem to protect mental health and facilitate action. Opportunities to use imagination and explore what a transformed world could look like can help students to learn more about the win-win opportunities available. There are [ways we can transform](#) how we eat, travel or where our energy comes from, that are good for our [health and wellbeing](#), and for the planet. There are opportunities for us all to work together with others in our communities to create hope for that better future through our actions.

WHEREVER WE ARE, THERE IS ALWAYS A PATH FROM THAT POINT TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE, OR A WORSE FUTURE. WE HAVE THE CHOICE OF WHICH ONE TO TAKE.

It can be helpful to include the following messages when teaching about the climate crisis:

- Make it clear that students' thoughts and feelings are normal when exploring these challenges, that they are ok, and they are not alone in experiencing a range of feelings. This could include sharing stories from other young people.
- Make it clear that worry about these issues can be an important part of contributing to action, and that there are many ways that every person can contribute to solving these issues.
- Encourage narratives that can facilitate hope – highlight all the wonderful young people active in making change, and the actions of many different scientists, engineers, policy makers and others. In particular, there are many ways that action on climate change can have benefits for many other things we care about – also known as 'co-benefits'. These win-win opportunities are a cause for real optimism; e.g. by improving green spaces, reducing air pollution, using active transport (such as biking and walking), and improving how well our homes are heated and cooled, we can make our lives happier and healthier and our societies more equal, while at the same time reducing climate change and becoming more resilient to its impacts.
- It is also worth noting that the wider impacts of climate change on our societies and human health is important to include in studies of climate and the environment. Climate change can exacerbate inequalities in our societies, but in addressing it we have a chance to make a healthier, more equal society. We need to help students build 'systems thinking' to understand the relationships between these issues, and why they matter no matter what they care about.

Useful activities may include:

- Provide space for the students to reflect on how it makes them feel to engage with these issues. This can include activities that guide the students through such reflection and exploration.
- Develop a stronger sense of agency in young people. This includes the desire, motivation, knowledge and capacity to act, and the sense that their actions can make a difference. Each student will have their own unique capabilities and ways to contribute to change. What interests and skills do the students have? What actions do they take already?
- Provide opportunities for students to connect with the natural world. This can help them increase their desire to protect it, but there is lots of evidence that spending time in nature and using urban green and blue spaces is supportive of mental health and wellbeing, as well as physical health.
- Help students think through their vision for the world they want to see. There are many ways that the actions necessary to support a safer climate future or improve biodiversity can also help other parts of our society. Such messages of hope may be important in protecting young people's mental health and wellbeing in the face of these challenges and facilitating action rather than overwhelm.
- Make available resources and tools that the students can access if they feel overwhelmed, and highlight that they can speak to you as their teacher or another trusted adult about these concerns if they feel they are becoming too much



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- Provide opportunities for students to take action to improve the environmental impact of your school e.g. via a Sustainability Champions network, with energy or biodiversity audits, tending to natural areas or planting trees.

Activity guides to support all the above approaches and more are provided in resources from the NHM Urban Nature Project developed by the Climate Cares team.

OTHER LINKS AND RESOURCES

[Climate Psychology Alliance: Resources for Parents, Teachers and Carers](#)

Royal College of Psychiatrists:
[Eco distress: for parents and carers](#)

[Eco distress: for young people](#)

[Force of Nature: Mobilising Mindsets for Climate Action](#)

[9 things you can do about climate change](#)

[9 things you can do for your health and the planet](#)

[Imperial College London briefing paper on the links between climate change and mental health](#)

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