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Climate anxiety: trigger or threat for mental disorders?

A recently published paper by Hickman and colleagues¹ provides evidence supporting an idea that has been growing over the past few years in the scientific community: climate anxiety (anxiety relating to the global climate crisis) affects a substantial proportion of children and young people (aged 16–25 years) worldwide. Climate anxiety occurs mainly in lower-income countries located in areas that are more directly affected by climate change. Despite this concerning reality, climate anxiety is not yet considered a mental health disorder. Moreover, little is known about its potential short-term and long-term effects on mental health.²

Existing literature suggests that climate anxiety tends to occur particularly in younger people because they are more aware and concerned about climate change.³ Furthermore, Sheth and colleagues⁴ suggest a strong association between chronic exposure to environmental stressors and psychopathology in young people, with stress being linked, for example, to anxiety and depressive disorders. In light of this evidence, and considering that young people are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues because they are at a crucial stage of their psychological development, there is an emergent need to determine whether climate anxiety is potentially a short-term or long-term risk factor for mental disorders.

As usual, the chicken or the egg causality dilemma must be carefully considered. For example, climate anxiety might be a risk factor for generalised anxiety disorder, but a generalised anxiety disorder might also place people at risk of increasing climate anxiety over time. There might be a bidirectional association between both variables.

Little is known about these potential cause-effect relationships; therefore, this topic seems to be a promising and extremely important direction for future research.

For now, although the association between climate anxiety and mental disorders is still unknown, young people's mental health must be protected by providing therapeutic support to those who have climate anxiety. Thus, although governments and policy makers are directly responsible for developing policy-based actions against climate change,¹ clinicians should also be aware of the evidence suggesting that engagement in pro-environmental behaviours and initiatives, especially in contexts of high collective and participative efficacy, are likely to be a helpful strategy for coping with climate anxiety.⁵

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