



Managing eco- emotions: A guide for educators

If you're reading this, you probably understand enough about climate change to know what eco-anxiety feels like. A 'chronic fear of environmental doom', that can 'flare up', affecting thought processes and daily functioning or simply simmer in background, as a nagging 'knowing'.

It might feel daunting to consider how to help children manage feelings when you're struggling to deal with eco-emotions yourself.



All feelings are valid.





What are eco-emotions?

The Climate Psychologists (Kennedy-Woodard & Kennedy-Williams, 2022) stress the adaptiveness of eco-anxiety. It is not a pathological problem or diagnosis, more an understandable response to a valid existential threat.

Emotional responses are more complex than just anxiety, and unmanaged eco-anxiety may sometimes develop into other emotions (e.g. depression, Scriberas & Fernando, 2021). This has led to the recognition of a new lexicon of 'eco-emotions', with some examples below (e.g. Coffey et al., 2021).

MEASURING ECOANXIETY

Researchers are developing scales to try to capture 'eco-emotions' (e.g. Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Hogg et al. 2021)

Given the fast pace of change of the context of climate change, it seems unlikely that the concept will ever be meaningfully standardised.

Rather than trying to compare or rate eco-emotions between pupils, scales may be useful to monitor change following intervention. See Appendix for an example to use.

CLIMATE CHANGE ANXIETY SCALE CLAYTON & KARZIA (2020)					
COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT	1	2	3	4	5
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate					
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to sleep					
I have nightmares about climate change					
I find myself crying because of climate change					
I think "why can't I handle climate change better?"					
I get away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change					
I rattle down my thoughts about climate change and analyze them					
I think "why do I react to climate change this way?"					
Total cognitive impairment (0-40) Higher scores indicate greater anxiety affecting thought processes					



Eco-emotion	Definition
Meteoranxiety	Anxiety stemming from the increased frequency of extreme weather events. e.g. experiencing a flare up of climate anxiety during a heat wave
Eco-paralysis	Inability, due to fear or hopelessness, to respond to environmental problems. Often associated with the thought 'it won't make a difference'
Eco-guilt	Guilt over wanting to do something for the planet but not acting on it. e.g. feeling bad about flying or drive a petrol car
Solastalgia or 'eco greif'	Distress caused by the ongoing loss and grief of a place that's being irreversibly altered. e.g. noticing about bird migratory patterns changing / population decline.
Terrafurie or 'eco anger'	Anger, shared by many activists, over the damage done to the planet. This can often be directed at groups e.g. 'politicians', 'older people'.
Eco-anxiety or climate anxiety	Chronic fear of environmental doom. Anxiety over anthropogenic climate change

These emotional responses may fluctuate and interact with each other. It's probably not helpful to try over-categorise them in a person, but just be aware that the emotional picture may be complicated and change depending on external events.

Some emotions may be helpful. Feelings of anger have been associated with engagement in positive climate action (Stanley et al. 2021), while facing grief may prevent the mechanisms of denial from kicking into action.

Eco-anxiety, however, seems to be the most discussed term, often serving as an umbrella term to capture much of the above.



Eco Emotion Recommendations



Acceptance of feelings:

- Communicate that all feelings are valid. Sometimes we think anger is unacceptable, but anger often is just masking pain and helplessness
- The aim isn't to 'get rid' of difficult feelings, so resist the temptation to provide false hope
- Eco-emotions show you care and can have a helpful, motivating aspect (Pihkala, 2020). Try reframing it.
- Model sharing some of your own feelings. If appropriate, using some of the eco-emotions words, above, may normalise feelings

Give pupils' feelings a voice:

- Don't assume that you know what someone is feeling - ask about their feelings and experiences
- Use visual and kinaesthetic prompts if pupils need help articulating feelings e.g. feelings wheel, get them to stand in a line of a 'scale of anxiety', or complete the questionnaire in the appendix if appropriate.
- Formalise student 'voice' through an 'eco-council' to represent views



emotional WEATHER

 GLOOMY CONFUSED	 PARTLY SUNNY	 CHEERFUL
 RUSHED	 HOPEFUL	 TEARFUL, SAD
 FRUSTRATED	 RELAXED	 CHAOTIC

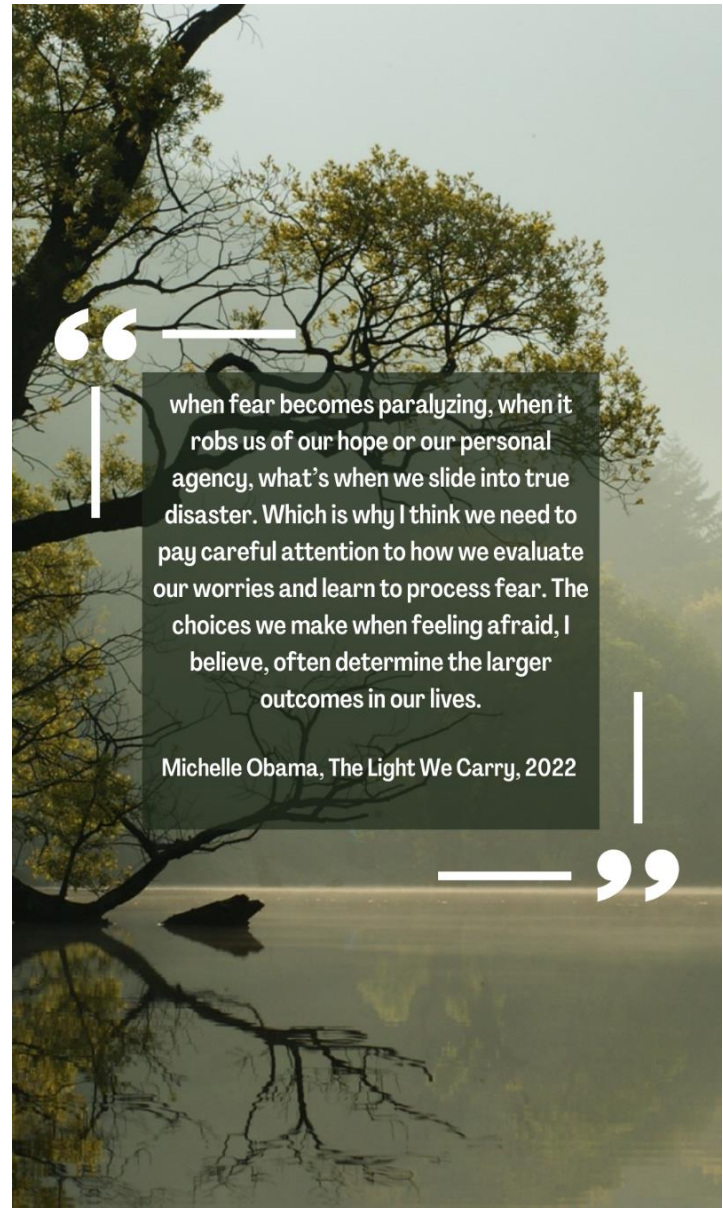


Isn't eco-anxiety a privilege?

Yes. In the sense that it implies only awareness of climate impacts, not actual experiences of life altering consequences. The direct and gradual impacts of climate change are being felt acutely in many parts of the globe, often in communities and populations that did least to produce historical carbon emissions.

Moreover, it is understood that climate change impacts will widen existing social inequalities within countries, as disadvantaged people tend to be more exposed and susceptible, having fewer resources for recovery and coping (Islam & Winkel, 2017). The 'Climate Justice' agenda needs to be understood by all citizens, in order to provide support for policies that take account of the complex socio-political factors involved in climate change mitigation.

Although not considered in this guide, direct impacts, adaptation and climate justice are undoubtedly more pressing issues than the eco-emotions of the fortunate. The psychological impacts of events like floods, direct heat and wildfires are significant and lead to 'cascading' secondary consequences that can include famine, economic collapse, mass migration, and war (Wallis-Wells, 2019).



when fear becomes paralyzing, when it robs us of our hope or our personal agency, what's when we slide into true disaster. Which is why I think we need to pay careful attention to how we evaluate our worries and learn to process fear. The choices we make when feeling afraid, I believe, often determine the larger outcomes in our lives.

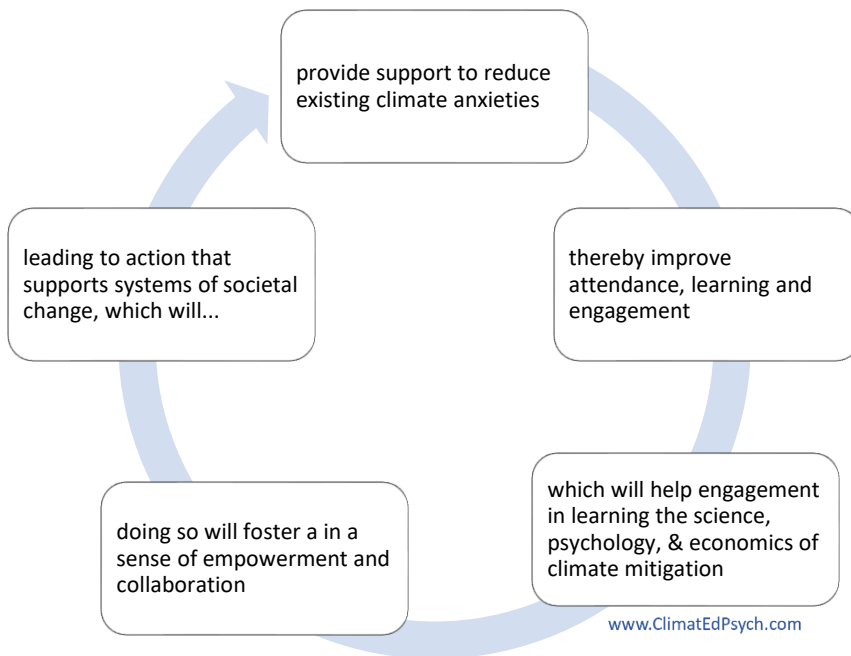
Michelle Obama, *The Light We Carry*, 2022

* It is reasoned here: those least affected by climate impacts have a responsibility to use their privilege for mitigation actions for all; this will not be effective from an individualistic mindset of self-preservation and fear. *



Paralysing fear or depression is not helpful for climate action, learning or general wellbeing.

In the wrong hands (think: social media, AI), climate education can engender misinformation, fear and fatalism, leaving people less able to think clearly and more likely to be manipulated.



Educators are uniquely placed

to support young people in a virtuous cycle of emotional regulation, critical engagement in climate change complexity, empowering action, agency and progress towards sustainability.



The key is containment

For educators and adults to work on their own emotions so that they can be available, empathic and not overwhelmed or triggered by young people's emotions.

This is the oxygen mask principle; you sort yourself out before helping others. Model the self-regulatory habits you would like children to have



Education Recommendations



Making eco-emotions a whole school priority:

- Educators need organisational and peer support for eco-emotion work with young people (Pihkala, 2020)
- Introduce the topic in assemblies, form time and in displays around the school.
- Raise the climate justice agenda. Ask and stay mindful of the experiences of family in most affected populations and areas.
- Include case studies and personal stories of those affected by climate disaster. This helps avoid 'compassion collapse' (Slovic, 2020)
- Consider ways to involve parents.
- Appoint a sustainability lead (as per DfE guidance, 2022), who is also able to take on a pastoral/eco-emotion role.

Staff self-care and support

- Educators need protected time, training and opportunities to work on their own eco-emotions (see further guidance below)
- Signposting to sources of additional support if necessary.
- Peer support groups in school (e.g. climate staffroom sessions) to share and air issues arising
- If you are having a particularly strong 'flare up' of eco-emotions, delay teaching climate related topics until you are feeling more grounded.





How to manage eco-emotions

1. Managing emotional 'flare ups'

2. Avoiding thinking traps

3. Habits for preventing 'flare ups'

The suggestions below are relevant to both children and adults. Educators are encouraged to engage with these ideas for themselves, so they can model it authentically for young people.

1. Managing emotional 'flare ups': Regulating the nervous system

When an existential threat is perceived, our sympathetic nervous system is triggered (fight, flight, freeze response).

While this system is useful to respond to imminent threat (like an attacker), it does not help with taking the positive action and decisions needed to tackle climate change. Being in this state long term can lead to mental health difficulties and a lack of action.

Sometimes the knowledge that climate change is a real existential threat can serve to prolong or maintain anxiety cycles.

However, we need to distinguish the threat *right now* and threat more generally. It can be helpful to run through the 'self-talk' in the flow chart below before self-regulatory /grounding activities.



Breathing exercises

BOX Breathing

Deep breathing using your hand.

Self-regulation / grounding activities

These mimic the body's parasympathetic nervous system when calm and relaxed, so send signals to the brain to get back into that state.

These are child friendly examples and not climate specific, so do use your own preferred method if you have one.

Breathing techniques are generally considered best for panic-like feelings.

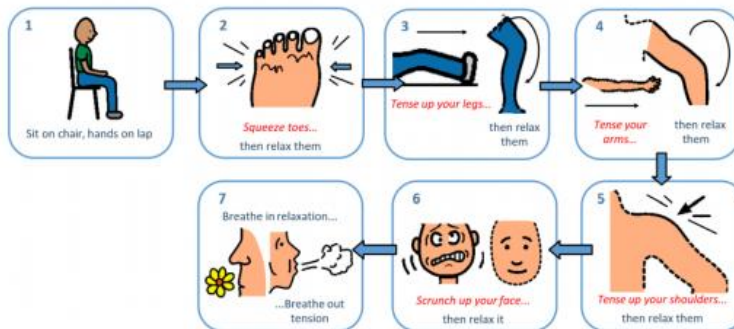


Attention to the present moment/ cognitive distraction

- 5,4,3,2,1
- [Tapping/ emotion freedom technique](#)
- Going for a walk
- Getting out in nature



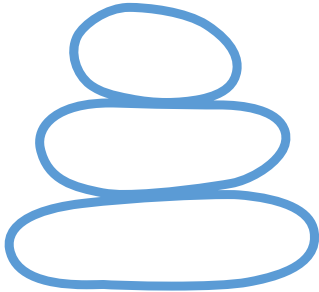
Progressive Muscle Relaxation Routine



Progressive Muscle relaxation



1. Eco-emotion Recommendations

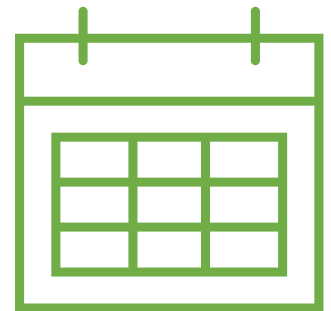


Teach and Practise self-regulation :

- Try and practise self-regulatory breathing, cognitive and muscular relaxation techniques for yourself. You may need to repeat them, or try different combinations
- Teach and practise them with young people, asking them which kind of approach they prefer.
- Small groups tend to work better, to minimise giggling and distractions

Routines and normalising

- it can be helpful to incorporate these exercises into daily routines (e.g. after breaktime).
- it may also be a good idea to 'sandwich' relaxation exercises before and after difficult teaching topics, that may be upsetting to some people.
- alternatively, if you notice someone is upset, or the class is a bit agitated, you have a mini 'self-regulation break'.





2. Avoiding thinking traps

While it is acknowledged that eco-anxiety isn't due to 'faulty thinking', there are some thinking habits that can reinforce the anxiety and make it worse than it needs to be.

Thinking traps are often shortcuts that oversimplify a complex situation, rather than reflect reality.



Climate Change Thinking Traps



Saviour Complex

- e.g. "I've got to convince them"
- Overassuming responsibility
 - Can lead to burn out.
- You don't have to save the world



Selective attending & doomscrolling

- e.g. "governments are doing nothing"
- Excessive 'bad' news consumption
 - Linked to poor mental health
 - It can warp your worldview



Catastrophising & Fatalism

- e.g. "what's the point, we're all doomed"
- Can lead to 'giving up',
 - Can cause demotivate others
- Projections are not fact, the reality is more complex



Foreboding Joy (Brown, 2015)

- Hypervigilance
 - Always on on look out for threats
 - Being unable to relax and enjoy life
 - Can lead to burn out.



Overgeneralising & the myth of self interest (Miller & Ratner, 1998)

- e.g. "people only care about themselves"
- Tend to over-estimate others' self-interest



Black and White thinking all or nothing thinking

- e.g. "governments are doing nothing"
- reality is more complex and 'greyscale'



Emotional Reasoning

- e.g. "I am scared of X, that's the risk worst fears often reflect past experiences we can't know for sure what is most likely"



2. Eco-Emotion Recommendations

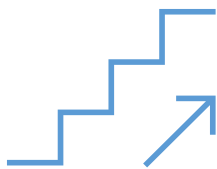


Celebrate progress & limit 'news'

- limit your news consumption to 10 mins daily.
- Look for positive, balancing news e.g. Nexus, Cipher, Earthshot prize, HappyEcoNews
- Thank other people for their efforts and celebrate them.
- Consider engaging in the DfE's Climate Leaders' Award
- Look at past examples of social change with pupils (e.g. Ozone layer, smoking ban in UK)

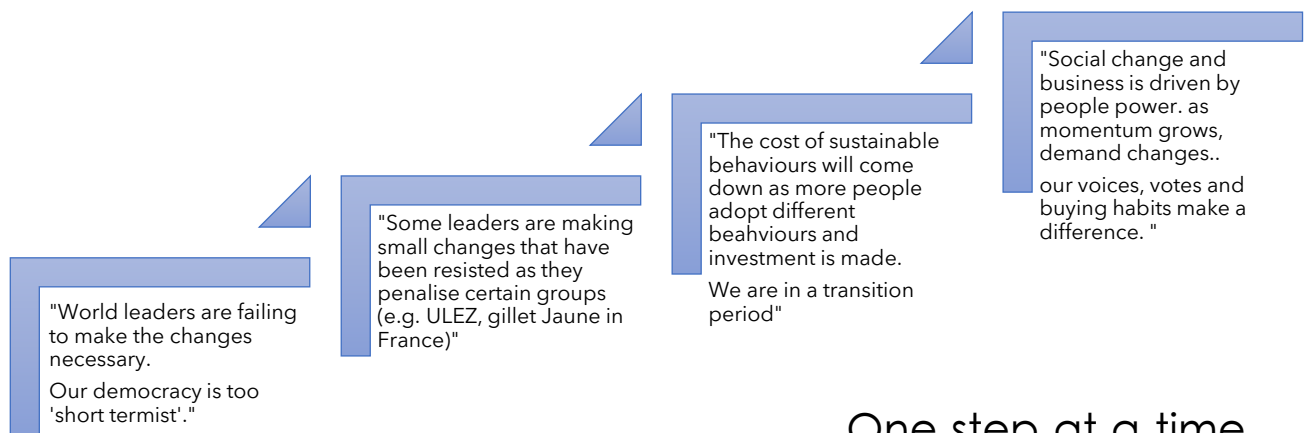
A balanced perspective

- It can be helpful to remember that you are only responsible for yourself and your actions. You don't have to save the world
- Through that, you may influence other people. Sometimes in ways you don't even realise. Trust in the social comparison effect - we tend to copy each other.
- We might not even know what is 'best'. Read this old Zen story to pupils: Good luck, bad luck, who knows?



Reframe faulty thinking:

- if a pupil (or yourself) has an unhelpful thinking pattern (e.g. nothing I do makes a difference), acknowledge the validity of their concerns then see if you can modify the statement, 'one step at a time' to take reality into account.
e.g my actions have a small influence on others, I might not see how much that is etc...



One step at a time



3. Habits for preventing anxiety 'flare ups'

It is inevitable that there will be 'triggers', that provoke an increase in climate anxiety. However, the intensity of feelings can be somewhat reduced by adopting these well-being habits.

Take care of yourself

It might sound obvious, but being tired, too hot or cold, hungry, dehydrated or in pain can really make it harder to manage feelings.

As well as attending to our basic needs, we have physical, psychological and social needs that the New Economics Foundation have identified as being key to wellbeing:



TALK & LISTEN,
BE THERE,
FEEL CONNECTED



DO WHAT YOU CAN,
ENJOY WHAT YOU DO,
MOVE YOUR MOOD



REMEMBER
THE SIMPLE
THINGS THAT
GIVE YOU JOY



EMBRACE NEW
EXPERIENCES,
SEE OPPORTUNITIES,
SURPRISE YOURSELF



Your time,
your words,
your presence



Sit with your feelings

Just because we all have feelings, it doesn't mean that we are all practised in *feeling* them.

Western culture seems to think that we should be happy all the time, so many of us tend to try to push away unpleasant feelings, often using distractions (phone) or substances to 'self soothe'.

The trouble is that this can cause you to react in an 'outburst' later, as you have unprocessed emotions & thought patterns. It can also lead to an increased level of cortisol (stress hormone) and muscular tension to be 'stored' in your body, causing longer term illnesses.

The feeling will keep on 'reappearing' until it has been 'allowed' to run its course.

Toxic Positivity

Sounds like:

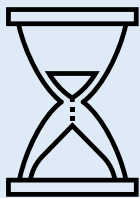
- Good vibes only
- Just need to hustle harder
- The bad only makes you stronger
- No excuses

Instead, let's try:

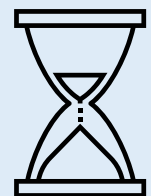
- All feelings allowed
- It's ok to rest
- That sounds really hard, I hear you
- How can I support you?

Not every hard circumstance needs a silver lining.

@ourmamavillage



Did you know?



If you actually 'sit with a feeling' and let it be there (without wishing it away, or thinking it's terrible), a feeling 'cycle' is believed to only last 90 seconds (Rosenberg 2019).



Dr Louise Edgington

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Feeling Overwhelmed? Remember “RAIN”

Four steps to stop being so hard on ourselves.

R

Recognize
what's
going on

A

Allow the
experience
to be there,
just as it is

I

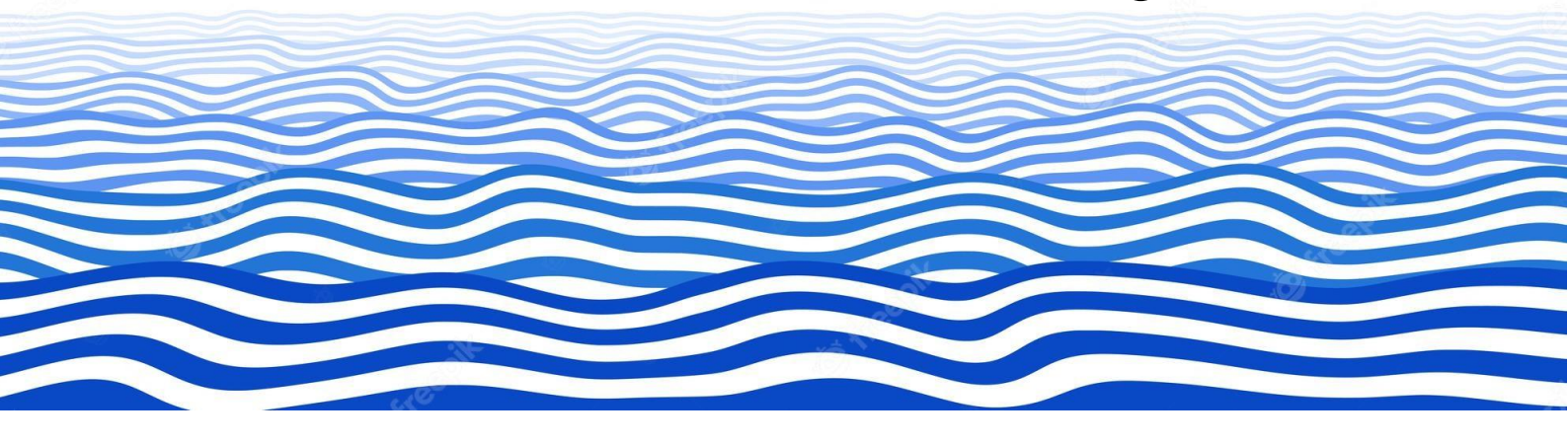
Investigate
with
kindness

N

Natural
awareness,
which comes
from not
identifying
with the
experience

www.tarabrach.com

It may also help to think about feelings
like waves, that come and go





THE FIVE STAGES OF THE GRIEVING PROCESS

KÜBLER-ROSS GRIEF CYCLE



There is much to grieve with climate change impacts. It is important to make space for these feelings when they arise. n.b.

- Grieve what is already lost, not future projections as they are not fact.
- Acceptance does not mean being ok with climate change - it means acknowledging the reality of what has happened so far. You don't have to like it



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Some people find it helpful to 'welcome' their eco-emotions and say 'thank you' to them.

Eco-emotions can show us that we have empathy, point to what we really value and give us motivation and strength to fight for what we care about

Get comfortable with uncertainty!

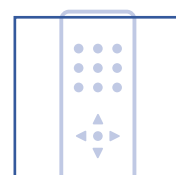
We live in a time where we make schedules, buy insurance, follow regulations, and research reviews, all to make our lives more predictable and 'safe'.

However, even with the best planning and preparation, life is inherently uncertain. This is going to become even more the case as the impacts of climate change and AI make uncertainty and change the norm.

Accepting changes and modelling adaptability will be key.



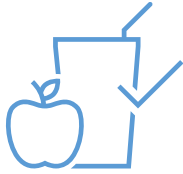
**The illusion
of control**



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3. Eco-Emotion Recommendations



Basic Needs

- Tend to your own basic needs and be vigilant for pupils who may be tired & hungry
- Keep a thermometer in your classroom, regulate the temperature and offer water regularly
- Practise the 5 ways to wellbeing yourself and teach it to pupils. e.g. You could incorporate 'take notice' into taking the register - pupils say one thing they

Sit with your feelings

- Try to notice how you react when anxious. see how it feels to not do that (e.g. put down the phone)
- Try R.A.I.N. meditations with yourself and pupils to develop the practise of being with feelings. (e.g. free meditations on InsightTimer)
- Welcome all the feelings and thank them for showing you what you care about. Never tell a pupil to 'cheer up' or 'stop crying'.
- Emotion coaching is a helpful approach when dealing with



Get Comfortable with uncertainty

- Notice how well you adapt to changes in routine.
- Practise 'sitting with uncertainty' by trying out new things from time to time. Anxiety Canand have some helpful resources on this.
- Model adaptability for pupils by keeping abreast of developments and learning new skills.
- You could ask pupils hypothetical questions to help them consider change e.g. what could you do if the car broke down/ the train was cancelled?



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CLIMATE CHANGE ANXIETY SCALE CLAYTON & KARZIA (2020)

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT	1	2	3	4	5
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to sleep.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have nightmares about climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find myself crying because of climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think, "why can't I handle climate change better?"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I go away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I write down my thoughts about climate change and analyze them	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think, "why do I react to climate change this way?"	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Total cognitive Impairment (8-40)					
Higher scores indicate greater anxiety affecting thought processes	<input type="text"/>				



CLIMATE CHANGE ANXIETY SCALE CLAYTON & KARZIA (2020)

FUNCTIONAL IMPAIRMENT

1 2 3 4 5
Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

My concerns about climate change make it hard for me to have fun with my family or friends.

I have problems balancing my concerns about sustainability with the needs of my family

My concerns about climate change interfere with my ability to get work or school assignments done.

My concerns about climate change undermine my ability to work to my potential.

My friends say I think about climate change too much

Total Functional Impairment

Higher scores indicate greater anxiety affecting thought processes