

# **Climate Anxiety 101**

**UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
CLIMATE WELLBEING GUIDE**

The Climate Wellness Guide is based on Claire Brandenbarg's (MNRM Candidate) holistic research on Climate Anxiety in her paper *Climate Anxiety: A Literature Review*. It is through her thorough investigation of Climate Anxiety, its sources, effects, and ways forward that the Climate Well-Being Guide has been created for the UM body.

## **Have you or someone you know experienced overwhelming concern, sadness, and/or anxiety related to the issue of climate change and its impacts?**

As the ecological impacts of climate change continue to settle in across the globe, attention also needs to be paid to the social impacts (such as mental and emotional health). Climate anxiety, as a psychological response to climate change, is one such impact. Put simply, climate anxiety can include any negative emotions connected to the issue of climate change and its impacts such as fear, stress, worry, concern, and overwhelm. Recognizing and understanding these emotions which surround climate change is important; they are not always recognized in research and discussion about climate change, yet there is a strong link between the issue of climate change and mental health.

While there is increasing information being discovered and circulated around climate anxiety as a legitimate mental health concern, even in the popular media, climate anxiety is a newer area of both anxiety research and climate change-adjacent research. Therefore, its boundaries are not yet neatly defined. This resource provides information for University of Manitoba students who may be experiencing climate anxiety, know someone else who is experiencing it, or are looking to learn more about it.

# WHAT IS CLIMATE ANXIETY?

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**Climate anxiety** occurs when the impacts and/or awareness of climate change begin to cause anxiety or other negative emotions in an individual.

## **What does climate anxiety look like?**

Similar to the experience of anxiety more generally, experiencing climate anxiety involves **physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, and future-oriented apprehension.**

**Academics point to to three areas of significant concern regarding the ways that climate change influences mental health:**

- 1.** how individuals directly experience the impacts of climate change,
- 2.** how vulnerable communities have and will increasingly struggle with “the social economic, and environmental determinants that promote mental health,” and
- 3.** the emotional distress and anxiety about a climate-change infused future.

Climate anxiety can be both direct or indirect; for example, a person may feel anxiety and sorrow because their coastal city is experiencing increased sea level rise due to climate change (i.e., direct) or because they feel that climate change is taking away their future (i.e., indirect). As such, climate anxiety includes any experience of anxiety related to and/or caused by climate change.

# WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF CLIMATE ANXIETY?

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Identifying the source and effects of climate anxiety is essential to creating practical knowledge and solutions around it.

**Climate anxiety can arise from distinctly different impacts. These are likely:**

1. Due to a tangible climate change-related weather event.
2. Due to an intangible secondary impact resulting from climate change.




## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE ANXIETY?

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**Effects can range from worry to diagnosable mental health behaviours and/or traits (e.g., depression). The effects of climate anxiety include some common emotions such as distress, fear, anxiousness, depressed feelings, numbness, helplessness, frustration, and/or anger.**

Climate anxiety is also experienced in various forms of severity depending on personal history and/or identity. For instance, groups that appear to be more at risk include individuals with existing depression or anxiety disorders, those working in the field of climate change, and children and adolescents.



# SOCIAL POSITION & CLIMATE ANXIETY

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Just as the effects of climate change have disproportionate impacts on racialized individuals, people experiencing material poverty, and those who live close to the Equator or in a coastal region (along with many other variables), so does climate anxiety contain its unique intersections of who experiences it, most extremely or at all.

Those in marginalized social positions or with either previous or ongoing mental illnesses may experience climate anxiety taking hold in a more extreme manner than those who occupy places of privilege in these regards.

Paying attention to your own experiences (such as those related to race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, age, previous mental health illnesses, etc.), may help you better understand your potential experience of climate anxiety. This is because the various positions, identities, and environmental conditions which makes up one's life shift how one might experience climate anxiety.

# HOW CAN WE COPE WITH CLIMATE ANXIETY?

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There is a certain challenge to coping with an experience like climate anxiety, considering that the source issue, climate change, is so far removed from the control of the individual. We may feel as though there are few impactful steps we can personally take to mitigate climate change; this feeling of helplessness can be overwhelming and can itself catalyze or contribute to worsening climate anxiety.

Coping with climate anxiety in a healthy manner requires careful attention, as avoidance or hyper fixation on the issue may cause you to become desensitised, resigned, cynical, skeptical or fed up with the topic.

Making use of some of the following strategies may help you cope with climate anxiety in a healthy and safe manner.



## *NATURE-BASED STRATEGIES*

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**Nature-based strategies** are one practical way to cope with climate anxiety. This can involve practices such as **outdoor therapy, forest-bathing, or Ecotherapy.**

Some scholars also suggest that engagement in climate activism may also be a helpful coping strategy. However, this coping strategy may not be productive or possible for those who have been directly affected by climate change impacts, given the challenge of coping with the outcome of said impacts.

## *TALKING WITH OTHERS*

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**Talking with friends, family or colleagues about the climate crisis offers an accessible starting point for those unsure about seeing a medical professional or seeking a formal support group regarding their experience with climate anxiety.**

## *ART-BASED ACTIVITIES*

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**Art-based activities, such as painting or creative writing, are other possible coping strategies for individuals experiencing climate anxiety.**

# HOPE & HEALTHY CLIMATE AWARENESS

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Worry is not an unreasonable reaction to the issue of climate change, but can be detrimental if morphed into climate anxiety without also imagining possible hopeful futures. Healthy climate awareness is possible and attainable! With work and self-care, climate anxiety has the potential to be transformed into climate awareness. Communicating one's emotions and experience with climate anxiety is key not only for preventing or alleviating climate anxiety, but for cultivating hope. Reaching out and talking about climate change anxiety is important both for you and your community!

## UM Wellness Resources

The University of Manitoba has a variety of resources for mental and physical health available to all students. Visit the links below for more details on workshops and counselling.

- [University Health Service \(UHS\)](#)
- [Health and Wellness Office](#)
- [Health and Wellness Peer Support](#)
- [UM Student Counselling Centre \(SCC\)](#)
- [Indigenous Elders](#)
- [Spiritual Services](#)