Eco-Anxiety

The world's climate is changing; everyone knows it. The United Nations' Secretary General, António Guterres, described our current situation as a "code red for society."The fact that greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at risk is irrefutable and some of the impact it has had already is irreversible.

For those of us that are perhaps eco anxious, this apocalyptic notion is ever concerning, exasperated by the fact that many individuals seem to remain indifferent towards the ever growing climate crisis, despite it flooding the headlines. Many just simply don't seem to care that their planet is crashing down around them and are in denial that they themselves are a large part of the problem. Unfortunately, until many people realise that they need to drastically alter the way they live and own up to their individual responsibility in tackling this problem, then nothing is going to change. The problem will only get worse as we become more industrialised, more globalised and evidently, produce more greenhouse gasses.

Eco-anxiety is increasing. It is the chronic fear of environmental doom. Although not yet an official diagnosis, it is becoming more and more recognised, especially in those of younger generations and communities with fewer resources to tackle the crisis. As a population, we are well informed about the physical impact of climate change; health-related stress, asthma and allergies, born illnesses, the consequences of floods and droughts, but there is increasing evidence linking those who experience the effects of climate change with depression, low mood and mental distress. It can be assumed that, given the current state of the issues at hand, this is only going to grow.

Climate anxiety is not confined to the UK and was confirmed very recently by the largest and most international survey of climate anxiety, conducted in 2020 by child psychiatrists in England, that young people aged 16 to 25 felt the emotional, cognitive, social, and functional burdens of climate change. Not surprisingly, respondents from countries in the "global south," who may have experienced or observed climate change, expressed more worry and greater impact on functioning. Governments are seen as failing to respond adequately, leaving young people with "no future" and "humanity doomed."

As an individual, I am increasingly struggling with Eco-anxiety and I'm constantly battling with the feeling of guilt for some for any contribution I might have towards the climate crisis and angry at myself, despite trying my best. I find myself verging on dehydration some days because I can't bring myself to buy a bottle of water when I forget my reusable one. I won't go out for coffee with my friends because I didn't bring my coffee-cup with me that day and the idea of being given a disposable cup distresses me. I fall out with family, friends and colleagues because they don't recycle properly, or don't recycle at all. I force myself to eat food I don't want to eat or like because I have been told food waste is a huge contribution to climate change, despite the fact that I am currently trying to recover from an Eating Disorder which I've battled with for almost a decade. I cry as I walk through the supermarket and see meat, dairy and eggs filling the aisles and people baskets, wanting to scream at them to stop. I walk around angry and upset with the world, terrified that if I put one foot wrong, make one mistake, that I am solely responsible for the ever-growing problem.

I sometimes think I am awful for wanting children because I know that the size of the population is one of the problems as well and convince myself that I don't really want them, when in reality, kids are something I have always dreamed of. I know I'd be a great mum. I have dreamt of how many kids I'd have, what their names would be, where we would live, their first words, the lunch boxes I'd pack them. I feel awful for wanting these things. I sometimes go to bed, the weight of the world on my shoulders, thinking of all the things I didn't do right that day and how I would be perfect tomorrow. Sometimes I lie there, not wanting to wake up purely because I feel ashamed of my existence, that I am not worthy. It is exhausting, depressing and draining.

I'm trying to learn to be more open about this, to voice my feelings in hope that others will speak out and this can become more recognised and socially accepted. There isn't much out there at the moment in regards to help for those struggling with Eco-anxiety, and until more people openly discuss this, nothing will change. Meanwhile, I'm trying to learn more positive ways in which I can deal with my anxiety and also be kinder to myself. It is important to recognise that these emotions are perfectly rational to have. It is a form of empathy and compassion, both of which I have always possessed and make me

a strong and kinder individual, but has equally been a downfall of mine on several occasions. These human characteristics are something we're born with and are important for the way we function and integrate as a society.

You'll notice it when you spend any time outdoors in nature, that sense of belonging and tranquillity you feel. Suddenly, the world seems less scary, everything is clearer; you can breathe. Being out in nature makes us feel connected with the world around us and momentarily grounds us as we feel a sense of acceptance. It is not ground-breaking information that fresh air and being out in nature is good for our mental health.

I have come up with some coping strategies to help me deal with the feeling of anxiety when it becomes overwhelming and I am seemingly unable to handle things. In case anyone reading this struggles with similar feelings, or knows of anyone who might be, I thought I'd share these:

1) Surround yourself with people who understand. Talking about this feeling is important, and knowing that it is OK to feel this way. Tell a close friend or family member you trust how you feel, tell them when you feel you don't have a grasp on things. They can help you rationalise situations, calm you down and be there to listen to your worries.
2) Take action. Do something that makes you feel better or settles you, something you regard as an ethical or sustainable choice. Go for a walk and pick some litter, volunteer with an important cause, educate someone and see if you can help them make any small changes in the right direction. This will make you feel like you're doing good, take away some of that hopelessness you feel and reinforce that you're important in the fight towards reducing climate change.
3) Prioritise yourself. This may seem hard, but you have to force yourself to do it. Whether you take 5 minutes or 1 day or 1 week just to yourself, you need to remember that you are the most important to you. Do something mindful. For some this could be baking, for some this could be a walk, perhaps a bath. Listening to an audiobook always calms me. I take time to look after myself, make sure my surroundings are tidy, my body is clean, my hair is brushed, and my skin hydrated. These things help me to unwind and feel a little calmer in a world that seems chaotic.

4) Seek Support. There are some services available online for you to speak to if you need to and counselling available which might help. Try speaking to your doctor to see if there's any direction they can point you in. They might even prescribe medication that helps ease some of the anxiety or depressive feelings you might be having.

https://www.ed.ac.uk/chaplaincy/wellbeing

https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org/

https://www.healthline.com/health/eco-anxiety#how-to-cope