

When the weather turns, so does **my mind**

The hidden toll of climate anxiety



PHOTOS: PIXABAY

AVNEE TANEJA

A gentle breeze once felt like an invitation to step outside, the first raindrops of the season brought joy, and winter's chill was a welcome relief.

But now? Shifting weather patterns bring something far more unsettling, anxiety. The air feels heavier with uncertainty; every heatwave carries a sense of unease, and storm warnings sound less like temporary alerts and more like omens of an unstable future.

This growing emotional distress, known as climate anxiety, is no longer a niche concern; it is now the awakening of a global mental health crisis. A 2021 survey

published in *The Lancet* found that 59 per cent of young people across 10 countries feel 'very' or 'extremely' worried about climate change, with 45 per cent saying it negatively affects their daily lives. And it's not just the young, across generations, people are feeling the emotional weight of a planet in distress.

For some, this anxiety manifests as chronic worry and panic attacks; for others, it is a paralysing sense of helplessness. One corporate professional in his mid-30s started experiencing panic attacks each winter as air pollution levels spiked in his city, waking up at night gasping for breath despite having no underlying health conditions. No mask, no air purifier could completely shield him from the toxic air, and the thought of stepping outside became a daily source of dread. A university student, deeply invested in environmental activism, found herself sinking into eco-paralysis, overwhelmed





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by the sheer scale of the crisis.

Every effort to live sustainably felt like a mere drop in the oh-so-vast ocean, and her guilt for simply existing in a resource-heavy world left her unable to act at all. Meanwhile, an elderly couple who had lived in their city for decades grieved for the environment they once knew, clearer skies, cooler summers, and winters that didn't come with an air pollution warning. Their anxiety wasn't just about the future; it was about mourning the past, about watching their home transform into something unrecognisable.

These experiences aren't isolated. A 2022 study by the American Psychological Association found that 67 per cent of Americans experience some level of climate anxiety, with younger generations reporting the highest distress. In Europe, increasing heatwaves and air pollution have been linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicide. While the crisis is massive, there are ways to navigate the psychological burden.

The first step is acknowledging that climate anxiety is a valid emotional response rather than dismissing it as an irrational fear. Understanding that this distress stems from genuine environmental concerns can help reframe

it as a signal for action rather than an overwhelming weight. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is effective in helping individuals reshape catastrophic thinking patterns and regain a sense of control over their emotions. Mindfulness and relaxation techniques, such as meditation, deep breathing, and spending time in green spaces, can also help ease feelings of helplessness and improve mental well-being. Research shows that simply being in nature, even for short periods, can significantly reduce stress and anxiety, reinforcing the connection between mental health and the environment.

Beyond individual coping mechanisms, taking action can be one of the most powerful antidotes to climate anxiety. Studies suggest that engaging in climate-related activism or community-led initiatives can transform feelings of despair into empowerment. Whether it's reducing personal carbon footprints, participating in local conservation efforts, or advocating for climate policies, these actions provide a tangible sense of agency. After all, some of the most remarkable environmental efforts have come from people who refused to let their anxiety turn into paralysis. When faced with a severe drought, Cape Town implemented widespread water conserva-



Building a support system is equally important. Discussing climate concerns with like-minded individuals, whether through local environmental groups or online communities, can reduce feelings of isolation. Sharing worries, brainstorming solutions, and fostering collective resilience can make the issue feel more manageable. Therapy and professional guidance can also be crucial, as more psychologists now recognise climate anxiety as a legitimate mental health concern and incorporate it into their practice.



Avnee Taneja is a psychologist passionate about mental health, criminology, and human behaviour. With a Master's in Criminology from the University of Manchester and ongoing studies in Psychology, she combines academic insight with real-world experience. From therapy and psychological assessments to research and advocacy, her work is driven by a deep commitment to understanding and supporting mental well-being.

tion efforts that not only eased the crisis but also gave people a renewed sense of control over their future.

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Finally, shifting the narrative around climate change can make a significant difference. While it's essential to acknowledge the urgency of the crisis, con-

suming a constant stream of doom-and-gloom news can deepen anxiety.

Seeking out stories of innovation, resilience, and successful climate solutions can offer a more balanced perspective. From cities implementing green infrastructure to advancements in renewable energy, progress is happening. Reminding ourselves of that can counteract the feeling of helplessness.

Climate anxiety is not an overreaction; it is a rational response to a real and pressing crisis. But shifting from fear to action, from despair to resilience, is key. The weather may be unpredictable, but our ability to adapt, support one another, and protect our mental well-being remains strong. While we may not control the storm, we can certainly decide how we face it.

Painting by PRANAB SAHA

