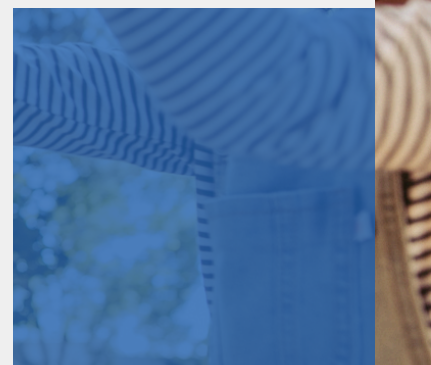


Funder Brief

Eco-Anxiety: How Time Outside Helps Youth Navigate Climate Emotions

By Heather White, Emily Fowler, and Sarah Newman

Investing in nature-based programs can help youth manage eco-anxiety and boost mental well-being.



Explore More
→

Blue Sky
FUNDERS
FORUM



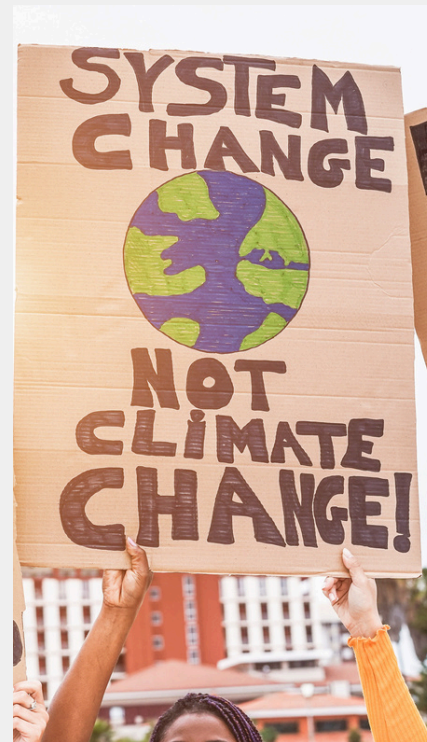
Introduction

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a major threat to mental health and well-being. Across generations, people are experiencing growing levels of anxiety, despair, and grief linked to direct encounters with extreme weather and indirect exposure through news and social media. Young people, in particular, are carrying the emotional weight of an uncertain future. **Eco-anxiety, a chronic fear of environmental doom*, has become a defining feature of their generation's experience.**

As public investment in mental health services and environmental education continues to decline, philanthropy's role has never been more critical. Funders across sectors, whether focused on youth wellbeing, mental health, education, community resilience, or environmental action, can play a vital role in supporting solutions that meet this moment.

Expanding access to nature-based programming offers a powerful, evidence-based way to help young people process their climate emotions and build resilience. Time in nature restores calm, strengthens connection, and fosters a sense of agency—reminding us that healing ourselves and healing the planet go hand in hand.

*As defined by the American Psychological Association (Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance).



Background: What are Eco-anxiety and Climate Emotions?

Eco-anxiety, also known as climate anxiety, is fundamental distress about climate change and its impacts on the planet and human existence. This can manifest as intrusive thoughts or feelings of distress about future disasters or the long-term future of humanity and future generations.

This fear amongst Gen Zers (ages 16-25) is exacerbated by three key factors, known as the “**eco-anxiety trifecta**” (*White*):

1. **Generalized Anxiety:** Rates of reported anxiety and depression in youth have dramatically *increased* over the past decade.
2. **Loneliness:** Gen Z is the *loneliest* generation. Compared to 5 in 10 elderly from the Boomer generation, 8 in 10 Gen Z suffer from loneliness.
3. **Hyperawareness:** One out of 4 Gen Zers do not want to have children due to eco-anxiety. A heightened awareness of climate catastrophe has them *worried about the future*.

The climate crisis has amplified existing mental health challenges globally, impacting overall wellbeing, life choices, and the capacity to take meaningful action in response. The United Nations in July 2024 stated that eco-anxiety is “**a crisis hiding in plain sight**” (*United Nations Environment Programme and International Science Council*).



A 2024 study published in the Lancet surveyed 16,000 youth in the US and found that:

77%

want the government to take bold action to address climate change



76%

said the future is frightening

52%

do not want children

85%

are worried about climate change, spanning political lines:

92% of Democrats

86% of Independents, and

74% of Republicans.

A Blue Shield of California study in 2023 of Gen Zers nationwide found that **68% said the climate crisis negatively impacts their mental health.**

Additionally, the physical, mental health and societal impacts of climate change are **magnified by other urgent global crises**, including biodiversity and nature loss and pollution (*United Nations Environment Programme and International Science Council*).

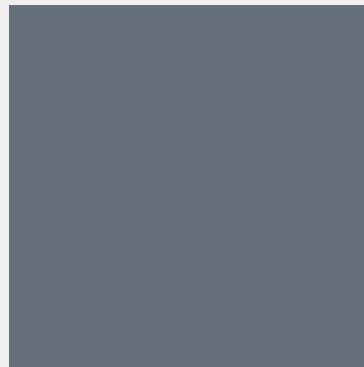


Why Connection to Nature is Key

In the emerging field of climate-mental health, **connecting with nature has proven to be a key intervention for supporting climate-related emotions** (Yale).

Research shows time in nature and “nature connectedness” can be beneficial to managing climate emotions and addressing eco-anxiety, though it is not a panacea or one-size-fits-all approach.

- **Stress relief:** Time in nature can help regulate the nervous system.
- **Awe:** Inspiration and wonderment about nature can help people feel more connected. It’s also an important way to encourage young children to begin forming their own connection with nature.
- **Belonging:** Connections with nature foster deeper relationships and a stronger sense of attachment to local landscapes.
- **Action:** Access to nature can inspire people to take climate actions that protect their communities. Research shows that taking action can be an important buffer to climate emotions.



Interventions and Resources

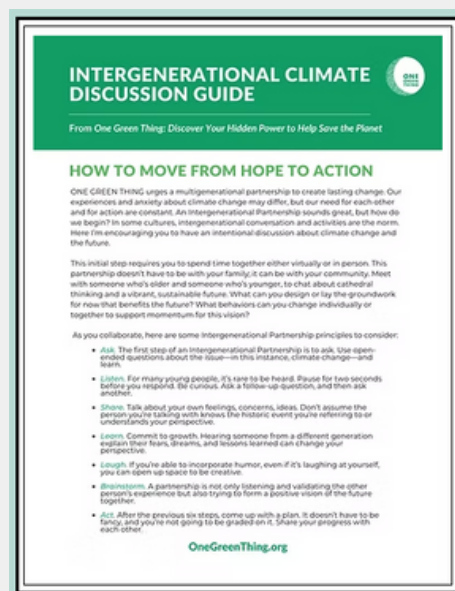
There are several groups providing resources and interventions for eco-anxiety and the wide range of climate emotions, including **OneGreenThing** and the **Climate Mental Health Network**. These include, but are not limited to:

Programs:

- **Professional development** training for educators and mental health providers.
- **Youth leadership** development and curriculum
- **Research** investigating and sharing the mental health impacts of climate change.

Tools and Resources:

- **Intergenerational Workshops**, making climate action achievable and enjoyable.
- **Reflection tools and creative exercises** to inspire creativity, community engagement, and long-term thinking.
- **Climate Emotions Wheel**, helping people identify and address emotions related to the climate crisis.



Overview of Latest Research

Recent research underscores the effectiveness of nature-based interventions in managing climate emotions and eco-anxiety.

Here are key findings:

Youth Experiences in Nature

Encouraging Physical and Mental Well-being: Activities like hiking, kayaking, and camping reduce stress and improve mental health. Spending time in nature has been shown to **lower cortisol levels, enhance mood, and provide a sense of peace**, which can counteract the feelings of eco-anxiety (*Dawson*).

Nature Walks and Mindfulness Practices: Programs that integrate mindful walking in natural environments help participants focus on their surroundings, reduce rumination, and experience calmness. These activities have been shown to decrease cortisol levels, thereby **lowering stress and anxiety linked to climate change** (*Dailianis*). A 2023 Study at Auckland University investigated the effectiveness of nature-based interventions in addressing climate emotions and eco-anxiety among diverse populations.

Environmental Education and Action Projects: Initiatives that combine education with hands-on environmental projects, such as tree planting, clean-up campaigns, and creating wildlife habitats, empower participants to take positive action. This **hands-on involvement fosters a sense of agency and reduces feelings of helplessness** related to climate change by demonstrating tangible impacts (*Dailianis*).



Photo from Climate
Mental Health Network

Therapeutic Horticulture Programs: These programs involve participants in gardening and plant care activities. Research shows that engaging in horticulture reduces anxiety and depression, enhances mood, and **provides a sense of accomplishment and connection to nature**, thereby alleviating eco-anxiety (*Rian*).

Wilderness Therapy for Adolescents: Wilderness therapy programs for youth combine outdoor adventure activities with counseling. These programs help adolescents develop coping skills, resilience, and a sense of empowerment by **overcoming challenges in natural settings**, which can reduce climate-related anxieties (*Rian*).

Urban Youth in Nature: Through an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of ten urban adolescent women (UAW) ages thirteen to eighteen, this study focuses on the human-nature relationship (HNR) of these ten women, specifically as it relates to urban nature. In this phenomenological inquiry, Shyla Earl and Erin Heinitz explain the impact of nature programming on holistic mental health, specifically when they write, **“Increasing awareness of urban nature’s benefits through urban nature-based community programming could encourage UAW’s use of these spaces, expanding their HNR and supporting their holistic health and well-being”** (81). Natural programming played a significant role in the women’s HNR, as “eight of the [ten] participants [have experienced] nature immersion as part of an after-school program” (76). This study focuses on how these ten young women relate to nature, what type of nature (urban or wild/natural) they feel the strongest connection to, and what impedes their HNR. Thus, this inquiry provides a strong foundation for future policies and programs relating to UAW and how to best support their HNR (*Earl and Heinitz*).



Photo from OneGreenThing

Community Based Programs

Community-Based Environmental Education: Programs that engage communities in environmental education and action projects, such as river clean-ups and tree planting, **promote a sense of agency and collective efficacy**. Participants learn about environmental issues and actively contribute to solutions, reducing feelings of helplessness and eco-anxiety (*Rian*).

Scale Up Communications about Programs that Connect Communities to Nature: Programs incorporating time in nature, access to tree canopies, walking in natural settings, and downtime outside help participants experience calmness and increased mental health. This literature review of studies showing increased mental health with time outside recommends that **public land managers “scale up” communication about the mental health benefits to time outside, provide more programming for communities in need, and partner with the healthcare sector.** (*Reuben & Himschoot*)

Philanthropy’s Role

In the face of rising eco-anxiety, **philanthropy has a crucial role to play in fostering resilience and well-being, especially among young people**. By investing in nature-based programming and community-led initiatives, funders can create accessible opportunities for youth to connect with the natural world, transforming feelings of fear and helplessness into agency and climate action.

Supporting research, educational programs, and mental health resources that highlight the restorative benefits of nature can help communities navigate climate emotions. And by bringing together partners across sectors, philanthropy can help build a more coordinated response to this growing crisis. Ultimately, strategic investment can cultivate a generation equipped not only to cope with eco-anxiety, but also lead the way toward a healthier, more hopeful future.

About the Authors

Heather White is the founder of OneGreenThing and a longtime environmental leader focused on transforming climate anxiety into personal, joyful action. She brings more than two decades of experience helping individuals and communities build momentum toward culture change and climate solutions.

Emily Fowler is the Chief of Start Up for OneGreenThing and a seasoned non-profit executive with 20+ years advancing progressive causes. A former public school educator and curriculum developer, she carries her knowledge forward in support of OneGreenThing's vision to help everyone discover their personal role in climate action.

Sarah Newman is the founder and Executive Director of Climate Mental Health Network, which she started after her own struggles with climate anxiety. Climate Mental Health Network offers tools, programs, and guidance to help communities better understand and address the collective and individual emotional impacts of the climate crisis.

Blue Sky Funders Forum is a national network of funders who believe in the power of the outdoors. Through convening, capacity building, and collective action initiatives, Blue Sky provides a platform for shared learning, collaboration, and resource mobilization. Together, we strengthen the movement by growing investment in equitable, meaningful outdoor experiences that improve quality of life, health, and well-being for all.



Works Cited

Dailianis, Anastasia T. *Eco-Anxiety: A Scoping Review towards a Clinical Conceptualisation and Therapeutic Approach*. 2020.

Dawson, Roxy. *The Benefits of Girls-Only Outdoor Programs: Empowering Young Women Through Nature*. 22 June 2023.

Earl, Shyla A., and Erin Heinitz. "Urban Adolescent Women's Human-Nature Relationship." *St. Catherine University*, 17 May 2017.

Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance. APA and ecoAmerica, Mar. 2017, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>.

Reuben, Aaron, and Elizabeth Himschoot. *Nature as a Mental Health Intervention: State of the Science and Programmatic Possibilities for the Conservation Community*. 2021.

Rian, Sage Winter. *The Impact of Nature Based Guidance Lessons on Third Grade Students' Anxiety and Connection to Nature*. Aug. 2019.

United Nations Environment Programme, and International Science Council. *Navigating New Horizons: A Global Foresight Report on Planetary Health and Human Wellbeing*. United Nations Environment Programme, 5 July 2024, <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/45890>.

White, Heather. *Eco-Anxiety: Saving Our Sanity, Our Kids, and Our Future*. Harper Horizon, 2024.

Yale Sustainability, Explainers, "Yale Experts Explain Climate Anxiety," (March 2023).

