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The Psychology of Climate Anxiety: Understanding Eco-Distress and Its Impact on Behaviour

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Abstract- ***Climate anxiety, often referred to as eco-distress, is becoming a vital aspect of the global climate crisis. Unlike the direct trauma of floods, fires, or heatwaves, climate anxiety stems from ongoing worry, sadness, guilt, and anger about environmental decline and future uncertainty. It's not a clinical disorder, but a widespread psychological response with emotional, cognitive, behavioural, social, and cultural implications. Research indicates that young people are particularly prone to eco-distress, which can significantly impact their daily lives and decisions about education, careers, and family. This paper explores the psychology of climate anxiety, examining its underlying causes, emotional and cognitive manifestations, and the social and cultural dimensions of eco-distress. It also discusses how people respond behaviourally to climate anxiety, the role of coping strategies, and the influence of policy, media, and communication. The paper concludes that striking a balance between awareness and constructive action is crucial in transforming climate anxiety into a catalyst for collective resilience and sustainable change.***

Keywords: Psychology, Climate Anxiety, Eco-Distress, Behaviour

I. INTRODUCTION

As the climate crisis worsens, its psychological impact has become increasingly hard to ignore. Beyond the direct trauma of floods, heatwaves, and wildfires, a growing number of people report experiencing persistent worry, grief, and anger about environmental degradation, which is often referred to as climate anxiety or eco-distress. Although not a clinical diagnosis, climate anxiety encompasses a range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural reactions to perceived existential threat and collective inaction. Global assessments now recognise mental health as a significant, yet often overlooked, dimension of climate risk, with implications for individual wellbeing, social cohesion, and decision-making (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2022).

Evidence on the prevalence and impact of eco-distress has expanded rapidly. One of the first large-scale cross- national studies of 10, 10,000 young people found that a majority experienced significant climate- related worry, grief, and perceived betrayal by governments, with reported effects on daily functioning and plans (e. g., hesitancy about career and family decisions). Subsequent reviews and meta-analyses have linked eco- anxiety to elevated psychological distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in general populations, while stressing that climate concern can be both burdensome and motivating. In short, climate anxiety is widespread, especially among youth and those acutely aware of climate risks (Hickman et al., 2021; Zhi et al., 2024).

Crucially, eco-distress is not merely an individual pathology; it is shaped by social context. Professional bodies in the UK and internationally frame climate change as a public mental-health challenge influenced by exposure to hazards, media, and institutional responses, as well as structural inequities that render some communities far more vulnerable. This framing highlights two co-existing truths: climate anxiety can impair sleep, concentration, and mood; yet, when validated and supported, it can also channel into constructive engagement, pro-environmental behaviour, and collective action. Emerging work in health and social psychology similarly links climate distress to shifts in lifestyle choices and political participation, while warning of maladaptive outcomes such as avoidance, paralysis, or doomism when support is absent (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021; Williams et al., 2024).

Policy and practice guidance increasingly call for integrated responses that protect mental health while enabling agency, through climate-informed healthcare, community-based, and nature-based interventions, as well as clear, efficacy-enhancing communication. The World Health Organisation

urges health systems to prepare for climate-related mental health burdens, and professional societies recommend climate literacy for clinicians alongside institutional decarbonisation. For educators and youth-serving professionals, the imperative is to acknowledge emotions without catastrophism, pair learning with action pathways, and cultivate hope grounded in credible solutions (World Health Organisation, 2022; American Psychological Association, 2025). This paper creates contemporary evidence on the psychology of climate anxiety, clarifies its outlines, and considers how eco-distress shapes (and can reshape) behaviour, arguing for responses that transform distress into durable resilience and prosocial action. However, before looking at these issues, it is important to clarify some concepts.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Psychology of Climate Anxiety

Climate anxiety, sometimes called eco-anxiety, is the ongoing emotional upset people feel when they think about the future of our planet. It often shows up as worry, fear, guilt, or sadness about climate change and what lies ahead. These feelings are not signs of being "overly sensitive"; they are understandable responses to real environmental danger and loss, and can affect our daily life and peace of mind (Dodds, 2021). For some, anxiety is a helpful signal; it can prompt action, such as learning more or joining community projects (Van Valkengoed & Steg, 2023). However, if these feelings become overwhelming and make it hard to live normally, that's when support may be needed (PubMed Staff, 2020). Particularly among young people, climate anxiety can feel like a heavy burden, filled with worry for the future, but it can also spark a desire to act and connect with others (Léger-Goodes et al., 2022).

Eco-Distress

Eco-distress refers to the feelings of worry, sadness, anger, or even a deep sense of being overwhelmed that arise when people think about climate change and environmental damage. It is not considered a disorder but a natural reaction to real and profound threats to our planet and our future. Often tied to a sense that our vital ecological foundations are in serious decline, eco-distress can affect daily well-being, even for those not directly impacted by climate events. While it can be distressing, this emotion may also motivate useful actions, such as caring more about the environment, joining community efforts, or supporting policies that protect nature. Therefore, eco-distress reflects both emotional burden and potential for positive engagement (ClimateXChange. n.d.; Albrecht, 2012; Coffey et al., 2024).

Psychological Roots (Causes) of Climate Anxiety

Climate anxiety often springs from deep-seated human fears, fear of losing our homes, loved ones, or the future's safety. It's not simply worry over far-off issues, but a reaction to very real and troubling changes in our environment. One key root is a sense of existential threat. Climate change challenges our understanding of safety, our place in the world, and even what life means. The concept of solastalgia, or "homesickness while still at home", captures the pain of witnessing cherished landscapes slowly transform or vanish (Albrecht, 2005). It is an emotional pain tied to the loss of familiar environments. Another psychological root lies in uncertainty and unpredictability. As the weather becomes more erratic, from sudden storms to unseasonal heat, people sense instability in their routines and threats to their safety. This erosion of predictability spills over into anxiety about personal and collective futures (Seth et al., 2023). Our brains also respond strongly to media exposure and social discourse. Continuous streams of alarming climate news, often referred to as doomscrolling, increase distress, making helplessness and dread feel overwhelming (Beattie, as cited in Ethos, 2025).

Personal traits further shape how we experience climate anxiety. Individuals with pre-existing generalised anxiety or a tendency toward chronic worrying are especially prone to eco-anxiety because environmental concerns easily tie into their broader worries (Kulsum & Ahman, 2023). Social dynamics also matter. When people feel morally betrayed—for example, by governments failing to act, or believe others don't share their concern, it intensifies feelings of isolation and frustration, pushing distress even higher (Seth et al., 2023). Importantly, climate anxiety isn't purely harmful. For many, it's a call to act, a motivator for involvement in environmental protection, lifestyle changes and community

engagement. Some eco-anxiety is practical, oriented toward solving problems rather than being immobilised by them (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022).

Consequently, climate anxiety is rooted in existential fear, environmental loss, uncertainty, media saturation, individual sensitivity, and social frustration. Understanding these psychological roots helps us recognise why these emotions are real and valid, and how, with the right support and action, they can lead to caring, constructive responses instead of despair.

Emotional and Cognitive Manifestations

Climate anxiety often shows up in how people feel and how they think. Understanding these emotional and mental patterns makes it clearer why this kind of anxiety can feel so heavy, and what might help.

- Emotional Manifestations

People experiencing eco-distress often describe a mix of strong feelings: sadness, fear, anger, guilt, and even despair. Many feel deeply upset about environmental losses, especially when their local landscapes, such as familiar forests, coasts, or heritage sites, are disappearing or changing beyond recognition. This emotional pain has a name: solastalgia, the grief felt when home becomes unrecognisable because of environmental harm (Albrecht, 2005). For some, climate anxiety also stirs a sense of moral betrayal, particularly when governments and institutions fail to act on climate warnings. This emotional response often leads to feelings of helplessness and frustration, further burdening emotional well-being.

- Cognitive Manifestations

On the thinking side, climate anxiety can make the mind spin with worry. People might ruminate on climate news, constantly replaying worst-case scenarios. This creates a kind of mental fog, reduced concentration, difficulty making decisions, or trouble sleeping. In some cases, emotional fatigue interferes with memory and focus. At the same time, a sense of agency, the belief that one can make a difference, affects cognitive responses (Goldwert, 2024). A recent study found that people with high intolerance of uncertainty (IU), those especially uneasy about the unknown future, experience greater distress in response to climate messages. Yet, paradoxically, IU (rather than climate anxiety itself) was better at predicting whether people supported climate policies or took steps to act (López-García, et al., 2025).

Another interesting cognitive-emotional insight comes from young adults. A study in Sustainability found that eco-worry and eco-anxiety act as emotional bridges between people's sense of climate agency (the belief they can help) and actual pro-environmental behaviour. In other words, thinking "I can do something" combined with emotional concern can motivate real action. Moreover, a recent study on environmental groups revealed that ecological anxiety was more strongly linked to collective action, like volunteering or attending climate protests, than to everyday personal actions like recycling (López-García, et al., 2025).

These emotional and cognitive effects often feed into each other. Emotional overwhelm, sadness, dread, and guilt make it hard to think clearly or focus. In turn, obsessive thoughts and uncertainty amplify emotional overwhelm, leading to exhaustion, lack of motivation, or even depression. Emotionally, climate anxiety can lead to grief, moral frustration, helplessness, and existential pain, especially when familiar places vanish or actions feel inadequate. Cognitively, it can result in rumination, worry, lowered concentration, disrupted sleep, and difficulties with decision-making. However, cognitive factors like intolerance of uncertainty and sense of climate agency are key influences that shape whether feelings transform into action or immobilization (Carasso-Romano et al., 2025). Therefore, recognising both the emotional and cognitive sides of eco-distress gives us a clearer path to support, through empathy, reducing uncertainty, strengthening agency, and nurturing constructive engagement instead of despair.

Eco-Distress Across Different Age Groups

Eco-distress, or the emotional burden of concern about the environment, touches people at every stage of life, though how it feels and shows up changes with age.

i. Young Children: This group of people may feel unease in the face of climate threats but might not fully understand them. They often express worry

through physical signs, nightmares, sleep troubles, or clinginess, especially when they have seen or heard about extreme weather events. Their emotions stem from a sense of vulnerability and the need for reassurance from caregivers (UNICEF South Africa, n.d.). In some countries, children and adolescents aged 5–18 showed varying levels of awareness; some were disengaged, others unaware, and others actively concerned, showing how understanding develops differently depending on age and context.

ii. Adolescents: Among adolescents, eco-distress often takes the form of worry, guilt, anger, or frustration. Many feel burdened by the perceived responsibility to "fix" problems they did not cause, yet they also want meaningful action, not just emotional support. In both the U.S. and France, teens spoke of anger, helplessness, and desire for climate justice, highlighting the importance of supportive discussion and engagement (Clayton et al., 2022). A wide study of Australian teenagers showed that a large segment experienced persistent or increasing worry over the years, which was linked to both higher depressive symptoms and greater political or civic engagement (Meo et al., 2025). Another adolescent study identified subgroups, including those deeply distressed yet proactive ("emotionally involved"), and some overwhelmed to the point of disengagement—underscoring that young people's responses vary significantly (Veijonaho et al., 2024) Young adults and youth in general often display the highest levels of emotional engagement with climate issues. For example, a global survey of 16–25-year-olds revealed that 59% felt very or extremely worried, and emotions like sadness, powerlessness, guilt, and anger were common, and these feelings often affected daily life (Hickman et al., 2021). In the U.S., around 85% of young adults reported at least moderate worry, and many said their concerns influenced life decisions like where to live or whether to have children (Lewandowski et al., 2024).

iii. Middle-aged and older adults: This group of people also experiences eco-distress, but their emotional responses may be more muted or shaped differently. A UK study found that younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) felt more emotionally threatened by climate change, experiencing stronger worry and guilt than Generation X, Baby Boomers, or older groups. However, the older generations still shared similar beliefs about climate change facts; their difference lay in emotional intensity (Poortinga et al., 2023)

iv. Older adults: These people can also suffer from anxiety-related symptoms: a Turkish study found that among people around 71 years old, higher climate anxiety linked with more insomnia, suggesting that eco-distress can disrupt sleep and wellbeing in later life (Poortinga et al., 2023).

Consequently, across all ages, concern about climate change remains widespread, even among older and middle-aged people sharing similar levels of worry, suggesting eco-anxiety isn't only a youth issue.

Social and Cultural Dimensions of Eco-Distress

Eco-distress does not occur in isolation but is shaped by the social and cultural settings in which people live. While climate anxiety may be a common reaction across the world, the way it is felt, expressed, and managed often depends on social relationships, cultural beliefs, and community structures. These dimensions influence how individuals make sense of environmental threats, how communities respond collectively, and what resources are available to cope with the distress. Understanding eco-distress through a social and cultural lens highlights that climate anxiety is not just a personal mental health concern but also a broader social issue that affects identity, traditions, and collective well-being.

- Social Dimensions of Eco-Distress

One of the strongest social factors influencing eco-distress is inequality. Communities that are more vulnerable to climate change, such as low-income populations and those dependent on natural resources, experience more anxiety and distress because their daily lives and livelihoods are at greater risk (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). In places where climate disasters frequently occur, like floods or droughts, people report higher levels of worry and fear compared to those in less affected areas. This suggests that social location, including class and

geography, has a significant role in shaping the intensity of eco-distress.

Social connections also matter. Individuals who feel supported by friends, family, or community groups often cope better with climate anxiety than those who feel isolated. Collective discussions, community gatherings, and shared cultural practices can help people express their fears in constructive ways. Research shows that communities with strong social networks recover more quickly from climate disasters and are better at managing the psychological impacts of environmental change (Berry et al., 2018). Social support reduces feelings of helplessness and creates a sense of shared responsibility for addressing climate risks.

- Cultural Dimensions of Eco-Distress

Culture shapes how people interpret environmental change and what meanings they attach to it. For example, Indigenous communities often experience eco-distress differently from urban populations because the environment is closely tied to cultural identity, spirituality, and traditions. When climate change disrupts land, water, or animals, Indigenous peoples not only face practical challenges but also deep emotional and cultural loss (Whyte, 2018). This has been described as *ecological grief*, where the destruction of ecosystems leads to mourning for cultural heritage and identity.

Similarly, religious and spiritual beliefs influence responses to climate anxiety. In some cultures, environmental changes are interpreted through religious frameworks, either as a test, a punishment, or a call to action. These interpretations can either intensify eco-distress or provide comfort by offering meaning and guidance. For example, some faith-based groups encourage stewardship of the Earth as a moral duty, which transforms anxiety into collective responsibility (Haluza-DeLay, 2014).

Cultural values also affect coping strategies. In more individualistic societies, eco-distress is often addressed through personal actions, such as lifestyle changes or therapy. By contrast, in collectivist cultures, coping tends to be more community-oriented, with an emphasis on group resilience and shared rituals. These differences highlight that mental health interventions for climate anxiety cannot be "one-size-fits-all" but must consider cultural contexts (Pihkala, 2022).

However, the social and cultural dimensions of eco-distress often intersect. For example, young people across cultures report high levels of climate anxiety, but their experiences are shaped by their communities and traditions. A study of global youth found that while feelings of anger and helplessness were common, cultural attitudes toward activism influenced whether young people responded with protest, silence, or adaptation (Hickman et al., 2021). Likewise, migrant communities in new countries may experience eco-distress both as a fear of climate change and as a cultural disconnection from traditional lands and practices.

The social and cultural dimensions of eco-distress show that climate anxiety is not only an individual emotional struggle but also a collective and cultural experience. Inequality, social support, cultural identity, and belief systems all shape how people perceive and cope with environmental change. Recognising these dimensions helps researchers, policymakers, and mental health professionals develop responses that are sensitive to the unique needs of diverse populations. By valuing cultural perspectives and strengthening social networks, societies can better address eco-distress and transform it into resilience and collective action.

Behavioural Responses to Climate Anxiety

Climate change not only affects the planet's physical systems; it also profoundly influences human behaviour. When people experience climate anxiety, they often respond in different ways—some take action, while others withdraw or become paralysed. These behavioural responses can be positive, such as lifestyle changes or civic engagement, but they can also be negative, like avoidance or hopelessness. Understanding these patterns is crucial because they influence how societies address the climate crisis and how individuals safeguard their mental health.

a. Proactive and Engagement-Oriented Responses

One of the most common behavioural outcomes of climate anxiety is pro-environmental behaviour. Many people channel their worry into positive action,

such as reducing waste, eating less meat, using public transport, or adopting energy-efficient technologies. Research has shown that climate-related worry can motivate sustainable practices, especially among young adults who see action as a way of regaining control (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Those who feel the strongest climate distress are often the most likely to adopt greener habits in daily life (Wullenkord & Reese, 2021).

Another form of active behavioural response is collective action. Eco-anxious individuals frequently engage in protests, join climate advocacy groups, or participate in community discussions. These activities not only address environmental problems but also help reduce feelings of isolation and helplessness by fostering solidarity. A study among European youth found that participating in climate movements gave many a sense of empowerment and reduced despair, even though their worries about the future remained (Ojala, 2023).

Engagement can also take the form of political behaviour, such as voting for environmentally oriented candidates, lobbying for climate policies, or signing petitions. In the United States and other countries, climate-concerned citizens report that their worry pushes them to demand stronger governmental action (Marlon et al., 2019). In this way, climate anxiety acts as a driver of democratic participation.

b. Adaptive Lifestyle Adjustments

For many individuals, anxiety about climate change translates into lifestyle changes that prioritise resilience and sustainability. Some people relocate from areas at risk of flooding, wildfires, or rising sea levels, while others adjust their consumption habits. Studies show that climate worry can influence major life decisions, such as whether to have children or where to settle (Helm et al., 2021). While these adjustments may seem extreme, they represent an attempt to live in alignment with environmental realities and to reduce personal vulnerability.

Furthermore, climate-conscious behaviours are sometimes motivated by a desire to set an example for others. Parents, for instance, may try to model eco-friendly habits to their children as a way of both coping with their anxiety and fostering hope for the future (Verlie, 2022). In this way, behavioural responses are not only about personal wellbeing but also about intergenerational responsibility.

c. Maladaptive Responses: Withdrawal and Avoidance

Not all behavioural responses to climate anxiety are constructive. For some individuals, overwhelming worry leads to avoidance behaviours. They may refuse to read climate news, disengage from conversations about the environment, or minimise the severity of the issue. This is often a way to protect themselves from feelings of despair, but it can reinforce inaction. Research suggests that denial and avoidance may temporarily reduce distress but do not eliminate the underlying concern, and they can prevent people from contributing to meaningful solutions (Pihkala, 2020).

Another maladaptive response is paralysis or inaction. Some people report feeling “frozen” by the scale of the climate crisis, believing that nothing they do will make a difference. This sense of powerlessness can reduce motivation to adopt sustainable behaviours. Studies on young adults in Australia revealed that while many were deeply distressed about climate change, a subset responded by disengaging completely because their anxiety was too overwhelming (Stanley et al., 2021). In extreme cases, climate anxiety may contribute to risky behaviours or health-related problems. For example, excessive worry has been linked to sleep difficulties, substance use, or social withdrawal (Clayton, 2020). These behavioural responses reflect an attempt to cope, but they can worsen both mental and physical health over time.

Coping Strategies and Mental Health Interventions

As climate change becomes a greater threat, more people are struggling with eco-anxiety and related distress. While behavioural responses such as activism and lifestyle change are common, many individuals also need coping strategies and structured mental health interventions to manage their emotions. These approaches aim to reduce overwhelming fear, build resilience, and give people tools to live meaningfully in an uncertain world. Effective strategies range from personal practices like mindfulness to professional psychological support to

community-based interventions that strengthen collective wellbeing.

1. Individual Coping Strategies

On a personal level, mindfulness and relaxation practices are among the most helpful coping tools. Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, and spending quiet time in nature help people calm racing thoughts and reconnect with their surroundings. Studies have shown that mindfulness reduces anxiety symptoms by improving emotional regulation and lowering stress responses (Stanley et al., 2021). For those distressed by constant news about climate change, limiting media exposure and setting "digital boundaries" can also prevent information overload and reduce feelings of helplessness (Pihkala, 2020).

Another coping approach is cognitive reframing, where individuals work on changing how they interpret the climate crisis. Instead of focusing only on catastrophic outcomes, reframing encourages people to see opportunities for innovation, community strength, and personal contribution. Research highlights that when individuals find meaning in their actions, such as teaching children about sustainability or supporting local initiatives, they feel less paralysed and more hopeful (Ojala, 2016). Journaling and creative expression, like writing or art, can also serve as outlets for processing emotions and transforming worry into constructive reflection.

Physical activity is another effective but often overlooked coping tool. Exercise not only reduces stress hormones but also provides a sense of agency and control. Outdoor activities such as hiking, gardening, or cycling allow individuals to reconnect with nature in positive ways, reinforcing the sense that they are part of something worth protecting (Baudon & Jachens, 2021).

2. Professional Mental Health Interventions

In more severe cases, professional interventions are necessary. Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is widely recognised as one of the most effective approaches. It helps people identify catastrophic thinking patterns about the future and replace them with balanced, constructive thoughts. Research has demonstrated that CBT techniques can significantly reduce symptoms of climate anxiety by addressing both emotional distress and avoidance behaviours (Clayton, 2020).

Another intervention is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). Unlike CBT, which focuses on changing thought patterns, ACT helps people accept difficult emotions and commit to meaningful values-based actions despite uncertainty. This approach is useful for eco-anxiety because it acknowledges that fear of climate change is rational but encourages individuals to avoid being paralysed by it (Reser et al., 2012).

Group therapy and peer support are also effective, as they give individuals the chance to share fears in a safe environment. Climate cafés, support groups, and community dialogues are becoming popular spaces for processing eco-distress collectively. Being part of a group reduces the sense of isolation and creates opportunities for cooperative problem-solving. A review of eco-anxiety interventions found that social connection is one of the strongest protective factors against despair (Cunsolo et al., 2020).

3. Community and System-Level Support

Beyond individual and professional interventions, community-based strategies play an important role. Schools, workplaces, and local organisations can create safe spaces for discussions about climate change, providing both education and emotional support. Including climate psychology in school curricula, for example, helps children and adolescents learn coping tools early, reducing the risk of long-term mental health difficulties (Hickman et al., 2021).

At a broader level, governments and institutions can integrate mental health into climate policies. This means ensuring that disaster response plans include psychological first aid and long-term support for communities affected by climate disasters. Policies that address both environmental risks and mental well-being strengthen resilience across society (Palinkas & Wong, 2020).

Consequently, coping strategies and mental health interventions are vital for reducing the burden of climate anxiety. Individual practices such as

mindfulness, reframing, and physical activity provide everyday tools for resilience. Professional approaches, including CBT, ACT, and group therapy, help people manage more severe distress. At the same time, community and policy-level interventions create supportive environments where individuals do not feel alone in their struggles. Together, these strategies allow people to face climate uncertainty with greater strength and purpose, transforming anxiety into motivation for constructive change.

Policy, Media, and the Role of Communication

The way people experience and respond to climate anxiety is strongly influenced by policies, media messages, and communication strategies. While climate change is a scientific and environmental issue, it is also a social and political problem that requires coordinated responses. Policies set the framework for action, media provides information and shapes narratives, and communication strategies influence how people understand risks and solutions. Together, these factors can either reduce eco-distress by promoting awareness and resilience, or worsen it by spreading fear, misinformation, or inaction.

- The Role of Policy

Policies play a critical role in shaping how societies respond to climate change and its psychological impacts. Governments are responsible for creating frameworks that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, promote adaptation, and support vulnerable populations. When policies are weak, inconsistent, or poorly enforced, they not only allow environmental harm to continue but also increase feelings of anxiety and helplessness among citizens. For example, research shows that people's trust in government action affects how they perceive climate threats, strong and credible policies can build hope, while weak ones worsen eco-distress (Clayton, 2020).

Climate policies can also support mental health by providing resources for communities affected by disasters. For instance, public health frameworks that include psychological support for survivors of floods, heatwaves, or wildfires reduce long-term distress (Cianconi et al., 2020). Moreover, policies that encourage community participation in decision-making help people feel empowered, reducing feelings of hopelessness. This highlights the importance of inclusive climate governance that not only focuses on physical adaptation but also considers mental and emotional wellbeing.

International policies also shape eco-distress. Agreements like the Paris Climate Accord send strong signals of global commitment, which can reduce feelings of despair. Conversely, political conflicts and delays in international climate action often lead to frustration, especially among young people who feel their future is being neglected (Hickman et al., 2021). This shows that climate anxiety is not just about environmental risks but also about trust in leadership and justice across generations.

- The Role of Media

Media is one of the most powerful forces shaping how people think and feel about climate change. News outlets, social media platforms, films, and documentaries all play roles in raising awareness and influencing emotions. When media coverage focuses heavily on catastrophic scenarios without highlighting solutions, it can intensify eco-distress by overwhelming audiences with fear and helplessness (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). However, when media communicates climate risks alongside examples of solutions and success stories, it can foster motivation and collective action.

Social media, in particular, has become central to the climate conversation. It allows young people and activists to share concerns, build networks, and push for policy change. Campaigns like "Fridays for Future," led by Greta Thunberg, demonstrate how media can amplify voices and inspire global movements (Han & Ahn, 2020). Yet social media can also expose people to misinformation and polarised debates, which may heighten distress and confusion. The spread of climate denial content undermines trust in science and policies, leaving individuals uncertain about what to believe or how to act.

Popular culture and film also influence climate perceptions. Movies and documentaries such as An Inconvenient Truth or Before the Flood have raised global awareness, but some critics argue that they focus too much on doom narratives, which may discourage engagement (Wang et al., 2018). Thus,

the media's role is not only to inform but also to balance urgency with empowerment, ensuring that people remain hopeful and motivated rather than paralysed by fear.

- The Role of Communication

Effective communication is central to addressing climate anxiety. Communication strategies involve how scientists, policymakers, activists, and educators share information with the public. Research shows that the way climate change is framed influences how people respond emotionally and behaviourally (Nisbet, 2009). For example, framing climate change as a public health issue can make it more relatable, as people understand the direct impacts on wellbeing. Similarly, framing it as an opportunity for innovation and green jobs can reduce fear and promote optimism.

Open and transparent communication is also important for trust-building. When governments and organisations communicate honestly about risks while also presenting feasible solutions, people are more likely to stay engaged. Conversely, when communication is vague, inconsistent, or overly technical, people may feel excluded or confused, which worsens eco-distress. For instance, jargon-heavy scientific reports often fail to connect with ordinary citizens, whereas clear and relatable messages can encourage proactive behaviour (Moser, 2016).

Another aspect of communication is the need for dialogue rather than one-way messaging. Creating spaces for citizens to share their fears, hopes, and ideas fosters empowerment and reduces isolation. Community-based communication, such as town hall meetings or local climate forums, allows people to feel heard and included in the process of finding solutions.

Finally, communication should be culturally sensitive. Messages that work in one country or cultural group may not resonate in another. For example, communication strategies in Indigenous communities must acknowledge cultural values tied to land and spirituality, whereas urban populations may respond better to messages about technology and lifestyle changes (Ford et al., 2020). Tailoring communication to diverse audiences ensures inclusivity and effectiveness.

Therefore, policies, media, and communication together shape the experience of climate anxiety. Strong, inclusive policies can build hope and resilience, while weak governance worsens distress. Media has the power to inform and mobilise but must balance urgency with empowerment to avoid spreading despair. Communication strategies are crucial in framing climate change in ways that connect with people's lives and inspire action. Addressing eco-distress requires more than individual coping, it depends on collective systems of governance, responsible media, and thoughtful communication that together build a culture of resilience and engagement.

Conclusion: Balancing Awareness with Action

Climate anxiety and eco-distress remind us that raising awareness about climate change is not enough; it must be balanced with concrete action. While awareness helps people understand the seriousness of the crisis, too much focus on threats without clear solutions can create fear and hopelessness. What is needed is communication and policies that not only highlight risks but also show practical steps for change at individual, community, and global levels. By combining knowledge with action, societies can transform eco-distress into motivation, helping people feel empowered to protect the planet and support one another.

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