

## There is hope amidst environmental anxiety, says a scholar of ecotheology

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Consistent efforts to achieve something better may also have positive effects on personal wellbeing, assesses environmental researcher Panu Pihkala. Credit: Mika Federley

Climate change affects everyone. Awareness of the vast scope and rapid pace of the required adjustments may cause feelings of impotence. According to Panu Pihkala, an ecotheologian, the power of constructive

actions and political influence is also inherent in the correct processing of eco-anxiety.

Eco-anxiety encompasses difficult emotions experienced to a significant degree due to [environmental issues](#). Environmental researcher Panu Pihkala says that related symptoms can be positioned between two extremes:

"At one extreme are the serious symptoms, such as shock and fear, which often have psychophysical manifestations, including sleep disorders and physical discomfort. At the other extreme there are less severe symptoms, such as melancholia and restlessness."

Any watertight causalities of eco-anxiety related to health are difficult to prove, although a recent doctoral dissertation (in Finnish only) by Reija Ruuhela indicates that [climate change](#) may even heighten the risk of suicide.

"The human mind is such a complex entity that, for example, in health care the environmental origin of anxiety symptoms has long been downplayed," Pihkala notes.

Pihkala is working as a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki. He has paid much attention to the indirect effects and symptoms of eco-anxiety, applying through his multidisciplinary approach, for example, theories of grief and loss to empirical data.

In Finland, wide-ranging data acquisition associated with the phenomenon has been conducted under the annually published Youth Barometer scheme.

"My research has validated the assumption that a lot of young people are

suffering from fear and anxiety related to [climate](#) change," Pihkala says.

## **Who are the most affected by eco-anxiety?**

Groups of people particularly exposed to mental strain stemming from environmental problems have been described in studies focused on eco-anxiety.

"One key group is children and adolescents whose mental processing capacity is still developing, making their potential for personal actions in the world of adults limited," notes Pihkala.

Another group is comprised of those who are in close contact with ecosystems due to either their livelihood or lifestyle.

"These individuals include farmers, professional fishermen, hunters, indigenous peoples and nature lovers," Pihkala lists.

In Pihkala's opinion, what in particular causes anxiety is finding something to be a problem without a sufficient ability to react or do anything about it.

## **Strain caused by environmental concern varies around the world**

Klimatångest (article in Swedish only), a term literally denoting 'climate angst', has become established in the Swedish language. In Sweden, significant research of high international importance that applies psychology and environmental education is being conducted on the climate change-related survival mechanisms of children and adolescents.

Then again, a field study carried out in a Norwegian community

indicated that attitudes towards climate change involve self-inflicted emotional numbness. This is the topic of *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, a book by sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard.

Norgaard found in her studies serious conflicts between the charitable Nordic image and identity, and the impact of the fossil economy and oil industry on climate change, humans and ecosystems across the globe.

"In Norway, the emotional load has already been accumulated to such an extent that the whole issue is difficult to process," Pihkala summarises.

On the international level, various researchers are taking different approaches to eco-anxiety. Some are speaking of the psychological or psychiatric effects of environmental problems.

Pihkala highlights the 'how to live with climate change' manuals drawn up in Australia on the basis of scientific research.

"Tensions in Australia are high. The fossil economy in the country is strong, combined with unusually powerful severe weather phenomena. For example, studies conducted among Australian farmers have, at worst, indicated suicidal tendencies caused by climate change."

## **How to channel concern about the environment into action?**

The bias of cognitive brain function underlies the oppressive nature of environmental issues.

"The [human mind](#) has evolved to effectively react to concrete threats, but its response to ambiguous threats occurring over a long period of

time is poor," Pihkala explains.

Feelings of impotence may also be caused by considering personal acts insignificant on the global scale.

According to Pihkala, what this often boils down to is trying to rid oneself of a difficult issue: if individuals succeed in convincing themselves of the irrelevance of their actions, they can remain inactive.

Based on survey data, trying to achieve such a goal often fails, as existing research findings already indicate, for example, that the climate and consumption choices of Finnish households are far from insignificant in the big picture.

"Consistent efforts to achieve something better may also have positive effects on personal wellbeing," assesses Pihkala.

For dealing with eco-anxiety, the researcher has his own advice.

"People are very relieved when they have the opportunity to process oppressive emotions without the restraints of roles that are considered socially acceptable and that restrict common sense. Various performances and rituals, art and even theology provide excellent pathways to achieving this."

Social support may also play an important role in relation to eco-anxiety: by being part of a larger community that aims to do its best, individuals can limit the strain caused by overbearing problems.

"Of course, we cannot decide in the Nordic countries what measures will be taken elsewhere in the world, but we could have a chance to serve as an inspiring example of environmental ethics to others. In Finland, conversations about climate change have lately gained prevalence even in

everyday situations. Certain people are wondering what they could do, others are demanding further political decisions. This is a clear sign of hope," Pihkala says.

Provided by University of Helsinki

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