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Young people's climate anxiety revealed in landmark survey

Children worldwide worry about the future and feel let down by governments, a huge study on attitudes towards climate change has found.

- [Tosin Thompson](#)



Children at a School Strike for Climate protest in Sydney, Australia.

Climate change is causing distress, anger and other negative emotions in children and young people worldwide, a survey of thousands of 16- to 25-year-olds has found. This 'eco-anxiety' has a negative impact on respondents' daily lives, say the researchers who

conducted the survey, and is partly caused by the feeling that governments aren't doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe.



The hard truths of climate change — by the numbers

“This study provides arguments for anyone who has any connection to youth mental health — climate change is a real dimension into their mental-health problems,” says Sarah Ray, who studies climate anxiety at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California.

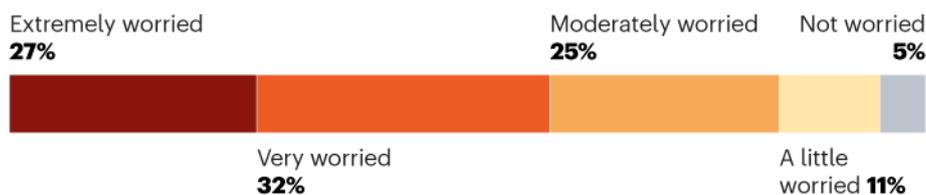
The survey — the largest of its kind — asked 10,000 young people in 10 countries how they felt about climate change and government responses to it.

The results, released in a preprint on 14 September¹, found that most respondents were concerned about climate change, with nearly 60% saying they felt ‘very worried’ or ‘extremely worried’. Many associated negative emotions with climate change — the most commonly chosen were ‘sad’, ‘afraid’, ‘anxious’, ‘angry’ and ‘powerless’ (see ‘Climate anxiety’). Overall, 45% of participants said their feelings about climate change impacted their daily lives.

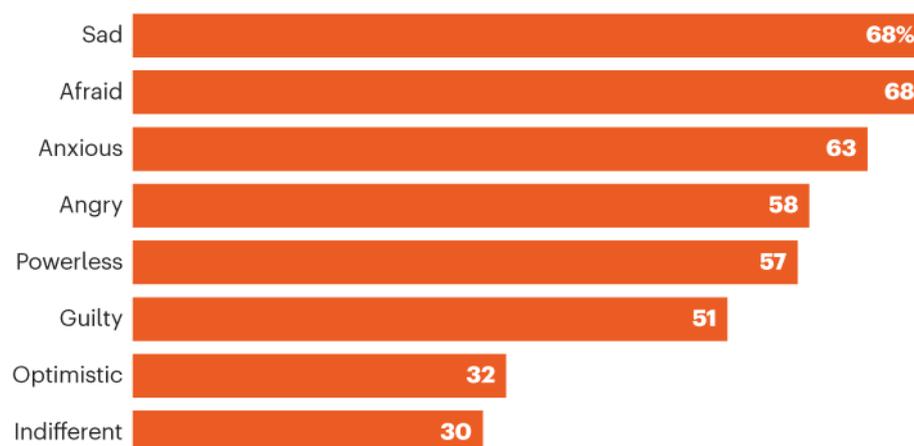
CLIMATE ANXIETY

A survey of 10,000 young people shows that negative feelings about climate change can cause psychological distress.

How worried are you about climate change?



Climate change makes me feel...



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Source: Ref. 1

The countries with the highest proportion of respondents who felt ‘very worried’ or ‘extremely worried’ by climate change were the Philippines (84%), India (68%) and Brazil (67%), nations that have been hard-hit by climate change. Portugal — where wildfires are becoming increasingly severe — had the highest level of very worried or extremely worried respondents (65%) out of the high-income countries surveyed, which included France, Finland, Australia and the United States.

“As much as we try to make change, I also see government inaction — trees being cut up on the daily,” Jennifer Uchendu, a climate activist based in Lagos, told reporters at a press conference where the survey results were presented. She recalled feeling anger and grief about government-backed deforestation in her country. “Young people are having to suffer the brunt of these issues when crisis or disasters come in.” In the survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents from Nigeria said that their feelings about climate change had negatively affected their daily life.

A general ‘othering’

Among those who said they have talked to others about climate change (81%), nearly half reported being ignored or dismissed. “There is a general ‘othering’ of

children in society, and children's voices that threaten the predominant narrative of the most powerful group in society," says study co-author Caroline Hickman, a climate-psychology researcher at the University of Bath, UK. Until now, there has been little research on the psychological impacts of climate change on children, she adds.



Climate science is supporting lawsuits that could help save the world

When asked about how governments are responding to climate change, 65% of respondents agreed with the statement that governments are failing young people, 64% agreed that they are lying about the impact of actions taken and 60% agreed they were dismissing people's distress. Only 36% agreed that governments are

acting according to science. However, young people do feel reassured when governments act.

Ray says that the results of surveys such as this could play a part in [climate-change lawsuits](#), because they might provide evidence of moral injury under human-rights law. “If the research can help hold government bodies accountable ... that would be extraordinary. It would give a voice to children most vulnerable, and eco-anxiety can become less about ‘snowflakes’ in privileged settings worrying about polar bears — which is how detractors see it,” she says.

“I think this research will impact more audiences than other arguments about why we should do more on climate.”

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-02582-8>

References

- 1.
Hickman, C. *et al.* Preprint at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3918955> (2021).