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Understanding Eco-Anxiety: An Analysis into the Causes, Treatments, and Effects of this Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT: This paper delves into the emergent psychological phenomenon of eco-anxiety, a growing distress associated with the deteriorating state of the environment and the intensifying symptoms of climate change. As global environmental changes induce widespread anxiety, this research seeks to comprehensively understand eco-anxiety, examining its causes, manifestations, and psychological impacts. Initially, the paper defines eco-anxiety in the context of climate change, exploring the nexus between environmental degradation and mental health. It then progresses to analyze how eco-anxiety intertwines with other psychological conditions, investigating potential long-term mental health implications. Through this exploration, the study aims to offer a deeper understanding of eco-anxiety, contributing to the broader discourse on mental health in the face of environmental crises. This inquiry is particularly vital in an era where the psychological effects of environmental changes are becoming as significant as their physical impacts, necessitating a nuanced understanding of their intersection with human mental well-being.

KEYWORDS: eco-anxiety, climate change, environmental degradation, mental health, psychological impacts

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, our planet has experienced abnormal changes within the environment, which has triggered a heightened sense of anxiety amongst people worldwide. As the symptoms of climate change intensify, a new phenomenon has occurred, attracting the attention of mental health professionals, researchers as well as the public. It goes by the term eco-anxiety, the occurrence portraying a growing sense of distress, worry, and alarm towards the worsening state of our environment. Eco-anxiety is far more than individuals' concern towards the environment; it comprises the psychological and emotional effects brought by the general public's awareness of the current environmental crises and predictions for the future. This research paper aims to explore further the reasoning behind eco-anxiety, its causes, and its degree of manifestation, as well as explore its consequences within individuals. This research paper will start by defining eco-anxiety and linking it to climate change and the deterioration of the environment. Secondly, it will examine how eco-anxiety intertwines with other psychological afflictions and discover any long-term conditions on mental health.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Climate change is a reality which endangers the future of our planet. This impending risk, evident by the abnormal changes within our environment, has had consequences for increased amounts of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Additionally, Eco-anxiety or Climate anxiety is a term used to describe the emotional and psychological deterioration that individuals experience due to apprehension of the worsening state of the environment and the impacts of climate change. This phenomenon is occurring at higher rates as it is characterized by feelings of helplessness and profuse concern in the face of environmental calamities (Murdock, 2023). Eco-anxiety has a significant effect on an individual's mental health and well-being, as it can present symptoms of depression, anxiety, and insomnia. Consequentially, it can lead to behavioral change as it provokes individuals to acquire more sustainable habits and advocate more for environmentally friendly changes to the lifestyles of many. This phenomenon makes the degradation of our environment a prominent issue that can no longer be ignored, as it now not only physically harms other species of plants and animals as we destroy habitats and contaminate waters, but it now harms our well-being and quality of life. The American Psychology Association (APA) describes eco-anxiety as "the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future and that of next generations" (Iberdrola, 2021).



The proposed study of Eco-anxiety and its effect on the well-being of individuals identified with showing symptoms of the phenomenon, as well as its effect on the current state of our environment, relates to a notable study, one of the largest to date on the topic of Eco-Anxiety (Marks et al., 2021) The study above was enacted by the University of Bath and funded by Avaaz. This study included surveying 10,000 children and young adults aged sixteen to twenty-five years old in ten countries (Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Portugal, UK, and the USA), with 1000 participants surveyed per country in 2021. Statistics were calculated on participants' perspectives and opinions on climate change as well as on each aspect of climate anxiety. Additionally, a Pearson's correlation analysis was done to assess whether climate anxiety and opposing views on climate change were connected to perspectives on government response. The findings of this research study were that respondents across all countries were under some level of distress about our climate (59% were apprehensive, and 84% were moderately worried). This depicts how more than 50% of people from all of these ten countries experienced symptoms of Eco-anxiety, highlighting how crucial the state of the planet has become. The reality is that climate change and its effects on daily lives, negative news of natural disasters, devastating artificial impacts from the textile industry, the meat industry as well as our strenuous use of fossil fuels (United Nations)

An analysis was enacted of five other prominent studies regarding the topic of Eco-Anxiety. During a case study on Youth Climate Activism and the effect of Eco-Anxiety on younger individuals such as teenagers and young adults, a prominent example from climate activist Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenager who gained global acknowledgment for her attempts to promote environmental well-being and sustainable behaviors from the general population. Greta's case illustrates how the phenomenon of Eco-Anxiety can lead to feelings of "sadness, there might be fear, there might be a kind of overwhelm. And maybe even sometimes a quite like wild optimism" (Thomas et al., 2021). This quote from Greta herself illustrates the effects climate anxiety had on her, and these are symptoms that could affect others in similar ways. Additionally, a survey was carried out, targeted at fifteen to fifty-year-old individuals. The results of this survey concluded previous predictions that the amount of knowledge on the subject of Eco-anxiety or climate anxiety was little to no knowledge. The results were that 73% of participants had never heard the term Eco-anxiety before, 16% had somewhat heard of it, and 11% had heard of it before. Critical phrases used to answer the question 'D, do you feel any stress, depression, anxiety, or sadness when thinking about the state of our planet?' depicted concern for the next generation, dwindling resources, fear of natural disasters, and stress when thinking of the state of the planet. Consequently, another question posed was about the leading cause of Eco-Anxiety. This question concluded that 32% of people thought that media exposure was a leading cause, and 22% of people believed experiencing an environmental disaster was a crucial part of developing Eco-Anxiety.

The findings of the research implemented emphasized the importance of making Eco-Anxiety a more well-known topic in order to improve the mental health and well-being of individuals as well as highlight symptoms and ways to cope with depressive or anxious feelings when fixating on the state of our environment (2021). As the state of the planet is deteriorating more rapidly as the years go on, the necessity of spreading awareness about the side effects of the destruction of the planet on humans ourselves will encourage more action to be brought about. The relevance of this study is to find new perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of what this new phenomenon is, and this will allow others to learn from my findings as well. There is limited data, research, and knowledge of Eco-Anxiety. However, it is a fundamental consequence of the effects of human behavior and impacts on the planet, which will make people realize the vitality of changing the way we live, the sustainability of our day-to-day activities, and how to lessen the climate impacts and adverse effects we have on other species and ecosystems which are immensely fragile without combatting pollution, contamination and disrupted food chains by the endangerment or extinction of animals and plants.

The current state of knowledge regarding Eco-Anxiety among global citizens is alarmingly low. This conclusion was taken given an extensive range of data from primary and secondary sources. Evidence of this was found from studies enacted by universities, governmental surveys, and specialist data collection, as well as primary data collected through my survey. The results of my survey concluded that an astounding 89% of participants had never heard the term eco-anxiety before, and if they had somewhat heard of it, they did not know what this phenomenon was. This survey highlighted the lack of knowledge from the global population and the importance of spreading awareness about how the effects of climate change and the lifestyle of humans around the world are not only affecting our ecosystems and other species but also have not started to affect our psychological well-being. Subsequently, due to the fact that the majority of individuals have never heard of eco-anxiety, a person could have the disorder or be experiencing thoughts and emotions



as well as behavior correlating to what Eco-Anxiety is and not know what it is, how to deal with it or if what they are dealing with is a real issue to be concerned about.

Moreover, it allows others to become aware of prevalent symptoms in others, providing people with the ability to monitor and observe the behavior of those around them, such as family and friends. The coinciding mental health disorders that are a part of Eco-Anxiety are detrimental to our well-being; therefore, these disorders must be appropriately diagnosed and treated professionally. This is in order to prevent more severe consequences of leaving these disorders unchecked and dwelling within a person, affecting their quality of life, academic success, and social functioning (Léger-Goodes et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research and data collection used to study the topic of Eco-Anxiety have been developed through Quantitative as well as Qualitative research methods. Data analysis can be used in order to achieve an understanding of more complex phenomena, such as Eco-Anxiety. The method of data analysis used in this research paper was using complex data from sources such as other research papers and articles, which was helpful in comparing my data to other individuals' findings. Additionally, the research I studied was carried out by professional teams of specialists within universities or individuals who work within the fields of climate phenomena and psychological phenomena, therefore providing the credentials and accuracy needed to support my findings and the outcome of the data I collected through a survey.

The purpose of this investigation and analysis of Eco-Anxiety is to determine the causes, symptoms, and treatments of this phenomenon, as it is widely unknown and unstudied, and there are few theories and accurate data available in other journals and studies. Therefore, this project aims to raise more awareness and gain a more profound understanding of the topic itself in order to do so. The primary step taken to collect data and research was to study and analyze similar studies on the topic of discussion, which is Eco-Anxiety. Other research papers on similar topics allowed there to be a comparison between the accuracy of the data collected as well as whether the data correlates between my data and official data from national polls, governmental surveys, and official data collected over time. These research papers allowed a deeper insight into differing perspectives on the topic as well as interpretations from the data and research used within other research journals and papers.

The data collected and the research studied illustrated how it is essential for people to gain a deeper understanding of the causes, effects, and coping mechanisms to aid those experiencing similar symptoms to that of Eco-Anxiety. This study allowed me to gain insight into the first impressions of what Eco-Anxiety is and whether people could make educated predictions and estimations of what they thought it was. Unexpected results lay in the question, "What do you think the best coping mechanism for those with Eco-Anxiety is?". There were multiple answers, and participants had the option to select three of the six, the most obvious ones being more involvement with eco-activism and volunteering within your community to help the environment, as well as taking a break from social media, which were popular answers. However, the option 'Connecting with Nature' was the most favorable answer, with the majority of participants choosing this answer within their chosen three coping mechanisms. However, this was unexpected as other studies and research work done on this topic showed solutions based around more involvement in climate action, campaigns, and awareness to allow the individual to be part of a movement and feel less overwhelmed and helpless. Additionally, only three participants chose attending therapy as one of their three options, which was surprising as for a relatively new phenomenon, especially one linking to psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression, one would assume the patient would benefit from speaking to a professional.

There were certain limitations to consider as a part of this research topic. Climate or Eco-Anxiety is a subject that is vastly unknown and unrecognized amongst many people. This problem is not prevalent in societies as individuals are unaware that they may show symptoms of Eco-Anxiety. It was challenging to find a variety of data to compare and utilize the one that fits best with my research as there is a limited amount of data, studies, and research done on this topic. That is what led to the creation of a survey let out to a sample of people within a population. Subsequently, another limitation was that the topic of Eco-Anxiety was that it revolves around the sensitive issue of being intrinsically linked to numerous mental health disorders. Within the survey carried out, individuals may feel the prevailing stigma when discussing mental health. There is fear, shame, and embarrassment linked to having a mental health concern, as individuals may feel that they are portrayed negatively and discriminated against. This meant that the survey and data collection had to be anonymous so that people could answer the questions truthfully and without feeling pressured by societal beliefs against mental health.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study of Eco-Anxiety and its causes, effects, and treatments, as well as unidentified knowledge gaps, has highlighted how intrinsically environmental concern, mental health, and the deteriorating state of our environment are linked. The research utilized, and the data collected have identified the multifaceted causes of Eco-Anxiety, which ranges from immense exposure to devastating environmental crises and impacts through the use of technology and social media to the existential threats that occur due to climate change. The research on the effects of Eco-Anxiety has proven to extend much beyond the suffering of an individual but illustrates widespread implications within communities and society as a whole. The emotional turmoil of this phenomenon exacerbates the need to make more successful progress while addressing the prevalent environmental issues that are a prevailing cause of Eco-Anxiety. Nonetheless, recognizing this phenomenon as a valid mental health issue is a fundamental step towards creating innovative solutions and accepting the consequences of human actions on the planet and ourselves.

In order to mitigate the severe impact of this disorder, the research carried out within this paper underlines the significance of a collective approach that is able to combine individual and societal strategies. It is essential to promote awareness and educate others about environmental concerns as well as nurture a sense of empowerment instead of powerlessness, which can assist individuals when managing their Eco-Anxiety. Additionally, normalizing conversations about this type of anxiety within social settings as well as within health care will help to decrease the stigma surrounding mental health associated with this condition. This will encourage individuals to seek aid from professionals such as doctors and therapists or introduce them to connecting with nature, participating in environmental campaigns, or reminding themselves that every action they take towards sustainability is not wasted.

In summary, Eco-Anxiety is a complicated disorder that requires a collective response. It is vital to recognize the causes and effects, and implementing viable solutions to this issue is a critical step to address this new yet growing mental health concern.

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