



Climate anxiety: an introduction for teachers

What is climate anxiety?

Climate anxiety is a chronic fear of the impact humans are having on the natural environment and the implications of this for the future of our planet and its inhabitants. It is often associated with feelings of helplessness, despair, guilt and frustration, which can be so extreme as to be debilitating.

At a normal level, anxiety can cause feelings of unease and discomfort, however for those with an anxiety disorder, these feelings are much more severe, with a constant feeling of fear which can, at times, stop individuals from carrying out their usual daily lives. Symptoms include a racing heart, fast breathing and breathlessness, trouble sleeping or finding it hard to concentrate, and can affect your ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.

Anxiety is a natural bodily response to stress that everyone will experience to different extents throughout their lives, for example, when taking an exam or awaiting medical results. It is one of the ways our bodies warn us of danger. Given the severity of the climate crisis, feeling anxious is both reasonable and expected, especially amongst young people who will feel the consequences of climate change most severely throughout their lives. It is how we respond to this anxiety that will make a difference.

Fortunately, climate anxiety is uniquely different to other anxiety induced conditions, in that it can be harnessed for positive action. If approached correctly, anxiety can help spark action and motivate us to act in ways that will both reduce our anxiety and have a positive impact on the environment. An urgent response is required in order to limit global temperature rise to no more than 1.5°C, and we have just 10 years in which to make significant and meaningful change. Channelling anxiety into action, rather than despondency, has, therefore, never been so necessary as now.



We work closely with teachers, and have listened to what they are telling us – that they are worried and unsure of how to respond to climate anxiety. We've worked to both design and curate a collection of resources to help teachers feel resilient and ready for the challenges ahead

Luke Wynne, Head of Youth and Schools,
Global Action Plan

This introductory guide

This guide aims to answer some of the key questions and concerns that we know teachers are asking. Half of the teachers we spoke to said they feel ill-equipped to deal with student anxiety around climate change. Our study showed that one in three teachers are seeing high levels of climate anxiety in students, and with 77% of students we spoke to telling us that thinking about climate change makes them nervous, this is clearly a real challenge. In addition, many teachers themselves are feeling anxious about the state of the climate and are looking for advice and guidance about how to approach the climate crisis conversation and associated anxiety in the classroom.

This guide provides ideas and resources around channelling anxiety into positive, effective action, the power of talking about the issue and suggestions for teaching about the crisis, as well as providing support for managing the symptoms of anxiety.

What this is not...

This is not a comprehensive guide on climate anxiety or the climate crisis, nor is it a full toolkit of resources, however we hope that the information here may ease some of your concerns and give you confidence that you are not alone. Climate anxiety is a real issue effecting many adults and young people today but it also has the potential to empower and motivate people towards positive action to help protect our planet.

Join us...

If this is a topic you'd like to explore further, we are hoping to create a more comprehensive teacher training course in the near future. Please do get in touch to be part of the team that shapes this training by emailing schools@globalactionplan.org.uk.

We are also looking for teachers to join our Transform Our World resource [review committee](#), volunteering 1-2 hours per month to review educational resources to feature on the hub. For more information, email transformourworld@globalactionplan.org.uk.



"Climate anxiety: An introduction for teachers provides a useful framework for helping one's students to get to grips with climate anxiety and take action."

Ed Brewster, Head of French at Hereward House School

Using this guide

This guide is broken into three key themes, with frequently asked teacher questions or statements answered within each, as well as a section on managing the symptoms of anxiety. These are:

Theme 1: Take action

Explore how taking action can reduce feelings of anxiety and create meaningful change. Key questions/statements addressed:

- How can I engage my students in meaningful collective action?
- What actions can my students take as individuals?

Theme 2: Teach about it

Explore how we can open up the climate crisis conversation in the classroom. Key questions/statements addressed:

- I don't feel confident teaching about the climate crisis.
- How do I fit the climate crisis into an already crowded curriculum?
- How do I teach about the severity of the climate crisis without causing anxiety?

Theme 3: Talk about it

Explore how conversation alone can help reduce feelings of loneliness and helplessness. Key questions/statements addressed:

- I don't know where to start with talking about something so critical.
- How do I talk and teach about the climate crisis without communicating my own sense of anxiety?
- School leadership are not clear on their position – could this cause anxiety amongst students?
- By talking about the climate crisis, do I risk triggering anxiety amongst students who are more prone to it?
- I'm deeply concerned about the environment but know that my actions don't always reflect this.

Support with managing the symptoms

- Resources and guidance from organisations specialising in supporting those with mental health issues.

Take action

Anxiety can sometimes be triggered by a feeling of helplessness; of being out of control. With the scale of the climate crisis requiring a global response, it is easy for individuals to feel overwhelmed and lost as to what they can do to contribute to the fight and make a difference.

Research has shown that taking action is effective in reducing the feelings of powerlessness associated with anxiety. Discovering and joining with others who feel the same can immediately reduce feelings of loneliness and joining together to take meaningful action can be hugely beneficial, to both our wellbeing and the planet. Teachers can play a pivotal role in unearthing the collective student voice, encouraging young people to engage in meaningful action towards systemic change, which in turn will have a significantly larger impact, as well as opening up the conversation about the small changes we can all make towards living more sustainably.

How can I engage my students in meaningful collective action?

In school:

- Set up a climate action focussed eco-team to meet regularly and campaign for change.
- Together identify the areas of action that would have the most significant impact for both the environment and the school or local community, for example air pollution from the school run.
- Encourage students to take the lead, which can reduce feelings of helplessness and empower them to act for change.
- The [Climate Action Campaign](#) on Transform Our World provides resources with advice and ideas for developing and implementing plans for effective action.

Out of school:

- Students can connect with a variety of youth focussed environmental groups who look to influence local government and businesses to make changes to policy and operations. Many have local branches with regular meetings. Some options are:
 - [UK Student Climate Network](#) demand the government declare a climate emergency and teach and communicate the truth to the public. This youth-led group rely on volunteers to join regional networks to campaigns for change.
 - [Fridays for Future](#) is a movement born out of Greta Thunberg's school strike for the climate. Their website holds advice and resources for taking action.

- **UK Youth Climate Coalition** aim to mobilise and empower young people to take positive action for global climate justice through demonstrations and campaigns.
- **Extinction Rebellion** is an international network who use non-violent action to persuade governments to tell the truth about and act on the climate emergency.
- **Teach the Future** is a youth-led campaign to repurpose the education system around the climate crisis.
- Be inspired by the action of others and attend climate focussed events, such as **London Climate Change Festival** or **FutureFest**.

What actions can my students take as individuals?

- Explore the changes possible at different scales, from the everyday to the more significant changes, such as opting not to fly - **this quiz** may help you and your students with this.
- Encourage students to focus on areas of action that are most within their control and easiest to implement; this will help reduce feelings of being powerless, such as:
 - Consumption – food, clothes, footwear.
 - Transport – walking, cycling, using public transport, lift sharing.
 - Pressure within the education system – the student voice is powerful. Influencing the system within their local authority, rather than striking.
 - Future planning – aligning these with your values.
- Use the **Goals for Good** resource to encourage students to explore how our values impact on our wellbeing and on the environment. It draws from research into positive psychology and sustainability to consider what really does, and doesn't, make us happy and how the goals we set can be beneficial to both ourselves and the planet.

Share what you're doing!

Others may also be feeling anxiety and be unsure of where to start; share your journey with your community – it may encourage, motivate and empower others to take action too.



"Think about how you can harness and channel your fear, rather than how you can simply 'manage' it. See yourself and your actions as part of something bigger – be part of supportive and energising groups where possible."

Dr Elly Hanson, Clinical Psychologist

Teach about it

I don't feel confident teaching about the climate crisis

Knowing how important it is that students fully comprehend the scale of the climate crisis but not knowing where to start can, understandably, be a cause of anxiety for some.

- Remember that you don't have to be an expert or have all the answers yourself. In fact, facilitating your students' learning and exploring the issue together can be a very powerful tool.
- Use resources that have already been created. [Transform Our World](#) is an online hub of high-quality, teacher reviewed, free resources, ready to be used by you.
- The '[Getting started with the SDGs](#)' guide provides seven teaching resources that introduce different aspects of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- [Changing Climates Curriculum](#) explores the climate crisis across four lessons, looking at the causes, the impacts and also the emotions we are experiencing, helping to move from anxiety to positive action.

How do I fit the climate crisis conversation into an already crowded curriculum?

Climate science and biodiversity are within geography and science curricula; however, the climate crisis can also be taught within other, less obvious, subject areas. Some ideas are below:

- English – analyse the language used in news articles, facilitate a debate, or use persuasive language to write to your local MP asking for change.
- Maths – use data relating to the climate crisis or representing data in graphs. Highlight that the projections for our climate are looking at the probability of the crisis, based on the data available, and the importance of maths in shaping these discussions and policies.
- History – explore the history of activism, of collective voices and what this has achieved in the past.
- Engineering – explore sustainable designs and ideas for technology, new and old.
- Design & Technology/Art – make a placard or design posters to campaign against the issue.
- Tutor time – dedicate regular time to discuss the latest news or to debate challenges and responses to the climate crisis. Could your tutor group start an action project that encourages more environmentally friendly behaviours across the school or their year group?

How do I teach about the severity of the climate crisis without causing anxiety?

Feeling anxious about the current state of the planet is a very rational response to current events and predictions for our future. In fact, [an article](#) by Caroline Hickman, a psychotherapist at University of Bath, suggests that a contributing factor to the current state of inaction is that not enough of us are yet anxious enough to catalyse the change that is required.

What can I do?

- Focus on the facts and on what we *do* know about our current and past climate and environment. You could compare the changes we have seen over time, such as looking at the severity of [extreme weather events](#), previous max/min [global temperatures](#), changes in [sea ice cover](#) and [glacier extent](#). Let the data speak for itself.
- Help students understand the severity of the situation but also look at the progress being made, such as technological innovations and changes in policy, to help provide hope for the future and to see that they can act and stand up for what is important to them. For example, [Microsoft](#) have recently pledged to be 'carbon negative' by 2030, removing more carbon than they contribute to the environment. Hope is essential for driving positive change.
- Make the learning relevant to your students' lives to show the connections between their everyday decisions and the issue of climate change; this will help reduce the feeling of helplessness or the idea that the issue is so big they cannot make a difference.



"School leaders are well-versed in the moral imperative to prepare young people for the future, and this includes providing them with a sense of purpose and agency through collective activism in order to secure their future well-being. Equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need to understand, speak out or innovate is a good start, but more critically we must also provide opportunities to engage in activism which provides a remedy for the anxiety associated with feeling powerless."

Graham Frost,
Head Teacher at Robert Ferguson Primary School

Talk about it

Feeling alone with any issue can be anxiety-inducing, especially if that issue is one which threatens the future of humanity and our planet. However, keeping everything locked up and dealing with it alone, perhaps for fear of judgment or from not knowing where to turn, will only be damaging to our mental health. Talking through fears and concerns can instantly relieve feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and you may be surprised by how many other people are experiencing similar feelings of anxiety.

I don't know where to start with talking about something so critical

Establish your students' feelings about the climate crisis and their current level of understanding towards it by asking some of the following questions:

- What does 'climate crisis' mean to you?
- How does this make you feel?
- Where have you heard about the climate crisis?
- Who do you hear talking about this most?

You will then have a clearer idea of the level at which to start the conversation, the main sources of information students are accessing, as well as an awareness of any feelings of anxiety that already exist. This will also allow you to tailor your conversations to close any gaps or undo any misconceptions about the topic. Be aware of the age appropriateness of what you are trying to communicate, adapting the content of your conversations to suit the age group of your cohort

How do I talk and teach about the climate crisis without communicating my own sense of anxiety?

Do not worry about communicating your own sense of anxiety about the climate crisis – it is not wrong to be feeling anxious and it is not wrong for your students to know this.

What can I do?

- Have an honest discussion with students about the issue, including your feelings – this could be both powerful and reassuring to students.
- Talk about your anxiety but also your hope for the situation and what we *can* still do.
- Facilitate a discussion around the facts and the science, allowing students to decide for themselves how severe the issue is. This way you reduce the risk of transferring your own anxiety and of being seen to push your own agenda.

School leadership are not clear on their position – could this cause anxiety amongst students?

A lack of response from school leaders, who students trust and look up to, sends the message that this is not important to them, which could cause confusion and frustration. This, in turn, could increase anxiety amongst students, as well as lead to a lack of trust in the school and the education system.

What can I do?

- Listening to and acting on the student voice will motivate, empower and inspire young people, whilst also sparking change in the school and community.
- Assess the priorities of students, teachers, leadership and the wider school community, and determine what would most meet their needs within their capabilities. Open the conversation between students and school leaders and find ways for students to lead on this, uncovering what is most important to them and harnessing their ideas for action.
- There is no 'one size fits all' approach to the climate crisis in schools; check out our [Climate Chaos Response Toolkit](#) for options to engage students and school leadership
- Ensure students are fairly represented within school decision-making, either via a diverse governing body, including student representatives, or via a student council at school.

I'm deeply concerned about the environment but know that my actions don't always reflect this

When our choices and actions do not match up to the values that we hold, it can often trigger feelings of guilt and shame. This is known as the values-action gap. Unfortunately, we are currently living in a culture with systems that don't support a more sustainable lifestyle. This is not a reason to feel ashamed or to stop trying.

- Remember that no one is perfect; we are all on a journey to living more sustainably and we should recognise and own where we are on that journey.
- Environmentally friendly actions and choices, no matter how small, can help relieve feelings of guilt and shame but it is the larger scale, system changes that will enable us all to live more easily in line with our values
- Explore the values that you and your students hold and how these values can play a larger role in how we educate (see 'Introducing values in education' on page 11)

Support with managing the symptoms of anxiety

The symptoms of climate anxiety can range from a general feeling of unease to panic attacks, breathlessness and insomnia. Below is a list of organisations who specialise in supporting those suffering from anxiety:

- [Mind](#) provide guidance for those suffering from anxiety and for those supporting friends, family and colleagues through the condition. Their downloadable '[Anxiety and Panic Attacks](#)' resource provides an overview of the condition and how to manage symptoms.
- [Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families](#) provide an A-Z of self-care options to help us be aware of and look after our own mental health.
- [Nopanic.org](#) provide youth mentoring and a helpline service, offering a community for talking about anxiety and sharing experiences. They offer ideas for self-help, including a [five-minute body scan relaxation](#) exercise to relieve anxiety.
- [Young Minds](#) provide an overview of anxiety as a condition, as well as tips for managing the symptoms and support for parents too.

"The climate emergency can bring up many difficult feelings: anxiety, grief, anger, guilt, distress and outrage – and they each have their part to play in tackling it."

Dr Elly Hanson, Clinical Psychologist

Introducing values in education

The values that young people hold will have a significant impact on the actions they choose to take.

Research has shown that through nurturing young people to be compassionate, kind and caring, they will be more inclined to care for the environment and each other. As educators we can't escape the role we play in shaping the values young people hold. We have a responsibility to be mindful of this in class, in the playground and in school life more generally.

Being aware of our influence as role models helps us to take care to nurture values that underpin environmental action, rather than their opposites.

Compassionate values can be encouraged and strengthened through every single lesson, no matter what the subject. Further information and guidance on values can be found on [Transform Our World](#).

Further reading and resources

Listen:

- [Climate Psychology Alliance](#) offer a series of podcasts around the psychology of the climate crisis, including a conversation on climate anxiety, featuring psychologists, climate experts and those suffering from it.
- [Costing the Earth: Eco Anxiety Podcast](#) is a podcast from the BBC interviewing people struggling with eco anxiety.
- [Me and my eco-anxiety](#) gives a personal, real life perspective on living with climate anxiety.

Watch:

- [‘Supporting children in the face of climate change’](#) is a talk by Jo McAndrews where she discusses the neurobiology of child development and recommends how best to discuss environmental issues and activism at different developmental stages.

Read:

- [‘Stressed about climate change? Eight tips for managing climate anxiety’](#), is an article from the New Scientist that provides realistic and helpful tips to manage anxiety induced by climate change, focusing on both managing the anxiety itself and taking action against climate change.
- [‘Hope in the Dark’](#) by Rebecca Solnit explores the history of activism and social change over the past five decades, providing an optimistic thread to what is frequently considered a hopeless situation.
- [‘What I’ve learned from listening to children talk about climate change’](#) by Caroline Hickman is an article that explores the importance of listening to children talk about their perspective on climate change and taking note of their fresh ideas on how we should face this challenge.
- [This article](#) from Parent Co. advises parents on how to ease their child’s fears around climate change.
- [‘Eco-anxiety: how to spot it and what to do about it’](#) is an article from BBC Three providing insight on climate anxiety and guidance on how to manage it.

- ‘Climate Change activism “reducing mental health symptoms among young people”’ from the Independent illustrates the positive impacts of practical action.
- Page 42 of [this report](#) from the American Psychological Association provides tips for supporting individuals with climate anxiety.

Teach:

- [Transform Our World](#) is a hub of high-quality, free, teacher reviewed environmental resources.
- [Changing Climates Curriculum](#) from ThoughtBox offers lesson plans and resources that will open your eyes to a variety of global perspectives and take you on a journey from climate crisis to climate action.
- [World’s Largest Lesson](#) offers free materials for teaching students of all ages about the Sustainable Development Goals.

Take action:

- [UK Student Climate Network](#) demand the government declare a climate emergency and teach and communicate the truth to the public. This youth-led group rely on volunteers to join regional networks to campaigns for change.
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- [Teach the Future](#) is a youth-led campaign to repurpose the education system around the climate crisis.

Glossary

Anxiety	Distress or uneasiness of mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune.
Chronic symptoms	A physical or emotional/mental sign of something that is long-lasting.
Climate anxiety	A chronic fear of environmental doom. Some people are deeply affected by feelings of loss, helplessness and frustration due to their inability to feel like they are making a difference in stopping climate change.
Climate crisis	Climate change and global warming, and their consequences.
Fatalism	The acceptance of all things and events as inevitable.
Meaningful practical action	Action that creates change and makes a difference.
School leadership	Senior school staff and governors.
Values	The moral principles and beliefs of a person or social group.
Values-action gap	The spaces that occurs when values or attitudes of an individual does not correlate with their actions.



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