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How Do We Feel About Global Warming? It's Called Eco-Anxiety.

After a summer of intense heat, raging fires and catastrophic floods, a term for pervading dread about climate change and other environmental crises is having its moment.



A wildfire burning last month near the towns of Alcamo and Partinico, in western Sicily. Credit...Alberto Lo Bianco/LaPresse, via Associated Press



By [Jason Horowitz](#), Reporting from Rome, Sept. 16, 2023

Italy was in the grip of extreme heat waves, hellish wildfires and biblical downpours, and a nerve-wracked young Italian woman wept as she stood in a theater to tell the country's environment minister about her fears of a climatically apocalyptic future.

"I personally suffer from eco-anxiety," Giorgia Vasaperna, 27, said, her eyes welling and her hands fidgeting, at a children's film festival in July. "I have no future because my land burns." She doubted the sanity of bringing children into an infernal world and [asked](#), "Aren't you scared for your children, for your grandchildren?"

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Then the minister, Gilberto Pichetto Fratin, started crying.

“I have a responsibility toward all of you,” he said, visibly choked up. “I have a responsibility toward my grandchildren.”

Europe is a continent on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

In Greece, nerves are shot as weeks of [blazes raging out of control](#) have given way to flooding that has [submerged villages](#), washed away cars and left dead bodies floating in the streets. Italians are frazzled as a summer of incinerating heat waves lingers and fear mounts over the return of hailstones the size of handballs.

A group of young Portuguese, exhausted by sweltering temperatures and spreading fires, are suing European nations for causing the climate change that they claim has damaged their mental health, much as their counterparts in Montana [sued the state](#).

And, in a common refrain of the eco-anxiety era, it gets worse.

The same storm that hit Greece gained strength over the Mediterranean and [pummeled Libya](#) with flooding that killed thousands.



Dimos Tsiakas in the yard of his flooded home this month in the village of Palamas, Greece. Credit...Alexandros Avramidis/Reuters

A recent [United Nations report](#) delivered the bad news that the world was way off track in meeting

it pledges under the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Polls have registered a deepening malaise. The [specter](#) of burning in nuclear fires started by the war in Ukraine has moved to the back burner.

In an era of ever-increasing anxiety, now is the summer — and autumn — of our disquiet, and eco-anxiety, a catchall term to describe all-encompassing environmental concerns, is having its moment.

While it is not clinically recognized as a pathology, or included in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, experts say the feeling of gloom and doom prompted by all of the inescapable images of planetary gloom and doom is becoming more widespread.

“Climate change is moving faster than psychiatry for sure and also psychology,” said Dr. Paolo Cianconi, a member of the ecology psychiatry and mental health division of the World Psychiatry Association, who is publishing a book with colleagues on the topic this month. He said that the term eco-anxiety had existed for more than a decade, but that it was “circulating very much” these days, and that the condition would only increase in the future.

“When people start to be worried about the planet, they don’t know that they have eco-anxiety,” he said. “When they see this thing has a name, then they understand what to call it.”

Dr. Cianconi and some of his colleagues [published a paper](#) in June in the Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine that mentioned the terms “eco-PTSD,” “eco-burnout,” “eco-phobia” and “eco-rage.”

But the focus remained on eco-anxiety, which they broadly defined as a “chronic fear of environmental doom” suffered by firsthand victims of traumatic climate change events; people whose livelihoods or way of living is threatened by climate change; climate activists or people who work in the field of climate change;

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people fed images of climate change through the news media; and people prone to anxiety.

Basically, everyone.



Few people braved the streets of downtown Rome during an intense heat wave in July, and most of them stayed in the shade. Credit...Andrew Medichini/Associated Press

Among the characteristics of eco-anxiety, they cited “frustration, powerlessness, feeling overwhelmed, hopelessness, helplessness.” There could be a combination of “clinically relevant symptoms, such as worry, rumination, irritability, sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, panic attacks.”

Sound familiar?

“Already I have Latin, Greek and French exams coming up — now I have this climate anxiety, too,” said Sara Maggiolo, 16, as she walked past the psychiatric wing of a hospital in Rome on a recent afternoon that cracked 100 degrees. Hardly anyone was outside except for a few tourists who clung to the shade.

Earlier in the summer, Ms. Maggiolo said, she had visited the Dolomite Alps with her family and was saddened to see workers protecting glaciers from the sun with white tarps. “Watching TV and seeing everything burn,” she said. “It’s hard to stay interested in world problems when there won’t be a world. Every summer will be hotter. It will always be worse.”

Psychiatrists say that for many people who have been put through the wringer over the past decade, the climate extremes are one crisis too many.

Within Europe, “back to back” crises have left Greeks particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, said Christos Liapis, a prominent Greek psychiatrist. He said it was not just the fires and the flooding. The 2010 financial crisis, the 2015 migrant crisis, Covid, inflation and energy crises took their toll, too, “and finally the climate crisis, which hit Greece particularly hard,” he said.

“Constant stress has a deeper impact on mental health than acute short-lived stress,” Mr. Liapis said. “The person who’s already struggling due to higher rent will be harder hit when his home floods.”

On Thursday, the Greek Health Ministry said it would put in place a “comprehensive program of interventions for psychosocial support” for victims of the floods and send mobile units of mental health professionals to the afflicted areas.



Flooding in the suburbs of the city of Larissa, Greece, this month. Credit...Stamos Prousalis/Reuters

A few days after the Italian environmental minister got choked up, the newspaper *la Repubblica* commissioned a survey about the toll that the apocalyptic weather was having on Italians. “Not only the young suffer from eco-anxiety,” the paper declared, with the poll finding

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that 72 percent of Italians were pessimistic for the future and convinced that the environmental situation would deteriorate in the coming years.

Some, frustrated with the paralysis of their governments, have turned to higher powers for a source of strength.

At the World Youth Day event in Lisbon this summer, Pope Francis told hundreds of thousands of young Catholics to take action to protect the earth and beat back climate change. Many of the participants took his words to heart, especially as temperatures climbed and the authorities warned about dangerous conditions.

“We are afraid of this temperature problem,” Rita Sacramento, 20, from Porto, Portugal, said as she and her friends trudged through one of the most sweltering days of the summer. She said she had seen people faint around her.

“It’s not normal,” Ms. Sacramento said. “When it is cold it is more cold. When it is hot it is more hot. Years pass and it’s hotter.”

Some experts said that for mentally healthy people, a touch of eco-anxiety could be an engine for action.

“In this moment eco-anxiety is something that will bring people to act in a positive way,” said Giampaolo Perna, a psychiatrist and expert in anxiety at the Humanitas San Pio X hospital in Milan. “And try to protect the environment.”

Niki Kitsantonis contributed reporting from Athens.

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The aftermath of the flooding on Thursday in Derna, Libya. Credit...Esam Omran Al-Fetori/Reuters

But he added that while climate fears were not yet a recognized pathology or driving people into therapy, they “could be a sort of stimulus” for a crisis in someone who already has a general anxiety disorder.

“If this becomes chronic,” Dr. Perna added, “in the long run this will not be healthy.”

Some have already moved on to a new stage of planetary grief.

“It’s not so much anxiety as despair,” said Leonardo Giordano, 27, who works in a health food restaurant in Rome. “Anxiety would be if you have the chance to do something. I think we are beyond those times.”

He added with a shrug: “My family thinks I have a future to worry about. But I think I don’t.”