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Managing Eco-Anxiety for Earth Day and Beyond

by Kayla Yurco

I've been teaching undergraduate environmental courses for over a decade, and it was almost that long ago the first time one of my students accused me of "only teaching depressing things." I remember first feeling a wave of surprise that quickly shifted to defensiveness, then finally softened to empathy. They weren't entirely wrong: learning—and teaching!—about the state of the world can be tough.

Since then, I've met many students who find it hard to embrace environmental challenges. And, while there have been plenty of students who have doubled down in their motivation to pursue environmental or social justice work in my classes, I've watched many others recoil at their newfound insights. When that first brave student confronted me, I didn't know that there was a term for what they were feeling. But that conversation, and my attempts to grapple with my own optimism and pessimism about the world, helped me eventually find my way to "[eco-anxiety](#)."

Eco-anxiety is a [general term](#) for anxiety or distress related to our current ecological crisis. It's used alongside and sometimes interchangeably with "[climate anxiety](#)," which is distress specific to climate change. It's also increasingly used as an umbrella term for [emotions like "eco-grief," "eco-guilt," and other reactions](#) to the world's [wicked problems](#) (which, according to [some accounts](#), have been overwhelming our current students for their entire lives).

Eco-anxiety is not an entirely new concept. Nearly two decades ago, philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the term "[solastalgia](#)" to explain the existential and psychological feelings people have when their environments undergo significant change or degradation. This concept is meant to combine feelings of nostalgia, desolation, and the homesickness we might feel when our home is being destroyed. As researchers have adopted and amplified this concept, they have reminded us that indigenous communities and other cultures all around the world have [words that relate psychological states to states of the environment](#), but that English has few.

Nonetheless, [the importance of eco-anxiety is being increasingly recognized](#). It was, for example, highlighted in [a recent report by the American Psychological Association](#) on the connections between mental health and climate change. The report notes that learning about the realities and horrors of climate change can be painful and can challenge individuals' sense of autonomy, control, and identity. From an education standpoint, this is why eco-anxiety is often framed *as a problem*.

Emotions that accompany eco-anxiety (fear, confusion, grief, guilt, or anger) can be difficult to manage in the classroom. And, when taking into account the inextricable links of environmental and social justice, we can understand how these discussions raise our consciousness and make us confront privilege. (Indeed, some who study climate anxiety warn that [it is an overwhelmingly white phenomenon](#).)

Managing eco-anxiety, then, can be messy. Most of us are not trained therapists—[who are also still learning about eco-anxiety](#)—so we need to know that guidelines for [referring students to counseling](#) may be relevant. ([Professional support](#) is building for the awareness of climate distress.) But there is more to it. Anxiety might be a very human, very reasonable response to the state of the world. And there should be shared responsibility not only in managing our shared environment, but also in [collective accountability for care](#) in the pursuit of environmental and social justice.

This past fall, in a [CFI roundtable discussion](#), I led a group of instructors as we opened up about how we experience and handle eco-anxiety in our own teaching across the disciplines. After some earnest commiserating, we talked over (modest) tips and tools. A first step, we agreed, regardless of discipline, is engaging students in [media literacy](#), i.e., how to access, analyze, and evaluate media. To that end, in my classes, I convey the real opportunity of [JMU-provided free access to newspapers](#) (and we use them for assignments). I suggest that students set up [Google alerts](#) for 1-2 topics they care about deeply. We think globally, discussing reports by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) and why they matter. And we connect back down to the personal, considering the work of inspiring activists like [Greta Thunberg](#) and [Nick Estes](#).

Connecting to personal stories like these helps us recognize that [feelings matter](#) when it comes to environmental issues like climate change. In [A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety](#), Sarah Jaquette Ray expands on this idea, offering a second framing of eco-anxiety: one of *possibility*. She traces what she calls “the affective arc of environmental studies curricula,” which starts with idealism, then moves quickly to lost innocence and guilt. In the middle there’s a “self-care/re-discover pleasure/bake cookies” phase that can lead to reclaimed hope and, finally, resilience. It’s good fortune that the technical concept of [resilience](#) may be key to [climate change science](#) AND to [the science of our emotions](#). But since [resilience is not a neutral term](#) for many of us, its potential should not overshadow the collective work needed to resist and disrupt the systems that endanger us.

Many of my students haven’t yet heard of eco-anxiety, but its meaning resonates with their experiences, so I’m foregrounding it in discussions. In one class, we’re listening to a new podcast on [Climate Change and Happiness](#). In my geography courses, I think about fundamental concepts like scale and space, and I focus regularly on encouraging students to enact care in their spheres of influence ([Community-Service Learning](#) at JMU is one great place to start). I highlight Black feminist scholar-activists like [adrienne maree brown](#) who reminds us that “small is good, small is all.” And I’m

learning from Ayana Elizabeth Johnson's call for a [Feminist Climate Renaissance](#). So much of the language on climate change, she says, has been war metaphors; we're *fighting* global warming, *battling* climate change. The notion of "renaissance," instead, invites and invokes art, creativity, and a possibility of rebirth. (And, lucky for us, the climate initiative she co-founded, [The All We Can Save Project](#), has plenty of [resources for educators](#).)

So, for this upcoming [Earth Day](#) (and every other day), I invite us all to think about engaging with our collective eco-anxieties to motivate deliberation and possibility, especially toward [climate justice](#) ([this very recent article](#) is great for starting the discussion in our classrooms and other spheres of influence, as is [this timely event](#)). And I invite us all to continue thinking more about [strategies of care](#) so we can work collaboratively across disciplines to envision and enact a more hopeful, equitable, and sustainable future.

About the author: Kayla Yurco is an assistant professor of Geography in the School of Integrated Sciences and a CFI faculty associate in the teaching area. She can be reached at yurcokm@jmu.edu.

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu) directly. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit our webpage: <https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>.