

‘Overwhelming and terrifying’: the rise of climate anxiety

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5 Clover Hogan grew up in Australia and said she was heartbroken when she heard about the number of animals killed by recent bushfires.

Over the past few weeks, Clover Hogan has found herself crying during the day and waking up at night gripped by panic. The 20-year-old, who now lives in London, grew up in Queensland, Australia, cheekbyjowl with the country’s wildlife, fishing frogs out
10 of the toilet and dodging snakes hanging from the ceiling.

The bushfires ravaging her homeland over the past few weeks have taken their toll. “I’ve found myself bursting into tears ... just seeing the absolutely harrowing images of what’s happening in Australia – it is overwhelming and terrifying.”

Hogan said her lowest point came when she heard about the death of half a billion
15 animals incinerated as the fires swept through the bush. “That was the moment where I felt my heart cleave into two pieces. I felt absolutely distraught.”

The physical impact of the climate crisis is impossible to ignore, but experts are becoming increasingly concerned about another, less obvious consequence of the escalating emergency – the strain it is putting on people’s mental wellbeing,
20 especially the young.

Psychologists warn that the impact can be debilitating for the growing number of people overwhelmed by the scientific reality of ecological breakdown and for those who have lived through traumatic climate events, often on the climate frontline in the global south.

25 Until two years ago Dr Patrick Kennedy-Williams, a clinical psychologist from Oxford, had spent his career treating common mental health difficulties including anxiety, depression and trauma. Then something new started to happen. Climate scientists and researchers working in Oxford began to approach him asking for help.

30 “These were people who were essentially facing a barrage of negative information and downward trends in their work ... and the more they engaged with the issue, the more they realised what needed to be done – and the more they felt that was bigger than their capacity to enact meaningful change,” he said. “The consequences of this can be pretty dire – anxiety, burnout and a sort of professional paralysis.”

Kennedy-Williams began to research the topic and realised it was not just scientists
35 and researchers who were suffering. “There is a huge need among parents, for instance, who are asking for support on how to talk to their kids about this.”

When Kennedy-Williams began focusing on young people he assumed most would be older teenagers or at least have started secondary school. But he soon discovered worrying levels of environment-related stress and anxiety in much younger children.

40 “What I was most surprised by is how young the awareness and anxiety starts. My own daughter was just six when she came to me and said: ‘Daddy, are we winning the war against climate change?’ and I was just flummoxed by that question in the moment. It really showed me the importance as a parent of being prepared for the conversation, so we can respond in a helpful way.”

45 He says there is no way to completely shield young people from the reality of the climate crisis, and argues that would be counterproductive even if it were possible. Rather, parents should talk to their children about their concerns and help them feel that they can change things.

50 A key moment for Kennedy-Williams came with the realisation that tackling “climate anxiety” and tackling the climate crisis were intrinsically linked.

“The positive thing from our perspective as psychologists is that we soon realised the cure to climate anxiety is the same as the cure for climate change – action. It is about getting out and doing something that helps.

55 “Record and celebrate the changes you make. Nobody is too small. Make connections with other people and at the same time realise that you are not going to cure this problem on your own. This isn’t all on you and it’s not sustainable to be working on solving climate change 24/7.”

This certainly resonates with Hogan, who has set up Force of Nature, an initiative aimed at helping young people realise their potential to create change.

60 Hogan’s group aims to target people aged 11-24 with a crash course in the climate crisis that helps them navigate their anxiety and realise their potential to get involved, take action and make a stand.

65 “This is only the beginning,” said Hogan. “We’re going to see massive, massive widespread climate crisis in every country around the world, so it’s about developing the emotional resilience to carry on, but in a way that ignites really dramatic individual initiative.”