

STRONG MIND

WH



In the grip of eco anxiety

The reality of climate change now has adults debating whether or not to have children, and children panicking about their future. As a new collective of psychologists attempt to address mounting ecological fear, how can you save the planet *and* your peace of mind?

WORDS GEMMA ASKHAM



The back corner of The Crown, a gastropub in a leafy North London suburb, is regularly rented out to different groups. There's the sweaty post-workout CrossFitters, a yoga group, a book club and six recently retired women who giggle as they practise French. The space even held a drag show once. But a new group brings a different vibe, with intense and animated conversations, supportive hugs, hand-holding, poetry readings and, most noticeably, crying. The manager initially thought that someone had died. But when the group returned on consecutive weeks with new faces, all looking similarly distressed, he quietly enquired. 'It's not *someone*', one attendee revealed, 'It's the planet.' The event was a grief circle – a peer-to-peer support group for the ecologically petrified – their fears triggered by damning scientific predictions about the planet's temperature and a spate of terrifying weather events. And these circles are popping up ever more frequently in cafes, parks and studios, and on university campuses across the country.

This climatically triggered downpour on mental health has a name – eco anxiety. In January, a poll by YouGov and Friends of the Earth found that over two thirds of young Brits experience eco anxiety. Another study revealed that almost half of those aged between 18 and 34 reported feeling eco anxiety on a daily basis. Among the psychotherapists that *WH* spoke to, there was a consensus that a few years ago no one would have come to them with eco anxiety, but following the landmark 2018 report that we only have 12 years to limit climate-change catastrophe, and the increasing noise around the issue, roughly two in every 10 clients feels that eco anxiety is putting strain on their mental wellbeing.

CLIMATE OF GRIEF

Psychotherapist Rosemary Randall, who specialises in the psychology of climate change, attributes this spike to people moving beyond 'disavowal' – psycho-speak for covering your ears and la-la-la-ing. 'Disavowal is a form of denial where you don't deny the facts, but you deny their connection to you and your life,' she explains. It was the go-to reaction when climate change was first presented as a concern in the 70s and 80s, and subsequent world events failed to cause the kind of mass intervention that a celeb-backed campaign and a Netflix exposé might have done. The financial crisis in 2008 diverted attention away from ecology, the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009 failed to produce a treaty, then the 2010 Conservative-led government dismantled a lot of climate regulation, and Theresa May even abolished the Department of Energy and Climate Change in 2016. In 2012, Randall, frustrated that the climate crisis had essentially been put on an eco version of flight mode, joined the committee of a radical new collective of green-minded

suddenly feel alarmingly relatable and relevant; the frosty old geography textbook is now a whip-smart, Trump-bashing 17-year-old from Sweden, while the UK branch of Extinction Rebellion, the environmental protest group launched here in October 2018, aims to make 50% of the public see the climate and ecological emergency as society's top priority. And as the collective sense of 'oh shit' grows, Randall and the CPA are rolling out support and community workshops for people grappling with a rising sense of concern and panic. More than 1,000 clinical psychologists have now signed an open letter to rally the government to act (and the media to report more fully on the issue), warning that the mental health impact of the climate crisis will be enormous, particularly for children growing up in ever-increasing danger, and their parents.

Anastasia Miari, a 29-year-old British-Greek journalist, is one such sufferer. She first became interested in climate change aged 15 after watching *An Inconvenient Truth*, about Al Gore's campaign to educate people on global warming. Witnessing environmental harm on her home island of Corfu made it real. 'Corfu has huge issues with waste disposal because EU money set aside for waste infrastructure has been spent on other things,' she explains. 'Because of the lack of infrastructure,

'I worry that my child will see extreme weather, war and famine'

psychologists. Called the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA), its mission was to mobilise a professional response to climate change for when the public *did* catch on.

And here we are. Your social media feeds, once reserved for screen-grabbing influencers' breakfast recipes, have become funeral pyres for the planet: images of a scorched Amazon rainforest, starving polar bears and koalas clinging on to firefighters have you blinking back tears in the self-checkout queue. Then shedding one as you buy another bag for life because you haven't yet followed up on your pledge to always carry a canvas bag. The facts of climate change

there's nowhere for the constant flow of rubbish to go, so waste piles up on the road and is never collected. One illegal landfill is above a water source, which puts an entire region at risk of having its water poisoned – water that my friends and family could wash and brush their teeth with. That brings environmental problems so much closer to home for me,' she says. Two years ago, in a bid to alleviate her rising anxiety, Anastasia started taking buses, ferries and trains instead of planes wherever possible and adopted a zero-waste lifestyle, composting everything and refusing to buy things packaged in plastic. Last summer, her eco anxiety began to cause heated arguments with friends. 'Out of frustration that intelligent, well-educated peers were turning a blind eye, I'd vehemently lambast friends for little things, like still accepting plastic straws. I get really wound up that they can't even make small changes,

and this cycle of frustration and anxiety culminates in the odd breakdown in tears at a dinner party after too many glasses of wine,' she admits. Anastasia's anxiety has recently taken a darker turn after finding out that she's pregnant. 'On our first date, my partner and I even discussed not having children because of climate change, and now we're faced with a decision. Emotionally, I feel guilty – not only am I impacting the planet, but I'm about to bring an extra person into the world who will, too. I worry that my child will see extreme weather conditions, war and famine,' she shares. 'My partner is happy about the pregnancy; he's better at finding the good in it all, and says we can instil positive values for future change. My parents have never understood my eco anxiety – why would I forgo my right to have children because of something that "may" happen? I can't seem to find a positive, though, and instead of my pregnancy being a happy time, it's one filled with dread.'

As the complexity of feelings in Anastasia's case shows, eco anxiety brings a much more varied emotional response than anxiety from, say, work pressures. 'When people first become aware of the climate crisis, they tend to experience shock, fear and dismay,' says Randall. Then they feel overwhelmed, powerless, angry and a sense of despair, followed by alternating periods of terror and disbelief. There can also be recurring bouts of guilt. Particularly if you feel you've buried your head in the sand



because the critical impact of climate change hasn't affected you personally. 'There's guilt at having been complicit in the problem (here's looking at you, unused recycling bin), at having failed to take the issue seriously, at having failed to adjust your own life,' adds Randall. 'This complex mix of emotions can make people feel a loss of identity, a sense of their future being threatened and of life plans having to change. Some people feel isolated from family or friends who don't get it. Others find themselves deeply depressed.' In other words, it's the perfect emotional storm.

FORECAST: PANIC

Dr Kris De Meyer, a King's College London neuroscientist who researches how people form world views, notes that, interestingly, eco anxiety is almost identical to the fear and uncertainty that Europeans felt during the Cold War and New Yorkers experienced after 9/11. Why? The human brain evaluates threat by the number of times you're exposed to news of something happening around you. The brain acts like a sponge for local information, but that absorbency peaks when you're young – hence the explosion of school climate strikes driven by anxious tweens. 'The brain has a critical window, likely up until early adolescence, in which threatening messages really shape your identity,' says Dr De Meyer. It's why an asteroid movie can have you LOLing at the 90s special effects, while your 10-year-old astronomy-mad niece is genuinely terrified that a giant rock will destroy Earth. Unlike war-induced anxiety, Dr De Meyer believes the difference here is the scale. 'Climate change is global, so the number of people affected by eco anxiety will be much larger, especially as extreme weather increases.' A new study by the Environment Agency concurs: it found that Brits who witness flooding and severe storms are 50% more likely to suffer from mental health problems, including stress and depression, for at least two years afterwards.



With that comes the implication that people once immune to eco anxiety could soon be grappling with it. Before attending her first Extinction Rebellion protest in April 2019 – which she only attended to support her partner who was drumming at the event – Dr Emily Grossman, a 41-year-old scientist from London, wasn't worried about climate change at all. 'I actually thought, come on, climate change can't be that bad. Otherwise it would be on every news programme, politicians would be doing something and, given that I work in science, I would know about it,' she admits. Worried that she could actually compromise her scientific integrity by appearing next to protest banners wildly exaggerating the state of play, after the march, Emily made it her mission to find out everything about climate change, devoting eight months to research. 'The more I uncovered, the more I realised that it's not just as bad as what people were saying, it's worse,' she says, frankly, explaining that the 1.5°C warming we're estimated to pass by 2040 would have a devastating impact here in the UK, from rising food prices to flooding and tornadoes. This knowledge has had a debilitating effect on her mindset. 'Since becoming present to that reality, I've barely had a good night's sleep,' she admits. She's also expanded the science she covers professionally to co-found Scientists for Extinction Rebellion – a group of academics who protest in their lab coats to force governments to take action. But her anxiety remains ever-present. 'If you're faced with the truth about climate change on a daily basis, as I now am because I'm looking at the figures and writing reports on it every day, there's a lot of grief and anxiety endemic in that. There are moments when I can distract myself, but a base level of horror and terror is always there.'

GETTING THE GREEN LIGHT

While Emily's work as a scientist increases her exposure to the worst of climate change news, Randall believes that mining the scary stuff is an addiction we can all get hooked on. 'Paradoxically, feeling awful can make you feel like you're doing something. Through an increase in unhappy and frightened feelings, suffering feels like a form of action – because feeling *something* is recognising the issue. But a preoccupation with reading the worst, particularly in the echo chambers of social media, can become a damaging form of self-torture where you deliberately frighten yourself more and more, as if being aware is enough,' she warns. A better approach is to treat climate change like a medical diagnosis. When you first get the diagnosis, you naturally research. 'Then, after time, you work out what you need to do in order to live with it – the diet, the exercise programme, the medication routine – and you stop googling and get on with finding joy in living,' she encourages. In other words, go easy on the climate news and find empowering ways to change things.

This was the driving force behind Emily co-founding Scientists for Extinction Rebellion. The activist group is already achieving small wins, such as February's ruling against the expansion of Bristol Airport. The 'act' part of activism is important, because when faced with a trauma on the scale of the world burning – as opposed to getting queue-jumped in the post office – your stress

APP-TIVISM

Taking practical action is one thing research suggests can help ease eco anxiety. These apps make sustainable living a cinch



OLIO

A third of the world's food goes to waste – attempting to change that stat is Olio, an app connecting local communities to make sure food on its way out finds a home.



GIKI

Not sure which brand of oat milk is best for the planet? Scan your food shop and Giki will award badges according to each product's environmental impact.



GOOD ON YOU

Good On You analyses fashion brands from around the world, giving ratings based on their eco credentials and providing similarly priced alternatives if your faves aren't up to scratch.



ECOSIA

Like Google, only greener. Ecosia is a search engine that plants trees while you type. The premise is simple: all the profits it earns through ads are put towards tree-planting initiatives.



FOR GOOD

Trackers, this one's for you. For Good helps you calculate your carbon footprint, taking in your energy consumption, travel and diet to give you an individual score you can improve upon.



REFILL

Permanently attached to your Chilly's bottle? With over 20,000 stations across the country, Refill provides a handy map of where you can freely fill up your H₂O.

response generally doesn't flip to fight-or-flight, it freezes. 'It's a feeling of complete oh-my-god-it's-all-too-much, which then manifests as doing nothing,' says Emily. Recent studies show that activism is the one pursuit where people who are developing high levels of eco anxiety can find meaning, because fear gets channelled into 'doing'.

The second perk of activism is that it looks at big-picture events rather than personal shortcomings, such as mentally torturing yourself for ordering a takeaway sushi meal containing roughly 117 plastic pots. While changing individual lifestyle factors (ie, reducing meat and dairy consumption, recycling more) plays a part, Dr De Meyer found that we all reach a point of personal conflict: for example, you're 100% determined to stop flying, but your grandparents live in the US. That either leads to lots of guilt if you go, or it hollows out family values if you don't. 'Neither is good for your mental health in the long-term,' he adds. 'We need to move away from those impossible personal choices to thinking: what is it that needs to change in the world around me? How can I be a part of bringing about that change?'

Examples include joining support and protest groups, such as Extinction Rebellion, Force of Nature and FridaysForFuture, which organise rallies and 'climate cafes', where you can chat to like-minded people over a latte (non-dairy, natch). Write to and lobby your local MP – a Sheffield-based organisation called Hope for the Future is mentoring people across the UK on how best to express concerns about climate change during your MP's constituency hour. Click on petitions and join community campaigns for things like cleaner air and better public transport. And, until November's United Nations Climate Change Conference (known as COP26) in Glasgow, the United Nations Development Programme is running Mission 1.5 (mission1point5.org) – a website-cum-video-game that lets you decide your ideal climate policies. The findings will then be analysed by the University of Oxford and delivered to world government leaders to – fingers crossed – act on.

There's currently no sugar-coating it: the climate crisis is not showing signs of cooling down. But in the heat of the moment, support groups, activism projects, lobbying techniques and online petitions are arming people like you with an increasingly loud voice that goes beyond a fatalistic 'we're screwed'. Using it could make all the difference to both the planet's future, and how soundly you sleep at night. **WH**