

FROM PREOCCUPATION TO PARTICIPATION:

Meet the YOU-CARE project addressing eco-anxiety in youth



Despite recent breakthroughs, the current and future effects of climate change on mental health remain underappreciated and understudied. Young people are the most affected, and there is an urgent need to deploy **spaces where they can play an active part in researching and grasping the diverse emotions triggered by the triple planetary crisis** – so as to move from anxiety to agentivity.

“Eco-anxiety is a very natural response to a very unnatural phenomenon that is happening in the world.”

Tori Tsui, climate justice activist and writer.

Eco-anxiety¹: A fast evolving reality

Over one in two young Europeans (15-24 y.o.) see climate change as the main global challenge for the future of the EU, and **nine out of ten (91%)** agree that tackling it can help improve their mental health and well-being.

In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child launched Comment no.26, a pioneer document raising the importance of building universal standards for governments to uphold children’s rights impacted by the environmental crisis. And, later that year, the report Headway - A new roadmap in Mental health considered the likely and rapid rise in eco-anxiety rates among young people – with already 45% of them saying that it significantly impacts their daily lives – due to the unprecedented increase in the number of natural disasters and extreme weather events in Europe (from 91 in 1979 to 1452 in 2019).

Meaningful youth participation as a solution

Young people are the most concerned by the manifestations of eco-anxiety. They tend to feel more powerless, are exposed to different information sources, and for some of them also in the front line of socio-environmental struggles.²

However, scientists have shown that **eco-anxiety can also be a driving force for change**, capable of raising awareness and triggering collective transitions.³ This move from helplessness and despair to agency can be achieved **through collective reflection, active participation, and policy engagement**. One way to do this is through participatory action research (PAR), enabling the **creative, active, and emancipatory involvement of young stakeholders in all stages of knowledge creation on eco-anxiety**. To do so, young people must be given the space to develop their skills and expertise to research, envision and implement green alternatives.

The YOU-CARE Project: Safeguarding youth's right to a healthy environment through research and participation

The YOU-CARE project (April 2024-March 2026) is an EU-level action research project **on environmental health, led by youth for youth**. With partners in five countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Ireland, Italy, and Lithuania), the project brings together participants between 13 and 25 y.o. from different geographical and socio-economic realities to examine the set of emotions linked to the triple planetary crisis.

Doing so, they build a common understanding of environmental issues and are empowered to move from preoccupation to active participation. All this while fostering their emotional, pedagogical, scientific, and advocacy skills. Indeed, among the project's expected results are youth-generated, research-based recommendations for decision-makers, encouraging policy changes towards a better handling of climate change related emotions and their causes.

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1. Several concepts have been coined to describe the most intense manifestations of climate preoccupation among individuals, of which ecoanxiety is the best known. It is a neologism referring to the perception of a compromised future, as well as to the set of emotions linked to a feeling of inevitability and inaction in the face of the deteriorating state of the planet.
2. Caroline Hickman, et al., "Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey," *Lancet Planetary Health* 5 (2021): 863–873 ; Terra Léger-Goodes, et al., "Eco-anxiety in children: A scoping review of the mental health impacts of the awareness of climate change," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022).
3. Alice Desbiolles, *L'éco-anxiété: Vivre sereinement dans un monde abîmé* (Paris: Fayard, 2020) ; Panu Pihkala, "Ecoanxiety and Environmental Education," *Sustainability* 12, no. 23 (2020) ; Christina A. Popescu, "Eco-anxiety and solastalgia: Keeping hope alive," *Rhizome* 82, no. 1 (2022).