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Adaptive anxiety

Human societies have evolved dramatically over the past few hundred years such that we might expect change to be something we are all well equipped to handle, and even embrace. To some extent that is true, but clearly much depends on how things change, how well those changes fit with our personal, social, and national narratives, and how quickly these changes occur. Perspectives on change are also influenced by how it affects the material wellbeing of individuals. Predictability is a further important factor. In general, predictable changes, even difficult ones, can be navigated if they can be foreseen with enough time and if actors have sufficient agency to take appropriate action. We exist as individuals within complex social, political, and economic contexts in which we may have limited personal understanding, influence, and agency. Climate change and biodiversity decline demand that we take significant steps to change our trajectory to avoid broadly predictable crises ahead, but even though the fundamental science is clear, there is still much room for debate about how best to navigate the road ahead. In addition to a multiplicity of normative and philosophical frames there are structural barriers to change and issues of power, influence, and geopolitics which make meaningful action slow and feel personally remote. For many this situation fuels a sense of eco-anxiety, which is perhaps particularly prevalent among the young who will live with greater change but have little direct influence. In this issue we present four Comments that tackle different dimensions of the psychological burden of environmental change.

Tony Wainwright and Khadj Rouf discuss the links between health justice (particularly mental health), social justice, and climate justice. They highlight that climate impacts are likely to accentuate existing socioeconomic inequalities both within and between countries. Climate heating will result in enhanced physical risks such as wildfire, flooding, and drought, all of which we have seen in the past year, but these events will also have a mental health burden which will be largely hidden. A related piece from Harriet Ingle and co-authors explores the factors that influence peoples' experience of eco-anxiety. Importantly they note that many instances of eco-anxiety should not be categorised as mental illness, as they are often depicted in the media, but as a quite reasonable and adaptive response to an unfolding climatic crisis. Anxiety

that leads to social mobilisation and activism of the kinds we have seen over the past 18 months or so may well be adaptive. Of course, this does not mean that we are all equally equipped to deal with such anxiety and there will be a need for mental health services to support the often-neglected mental health burden of environmental change. Danny Dorling reflects on the similarities between the activism we are seeing in response to the climate and biodiversity crises today and that from the era of nuclear proliferation and subsequent arms reduction. He notes that in both cases there seems to be a progression from ignorance to acceptance, then revulsion and rejection, but that new generations are required to aid and embrace the transition. A concerning point considering we only have 10 years to avert dangerous levels of climate heating being locked in for decades to come.

One of the ways to reduce anxiety is to take action. For people working in the health sector, that includes speaking up and advocating for change but also leading by example. Rachel Stancliffe's Comment outlines some of the key principles of sustainable healthcare needed to rapidly transition to a net zero sector. She highlights in particular the need for system level changes integrating environmental considerations into standard operating practices throughout the health system.

These pieces were written before the pandemic and before lockdowns were widely instigated in response to COVID-19. And of course, these isolation measures will also have a tremendous burden on mental health for many, particularly since hardship is likely to fall most on those who are already marginalised and vulnerable. The COP26 climate conference has been postponed and there is concern that this pandemic will lead to a myopic focus on re-establishing the pre-coronavirus economic business as usual, thus detracting from carbon reduction efforts. For many this sense of a stalled process could further exacerbate feelings of eco-anxiety, combined with new pressures and concerns. The full impact of COVID-19 and associated countermeasures remains to be seen, but once we emerge from lockdown it will be into a new and uncertain world with a climate change curve still to flatten. Eco-anxiety will likely remain an important, if painful, part of our journey. ■ *The Lancet Planetary Health*

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