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The Kids Are Not Alright

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This article from the [Summer 2019 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is by psychiatry registrar Dr Junjie Ling and retired psychiatrist and IPA member Dr Robert Lyndon.

In September 2019, a record 7.6 million people worldwide took to the streets as participants in the Global Climate Strike. Greta Thunberg, the young activist, addressed the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit with the words: “How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. ... People are suffering. People are dying ... And all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”

Media outlets worldwide are polarised, hailing the activists as heroes and leaders, or condemning them as juvenile and ‘mentally ill’. Preliminary surveys have suggested that ‘climate anxiety’ or ‘eco-anxiety’ is on the rise and postulated a link with depression and anxiety, and guidelines have been published for psychologists to help patients “come to terms and cope with the profound implications of climate change”. Are we in the throes of an epidemic of climate anxiety? Is this the result of climate change—or is it due to the fear being instilled in children and teenagers by climate alarmists?

Speculation and anxiety over climate change are not new. In 1912, a newspaper published an article saying:

The furnaces of the world are now burning about 2,000,000,000 tons of coal a year ...
The effect may be considerable in a few centuries.

Yet, across the areas of politics, economics, science, society, culture and religion, change is occurring at an unfathomable pace. The old adage of ‘the wisdom of elders’ is faced with the threat of irrelevance. The new generation born into this world will inherit a world completely alien to our elders, with no foundation or benchmark to base their exploration. With our strivings of the past, confusion of the present and insecurity of the future, it would be cognisant to have a model in which to view the emerging issue of climate anxiety, and potential strategies to cope with our brave new world. The fear of irreversible and destructive climate change is very real for the young. They are being told there is a ‘climate emergency’ by such influential people and institutions as Pope Francis, Prince Harry, the Australian Medical Association, UNICEF, local governments and numerous celebrities. WHO projections speculate approximately 250,000 deaths per year due to climate change in the near future.

Activist organisations such as Extinction Rebellion tell the young there are only a few short years left before the human race becomes extinct. This is the threat that looms over the current young



generation. Those who scoff at these would do wise to remember the lived experience of fears of days past such as poverty/post-war economic collapse (1940s-1950s), alien invasions (1960-1970s), nuclear annihilation (1960s), technological dystopias/artificial intelligence (1990s), terrorism (2000s) and Orwellian surveillance (2010s). Some aspects of the past fears may be relieved, others re-lived, but they undeniably shape our psyche. Compounding this are the accelerants of the internet, social media and the increasing polarisation of the mass media which magnifies or minimises the impending situation based on our worldviews, further segregating the masses, escalating fear in one and inviting denial in another.

The term 'eco-anxiety' is not a diagnosis and understates the emotional effects on the young of the frightening messages to which they are exposed. The effects are much more than anxiety and worry and include anger, despair, demoralisation, futility, nihilism and hopelessness. Some of the more resilient ones will not experience a significant impact on their mental health, but many others are less able to cope with their fears, or are less supported and will be highly affected and traumatised. The potential consequences include a decline in social and academic performance, panic and generalised anxiety disorders, depression, and the misuse of alcohol and drugs. The link between depression, nihilism, hopelessness and suicide is well recognised and must be acknowledged as a potential consequence.

One useful formulation of climate anxiety applicable to the plight of the current young generation is a model ubiquitous in the field of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: the Circle of Security. Based on principles of attachment theory, the model postulates mechanisms underlying insecurity and proposes strategies to increase security and wellbeing. Although primarily used in psychiatry, it is relevant and applicable to all ages in life.

The fundamental principle is that of providing a young individual with a 'secure base' from which to explore a 'novel situation'. The individual can then return to a 'safe haven', freshly equipped with a template on which to organise their feelings when faced with a distressing situation.

In this model the secure base and safe haven would typically be represented and provided by the current older generation, including parents as well as teachers, government leaders, policymakers and industry leaders to whom young people can look up as a source of inspiration and support. The novel situation applied in this model would be the fear of climate change and its impending consequences.

In an ideal situation, the adults support and encourage the exploration by young individuals of the issue of climate change. Whenever the young individuals become distressed, this older generation then provide a 'safe haven' for the youths to return to for protection, reassurance, comfort, delight and organisation. Unfortunately, there are several ways in which this Circle of Security can be disrupted.

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Safe investigation of the climate change issue can be disrupted by prohibition to explore, whether by dismissal, denial or denigration. Alternatively, the exploration can be limited by adults sending a message that they are afraid due to their own insecurities. Most adults grew up through tremendous financial insecurity and to see young individuals seemingly trading financial security for climate security can be distressing.

Criticisms by both parties can appear visceral and personal, with safe exploration of the issue restricted by adults chiding young individuals for forsaking the economic gains and securities they worked so hard for. Similarly, young individuals may rebuke adults for not being willing to face the facts and for denying climate change. Inability to provide a safe haven can result from adults being unable to offer a sense of protection, reassurance and comfort—whether through policy making or by practical action. Alternatively, young individuals are pushed away with threats, denigration and belittling of their efforts. It may appear a magnanimous request to the adults, but to those who face the fear that their lives will be directly affected by climate change it would be reasonable to seek reassurance and action in those who have the power to do so.

A concerted effort is needed to counteract the alarmist messages.

The organisation of feelings is a key concept based on the theory of mirroring, or 'being with'. A child who is distressed presents their emotions to the caregiver, who is then expected to help the child process the information and express an appropriate emotion which the child is then able to internalise. We see a breakdown of this process in the approach to climate change. The anxiety and distress of young people are real, but they are faced with unhelpful reactions such as ignorance, denial and blame—or more commonly a diversion to other issues, such as economic security or feeble approaches to the issue of climate change. What is required is for the adult to also experience and share in the anxiety, but utilise their wisdom and resources to process the unpleasant emotion into a positive one—perhaps of hope or change—and demonstrate that to the child through action.

Returning to Greta Thunberg's words—which some claim reflect the feelings of a generation—we see an anger directed at the perceived abandonment and dereliction of duty by the policymakers. We see someone thrust into an uncertain future with no secure base upon which to base their exploration. We see a limitation of their exploration by policymakers preoccupied with their woes of economic ruin and a failure to recognise their own anxieties. We see an absence of a secure base that can offer protection and comfort. We see a rejection with Thunberg and others being labelled as 'mentally ill' and 'not knowing their place' and being asked to stay in school. Collectively, there is a lack of empathy and 'being with' on the part of those in power to enact action. Various pundits have speculated on the role of politics, economics, social psychology, technology and culture in fostering climate anxiety, but perhaps there is more to it than meets the eye.



The effect of eco-anxiety on our young's mental health is developing as a public health issue, within the responsibility of governments. The Prime Minister Scott Morrison has warned parents and campaigners on climate change against creating needless anxiety in children and has tried to reassure the young by encouraging them to have an optimistic view of their future. This is an excellent and necessary approach, but now needs to be backed with action. A concerted effort is needed through education to counteract the alarmist messages of activist groups and other influential sources that are at present essentially unopposed.

Young people need to be exposed through a public and schools-based education program to the range of scientific opinion held by climate scientists, giving them a balanced view of the evidence for the causes and potential impact of climate change on their future. They should be encouraged to explore the evidence and be reassured there is no climate emergency: we can manage and adapt to the impact of climate change, and take action to minimise our contribution to climate change.

The concluding remarks of the Circle of Security model are “always be bigger, stronger, wiser and kind”. Perhaps this could be a call to the adults—the parents, teachers, policymakers and those in a position to enact change—to take up the moral high ground, to enact action within their power, to reflect on and inquire themselves about the range of scientific opinion about climate change, to educate and to be accepting of others who may be more profoundly affected by the climate situation. That the climate has always changed and will continue to change is undeniable and potentially provokes anxiety but everyone, including the young, deserve to be able to explore the issue, have access to the facts, and be reassured of their future.