

Climate Change & The Therapy Room

Survey – Text-only version

Introduction

Climate change, and considering and dealing with the impacts of it, is becoming a larger and more prevalent part of modern life for many people. We, by and large, understand that many people are beginning to worry about their futures, or their children's futures, whether or not we personally agree with that ourselves. I say that last part because, for a number of people, therapists included, conversations about climate change and the climate crisis feel politicised or over-blown, and it's important that we acknowledge that position whilst also understanding the fact that people are experiencing climate distress or anxiety in a very real way, and that, as therapists, those people could show up in our therapy room. Research shows¹, for example, that being worried about the climate isn't just an offshoot of generalised anxiety; in fact, generalised anxiety shows completely different patterns of behaviour to climate-related anxiety.

What's much less clear at this moment in time, though, is how climate anxiety, or climate distress, is showing up in the therapy room, and how often, and whether counsellors & psychotherapists feel equipped to work with it when it does.

There's a growing body of writing on climate anxiety and eco-distress, much of it drawn from specialist practice or from research with people who are already climate-engaged. What there is far less of is a picture of the the everyday experience of practitioners across the full range of settings, modalities and client groups.

To support research being undertaken by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), the International Association of Counselling (IAC), the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA), and the Open University (OU), we asked members about their own wellbeing, their physical environment, what they're hearing from clients, how confident they feel working with climate-related distress, and what, if anything, they'd want NCPS to do about it.

¹ Williams, M. O., Buekers, J., Castaño-Vinyals, G., de Cid, R., Delgado-Ortiz, L., Espinosa, A., Garcia-Aymerich, J., Koch, S., Kogevinas, M., Viola, M., Whitmarsh, L., & Chevance, G. (2024). Climate anxiety and its association with health behaviours and generalized anxiety: An intensive longitudinal study. *British journal of health psychology*, 29(4), 1080–1095. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12746>

Executive summary

Around four in ten members (41%) report that climate change has had at least some negative impact on their own mental wellbeing, and nearly half (46.8%) say it's affected their immediate physical environment, whether through flooding, extreme heat or air quality. But only 31.1% have noticed more clients raising climate-related concerns over the past twelve months, and almost a third (31.7%) say it hasn't come up with any client at all. Members are experiencing this themselves at roughly the rate the general population does, but they're not, for the most part, hearing it in the room.

Clients may not be naming climate change directly, framing the same distress as worry about money, housing, health or the state of the world generally. It may be that the other concerns that bring people to therapy are simply more pressing, or it may be that climate distress is genuinely less prevalent than the current volume of commentary suggests.

Nearly seven in ten members (69%) feel very or fairly confident working therapeutically with climate-related distress, and only 10% say they're not confident. A further 21% haven't encountered it yet.

On what NCPS should prioritise, the strongest support was for collaboration with organisations already working on climate and mental health (52.6%) and additional training or CPD (50%), followed by research (39.5%) and advocacy to policymakers (39.2%). Support for changing our Code of Ethics (23.3%) or Training Standards (20.1%) was much lower.

A substantial number of respondents said plainly that they don't see this as a priority, that it rarely arises in their work, and that clients are far more likely to bring finances, global events, or day-to-day pressures. Others questioned the evidence base for climate anxiety as a distinct concept, or felt the issue is overly politicised, with several emphasising the importance of therapist neutrality.

The findings support a proportionate response from us: working with existing organisations rather than building new structures, which is something we're doing anyway as part of the Climate Minds Coalition, as well as making training available to those who want it, and continuing to press policymakers on the mental health consequences of climate change, which is work that serves members regardless of how often the subject comes up in their own practice.

Q1 - Have you personally experienced a negative impact on your own mental wellbeing related to climate change?

A total of 41.0% of respondents reported experiencing some level of negative impact on their mental wellbeing related to climate change, with 8.1% saying the impact had been significant and 32.9% saying it had been somewhat negative. Around a quarter (26.0%) said they had not really experienced a negative impact, while 30.6% said they had not experienced one at all. A small proportion (2.3%) were unsure.

Q2 - Has climate change had a negative impact on your immediate physical environment or geography (e.g. flooding, extreme heat, air quality)?

A total of 46.8% of respondents reported that climate change had negatively impacted their immediate physical environment or geography, with 5.7% saying the impact had been significant and 41.1% saying it had been somewhat negative. Almost one in five respondents (18.7%) said they had not really experienced an impact, while 32.2% said they had not experienced one at all. A small proportion (2.3%) were unsure.

Q3 - Over the past 12 months, have you noticed a change in the number of clients raising concerns or distress related to climate change?

Almost a third (31.1%) of respondents reported seeing an increase in the number of clients raising concerns or distress related to climate change, with 6.9% noticing a noticeable increase and 24.2% noticing a slight increase. Over a third (36.0%) said they had seen no change, while 31.7% said the topic had not come up with any clients. A small proportion (1.2%) reported that fewer clients were raising concerns related to climate change.

Q4 - How confident do you feel in your ability to work therapeutically with clients experiencing climate-related distress or anxiety?

The majority of respondents (69.0%) felt confident in their ability to work therapeutically with clients experiencing climate-related distress or anxiety, with 23.3% feeling very confident and 45.7% feeling fairly confident. A small proportion (10.0%) reported feeling less confident, with 8.9% saying they were not very confident and 1.1% saying they were not at all confident. Around one in five respondents (21.0%) said they had not encountered climate-related distress or anxiety with clients yet.

Q5 - Which of the following do you feel would be valuable for NCPS to prioritise? (Select all that apply)

The most commonly selected priority was collaboration with organisations working on climate and mental health, chosen by 52.6% of respondents. This was closely followed by additional training or CPD to support working with clients on climate concerns (50.0%). Other areas respondents felt NCPS should prioritise included commissioning or promoting research into climate anxiety and effective therapies (39.5%) and advocacy to raise policymakers' awareness of climate change's mental health impacts (39.2%).

Almost a quarter (23.3%) felt that updating the Code of Ethics to reflect climate issues would be valuable, while 20.1% selected updating Training Standards to reflect climate issues. A further 13.4% selected Other and provided additional suggestions. 14.5% of respondents selected None of the above.

Responses in the 'other' category (13.4% of respondents) were mixed, with some noting that climate change is not a priority for them. Some respondents said it rarely arises in their work, with clients more likely to present with concerns about finances, global events, or day to day pressures.

There were also concerns about the relevance and evidence base for climate anxiety, and some felt the issue is overly politicised. A number of respondents emphasised the importance of therapist neutrality.

Some suggested taking a broader approach, placing climate change alongside other societal issues, or working with existing organisations rather than developing new initiatives. Others supported practical actions such as improving sustainability or sharing existing resources.