



Navigating eco-anxiety in the face of the climate change crisis

For Mental Health Awareness Month, we spoke to Pearl Ayem, a physical climate scientist and one of our Smashing Stereotypes 2025 profiles, about navigating eco-anxiety in the face of the climate change crisis.

This year, [a YouGov survey of over 600 children commissioned by Greenpeace UK](#) revealed how nearly two thirds of secondary school children are experiencing mental health symptoms associated with concern about the environment.

Research from the [BSA's Future Forum programme in 2023](#), funded by the University of Plymouth, also revealed how a lack of climate education at school is contributing to young people's sense of climate anxiety and does not inspire hope.

Below, Pearl shares some words of hope and reminds us that eco-anxiety is real and valid. She encourages us to channel fear into taking action, and recognising when to pause, without guilt or the sense that you're not doing enough.



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No, It's Not Just in Your Head

Eco-anxiety isn't new. It's not just a "youth issue". And it's certainly not a symptom of being too sensitive. It's a response to what we know about the planet, the state we live in, and the risks that lie ahead.

This kind of anxiety builds quietly: in the guilt after a long flight, the dread scrolling past yet another climate headline, the anger at inaction, the helplessness as the clock keeps ticking.

And still, we keep showing up, because this discomfort is a rational response to an overwhelming reality. Naming it may not make it go away, but it can help us face it with clarity instead of guilt.



When Passion Becomes Pressure

At first, it felt like purpose, but over time, purpose started feeling like pressure. Many of us entered the climate space energised by what we thought was passion. We grew up sorting recyclables, seeing documentaries of disappearing glaciers, and committing to "make a difference". But that passion can turn heavy. What we were really experiencing was eco-anxiety.

“ Late nights and relentless advocacy may feel like dedication—but often, they’re just burnout in disguise. When the fear of not doing enough overshadows the joy of doing anything at all, it’s time to pause. ”

Managing eco-anxiety means knowing your passion doesn’t have to fix everything. It means showing up when you can, how you can. Impact isn’t measured in personal sacrifice alone.

“ Managing eco-anxiety doesn’t mean shutting off your passion, it means learning not to let it consume your identity or capacity. ”

The System Was Designed to Wear You Down

“ Eco-anxiety isn't just about witnessing a warming planet, it's about being made to feel solely responsible for fixing it. We're told to recycle better, travel less, and consume smarter, while the most powerful polluters continue unchallenged. ”

If this has left you exhausted, it isn't weakness, it's what the system was engineered to achieve.

Campaigns like BP's "carbon footprint" weren't created to inspire action, they were designed to distract. To shift attention from systemic responsibility onto individual behavior.

The numbers make it plain:

- Just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions since 1988.
- The top 10% of earners account for 60% of global CO₂ emissions.
- The top 1% alone contribute 20% of global warming.

“ It's important to recognize here that collective action is stronger than individual purity. You can want a better planet and still enjoy small pleasures. It's not your footprint that broke the planet, it's theirs, and recognising this isn't defeatist, it's empowering. It means you can let go of guilt and aim your energy where it matters. There's no such thing as the ideal climate warrior. ”

Climate Work and the Cost of Credibility

Working in climate science means facing hard truths daily, not just about the state of the planet, but about how your work is received. You're expected to remain calm, composed, and diplomatic to defend clear, evidence-based conclusions against conspiracy theories or ideological denial, even in the most professional of rooms.

Unlike many fields, climate science is punished for being dynamic. All science evolves with new data, but in climate, a model update is framed not as progress but as failure. Say the risk drops from 50% to 40% and suddenly the narrative becomes, "See? Climate change was exaggerated all along". This isn't just frustrating, it's deeply invalidating.

You're not just doing the work, but also bracing for the misinterpretation of that work. This adds emotional labour, as you're guarding your credibility from being misused. Every word, every

claim, must be airtight. Climate work is a moral minefield. You're expected to perform under immense pressure, with fewer resources and less recognition.

“ If you're anxious because you can't predict everything, ask yourself: Would you expect a pilot to guarantee zero turbulence? Would you fault a surgeon for revising a diagnosis with new scans? Of course not. We must extend the same grace to ourselves. ”

Working in climate is often not just a job. You're expected to perform with surgical precision while under immense pressure, with fewer resources, and often with less recognition. It's a high-stress environment by every standard, emotional, intellectual, and ethical.

“ Uncertainty doesn't mean failure. It means you're being honest. And that honesty is your strength. When it feels like too much, I remind myself that being questioned doesn't erase the truth. And that in a world looking for certainty, staying committed to the process is its own quiet form of resilience. ”



What I Do for Myself (and Maybe You Can Too)

So how do you keep going when it all feels too much? For me, it starts with refusing to shame myself for feeling anxious. And along with anxiety, I've learned to accept anger, frustration and disappointment in wider systems as valid feelings that I can channel into meaningful work.

“ I remind myself that taking a break doesn't mean the planet will stop turning. The work will continue, even when I need to rest. I try to enjoy small pleasures - travel, shopping, community events - by making mindful choices within my means. I've stopped using Amazon. It's not always easy, but those decisions matter to me. ”

And I show up. Especially now, when rights, democracy, and peace are under attack. For me, loving the planet means loving its people. Whether I'm supporting clean water, safe housing, or peace efforts, I see it all as climate work.

I remind myself about kindness - and the ultimate goal of saving this planet is to preserve our humanity. It's not judging when others cannot commit to the cause the same way I can, but also be happy to support them when they can.

And when it feels like nothing's working, I return to the numbers. Because they tell a different story. Data tells me this:

- Global renewable capacity is set to grow 2.7x by 2030.
- The UK eliminated coal-generated electricity in 2024.
- 80% of companies with sustainability targets are on track.
- 73% of investors expect ESG growth.
- Brazil saw a 30.6% drop in Amazon deforestation in 2024.
- Nearly 1 in 5 cars sold in 2023 was electric.
- Over 230 climate lawsuits have been filed against polluting companies.

None of that happened by accident. It happened because people didn't give up.

You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone

No one person can fix this. But no one has to. That's the power of community. Of collective action. It reminds you that you're not shouting into the void. You're standing alongside people who care just as deeply, who are also angry, tired, sad, but still showing up.

“ And showing up doesn't always mean protesting. Some days, it means resting. Other days, it's emailing your MP or buying local or helping a neighbour plant something. It all counts. It all adds up. ”

So if you're tired, take a break. If you're overwhelmed, step back. The movement will still be here when you're ready.

Not out of guilt. But out of love. Because that's what this work really is. Show up when you can. Rest when you must. Trust that even on days when you feel small, you are part of something vast. That's not failure. That's the movement.

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