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RCPsych Breaking Boundaries; Planet Mind & Action Feb 2026

Climate crisis conversations

Caroline Hickman

Caroline.hickman@yahoo.com

www.caroline-hickman.com

Overview

The cumulative impacts of climate change in the world today are clear, with record heat waves, wildfires, sea level rise, ice melting and flooding leading to both physical harm and emotional distress

When we examine the health impacts of climate change on people, we can see there are multiple **direct** and **indirect** effects of climate change ranging from acute short term stress reactions (shock) to extreme weather events (panic attack following extreme heat)

Longer term impacts of infrastructure and resource disruption (unable to go to school following impact of wildfires or flooding), air pollution

Indirect impact - indirect adverse experiences observed by witnessing the harm being caused to others such as news reports showing animals and people fleeing wildfires or listening to stories told by survivors of traumatic events (Lawrence et al 2021, Obradovich et al, 2018).

And the psychological distress in response to the overarching threat of climate change which is a chronic long-term stressor (climate anxiety, vicarious trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief).

Children's voices

I wish I was mad

Tell me how should I live in a world that doesn't care

My friends are dying

It's ok for you....

It's not eco-anxiety, it's eco-terror

Why don't people care?!

Climate change is like Thanos



UNICEF 2021

- Children's Climate Risk Index the combination of any existing respiratory health condition such as asthma, with extreme heat and air pollution produces an increased risk factor for mental illness (UNICEF, 2021).
- Estimating that one billion children are at extremely high risk as a result (p864).
- Climate change poses a risk to mental health that can be understood through stress-vulnerability models of health.
- Because of exposure to chronic stress in childhood there is a long-lasting impact that increases the risk of developing mental health problems in adolescence and adulthood.

ACE's

A helpless anticipation of a future traumatising constant event such as climate change, leads to a child remaining in a constant state of anticipatory anxiety and readiness to run away from the threat or to try to fight it.

But with climate change there is nowhere to run to because it is a globally adverse experience and traumatising event.

Children and young people have few resources to either mitigate or avoid the multiple stressors of climate change discussed above. The sense of helplessness and powerlessness combined with a real threat such as extreme heat or wildfires could lead to a child being in a constant state of anxiety (Shemmings & Shemmings, 2011).

Infants & Young Children

- Hurricane Katrina – impact on mental health PTSD even years later (Raker et al 2019)
- Even in utero during the hurricane (Paxson 2012)
- Superstorm Sandy – NY 2012. Examined effects of in-utero exposure to maternal stress. Led to lower emotional regulation & higher levels of distress.
- Lilian Calderon-Garciduenas – link between early signs of neurodegeneration & air pollution in Mexico City in infants
- UK – Ella Adoo-Kissi Debrah 1st child to have air pollution recognized as a significant factor in her death

Greenpeace survey 2023

- Children aged 6-12
- 78% said they were worried about climate change
- 27% very worried
- $\frac{3}{4}$ were aware of climate change (awareness increased around age 7)

- *Greenpeace UK guides, which aim to help teachers and parents/carers discuss the climate crisis with their pupils and children.*
- <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GPUK-Parents-Carers-Guide-Climate-Change.pdf>

2020 BACP survey

- Overall, 55% of people feel that climate change has impacted on their mental health and well-being.
- Of those who said climate change has affected their mental health, 65% were concerned about the impact on the natural world; 63% about increased frequency of natural disasters; 58% were worried about what the world would be like for future generations; and 30% were worried about how their life would be affected.
- This survey shows the impact on the younger age group is higher:
 - By age:
 - 61% of 16-24
 - 60% of 25-34
 - 44% of 45-54
 - 54% of 55 – 64
 - 56% of > 65

Public Perceptions Survey (BACP 2025)

- A more recent Public Perceptions Survey by BACP in 2025 showed a slight increase with 57% saying their mental health is affected by the climate crisis
- Increasing to 63% in people aged 16 to 24
- Importantly this rose to 73% in people who have experienced a mental health issue in the last five years

The Culture of Uncare

Sally Weintrobe
(The Psychological
Roots of the
Climate Crisis)

- The climate crisis is not easy to explain
- The subject is too big to think about 'all in one go'
- Current 'dominant' western culture encourages people to deny or minimize the problem

- We need a nightmare & dream to understand what is wrong & imagine a better world

Fight Flight Freeze Defenses

- Lie outside awareness & control & have 2 key features
- To guard us from further harm (protect us from thoughts, feelings, actions or events that are felt to be threatening)
- But they also distort our perceptions of reality
- Regression – falling back into an early state of development (less demanding & safer)
- Denial
- Splitting – Primitive defense – harmful & helpful impulses are split off and unintegrated (frequently projected onto someone else). All good/all bad with no room for ambiguity or ambivalence
- Acting out – direct expression of an unconscious wish or impulse without conscious awareness or the emotion that drives the behaviour
- Disavowal
- Wishful thinking – making decisions according to what might please others/fantasy rather than based on reality or rationality

Eco-anxiety & distress

Hickman, C. (2020) We need to (find a way to) talk about ... Eco-anxiety
Special Edition Journal of Social Work Practice, 34:4, 411-424, DOI: 10.1080/02650533.2020.1844166

We live with an awful uncertainty about whether we will take sufficient, sustained, effective action in time to reduce the spread of the more extreme impacts already appearing globally

Congruent & healthy response to the reality we are facing

But for children & young people it is also linked to adult action/inaction – relational trauma/neglect/abuse

The capacity to be in touch with external reality has long been regarded as an indication of mental health and conversely not having that capacity regarded as mentally unhealthy

How are we responding to
this cognitively &
emotionally?

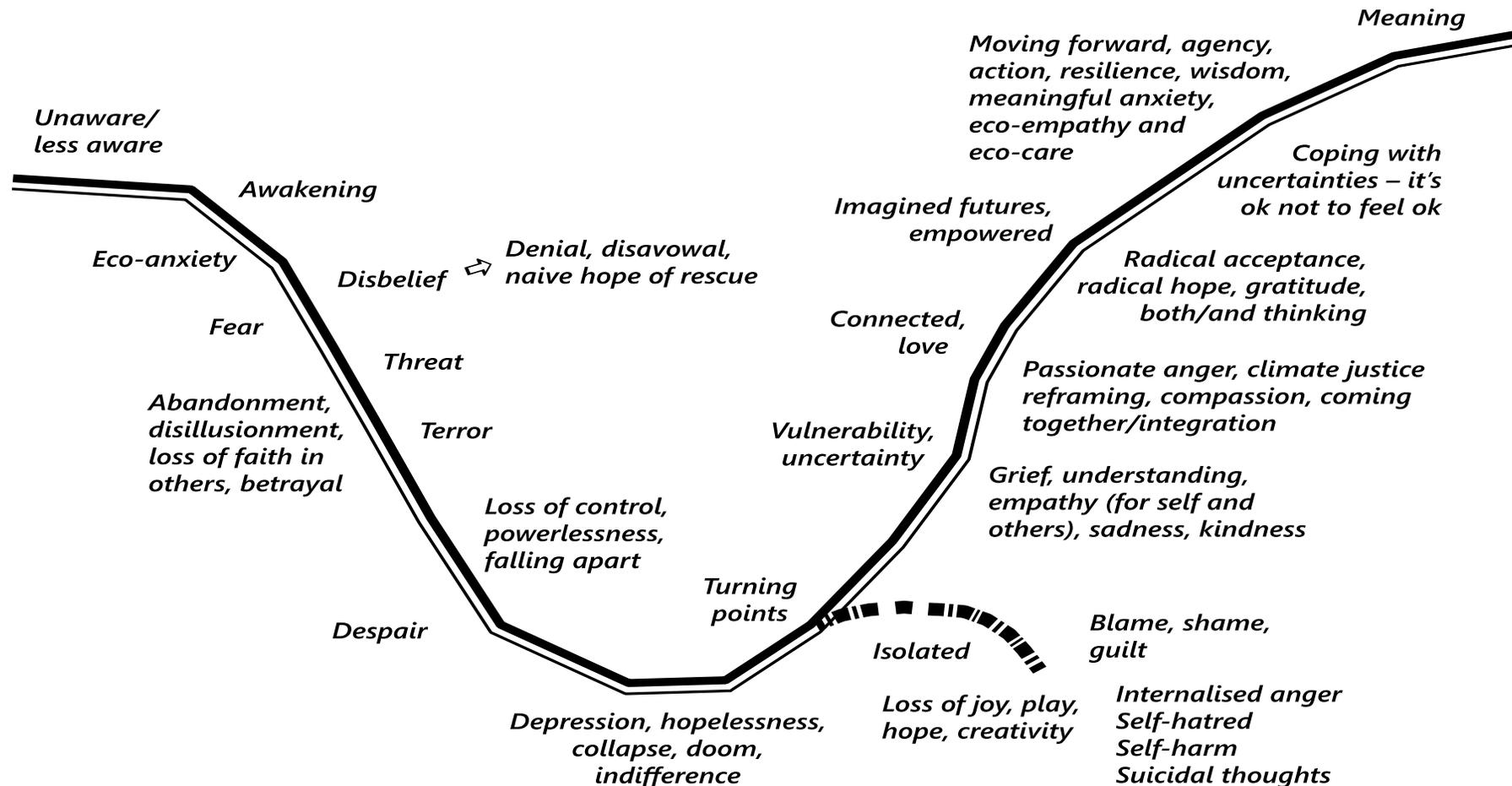
Emotional bio-diversity

Internal & External

False Binary Apocalypse
or Hope

- Eco-anxiety
- Grief & Solastalgia
- Hope & Hopeless
- Anger
- Blame
- Frustration
- Guilt & Shame
- Sadness & Grief
- Fantasies of rescue
- Apocalyptic Fantasies
- Defensiveness, Avoidance, Denial, Delay & Disavowal
- Nihilism
- Despair

Hickman (2023) Holding the Hope. PCCS Books



Psychosocial climate anxiety scale

Hickman, C. (2024) Eco-Anxiety in Children & Young People – A Rational Response, Irreconcilable Despair, or Both? The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child. Jan p1-13.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00797308.2023.2287381?needAccess=true>

Mild – feelings of upset are transient & can respond to reassurance, focus on optimism & hope in others (maybe ungrounded)

Medium – upset more frequently, doubt in ‘others’ capacity to take action, making some changes in lifestyle

Significant – minimal defenses against anxiety, harder to mitigate distress, guilt & shame, little faith in others to take action, significant impact on relationships

Severe – intrusive thoughts, sleep affected, struggle to get any respite, anticipation of human extinction, no belief in others ability to care, may be unable to work

Critical - Suicidal. Loss of personal security - severe

Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey (2021)

Hickman, C. Marks, L. Pihkala, P. Clayton, S. Lewandowski, E. Mayall, E. Wray, B. Mellor, C. Susteren, L.

Lancet Planetary Health

- Distress about climate change is associated with young people perceiving that they have no future, that humanity is doomed, that governments are failing to respond adequately, and with feelings of betrayal and abandonment by governments and adults.
- Climate change and government inaction are chronic stressors which have significant, long-lasting and incremental negative implications for the mental health of children and young people.
- The failure of governments to adequately address climate change and the impact on younger generations potentially constitutes moral injury.
- Nations must respond to protect the mental health of children and young people by engaging in ethical, collective, policy-based action against climate change.

10,000 Children and Young people, aged 16 – 25

Australia

Brazil

Finland

France

India

Nigeria

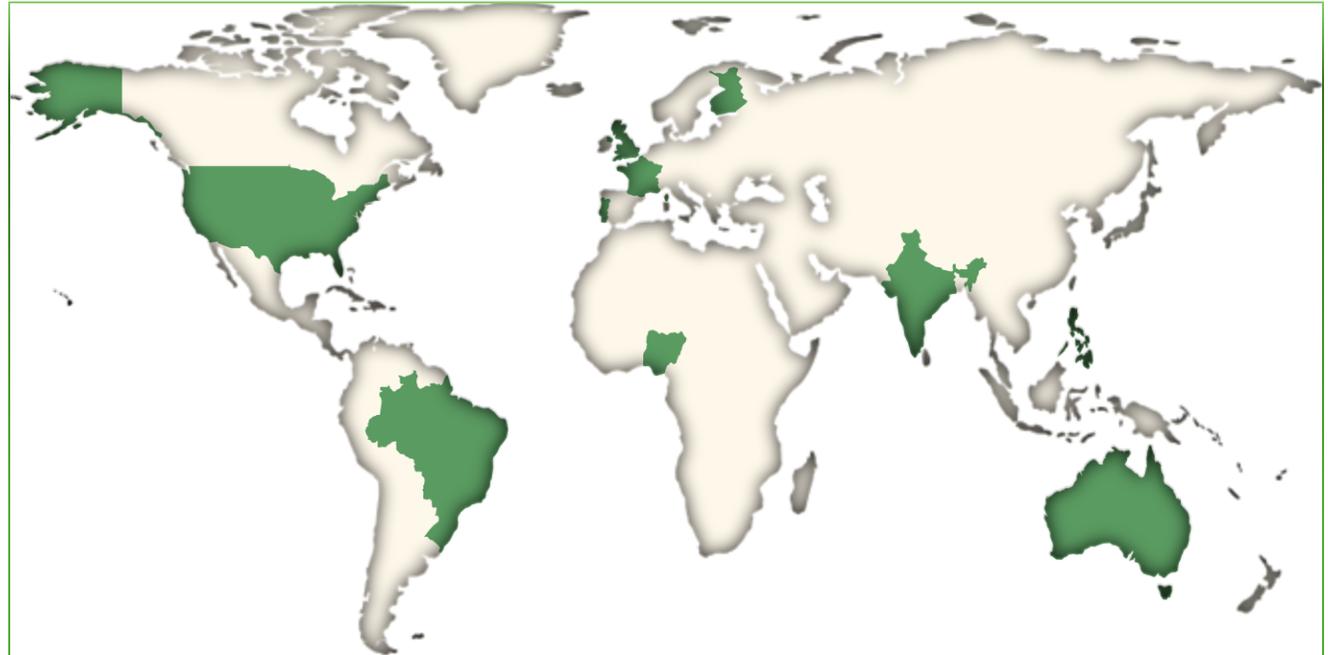
Philippines

Portugal

UK

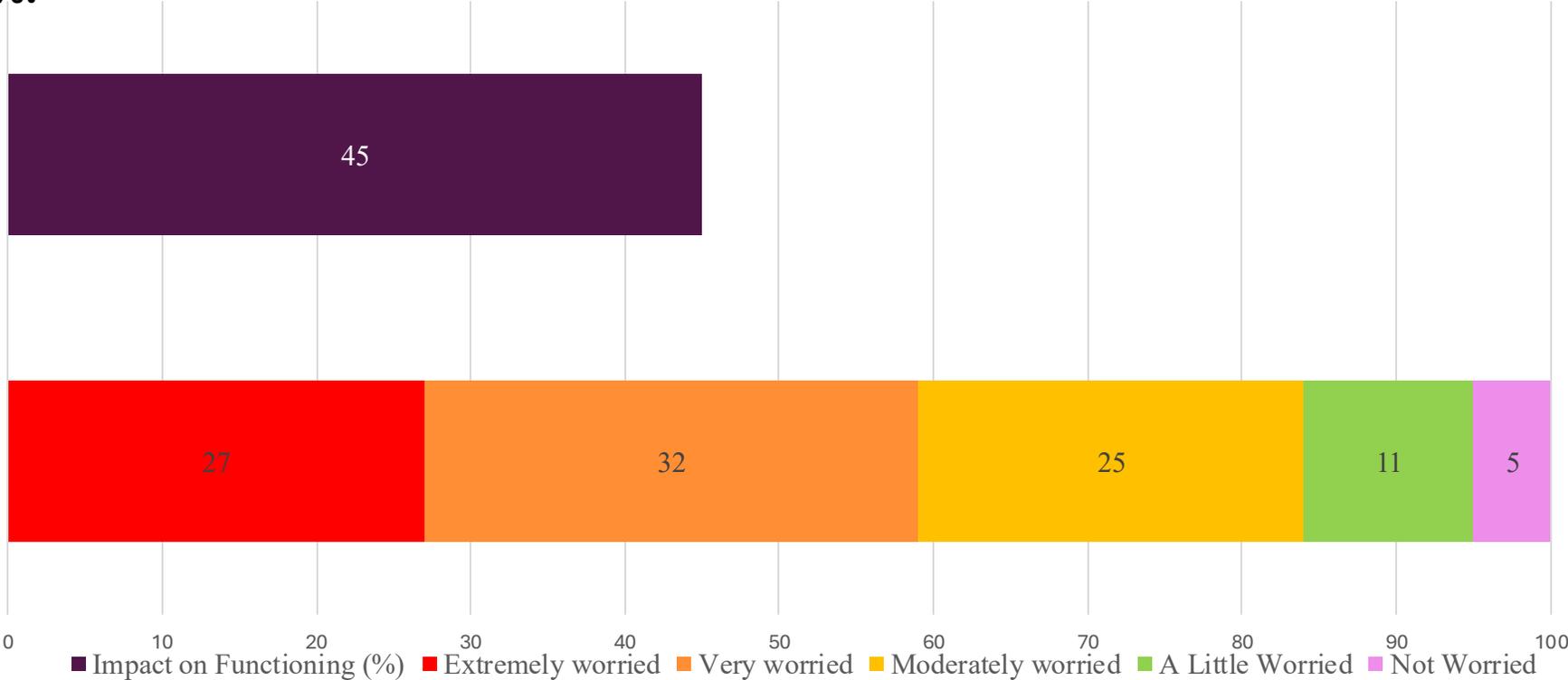
USA

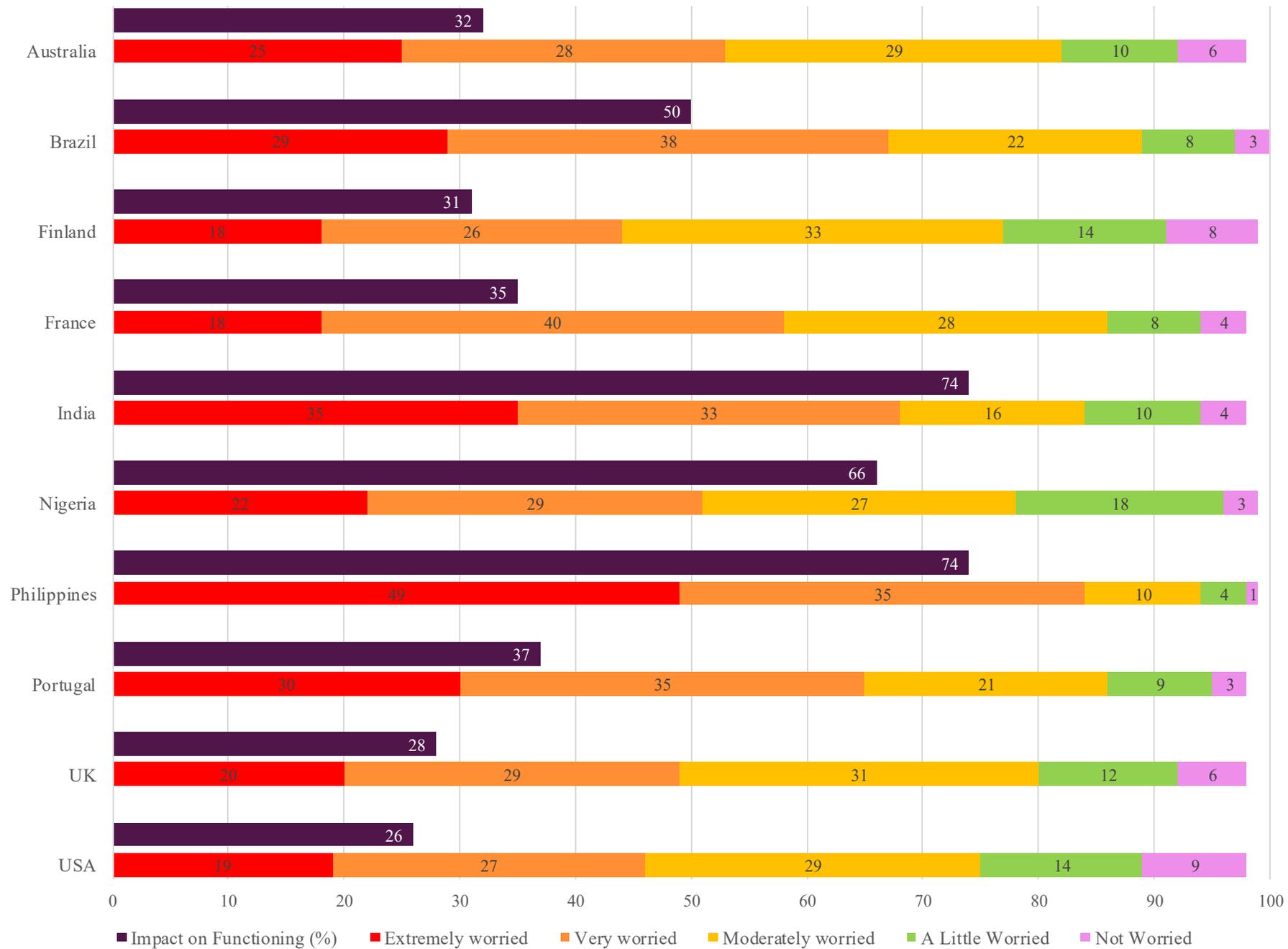
Representative samples from each country



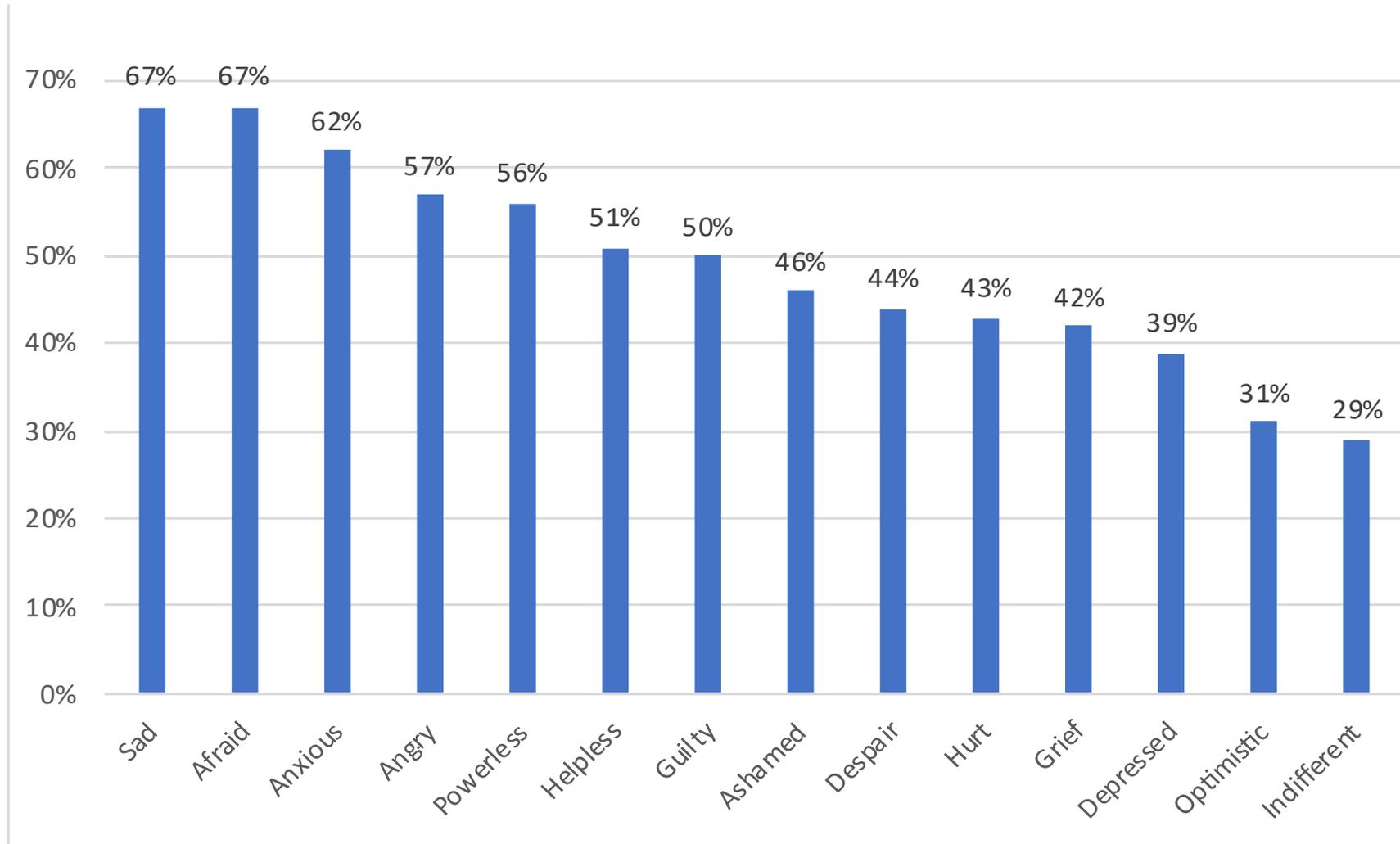
8 out of 10 children and young people across the world, including UK, **worry that climate change is threatening people and the planet**

45% report **negative impact on daily functioning** (eating, concentrating, work, school, sleeping, spending time in nature, playing, having fun, relationships). In the **UK this is 28%**.





Climate change makes me feel... (% worldwide)



Eight out of ten

83% worldwide

80% UK

92% Philippines

think that **people have failed to
take care of the planet**

Three quarters (or more) think that **the future is frightening**

75% Worldwide

92% Philippines

86% Brazil

81% Portugal

80% India

76% Australia

74% France

73% UK

70% Nigeria

68% United States

56% Finland

Over half think that **humanity is doomed**

56% Worldwide

74% India

73% Philippines

67% Brazil

62% Portugal

51% UK

50% Australia

48% France

46% United States

43% Finland

42% Nigeria

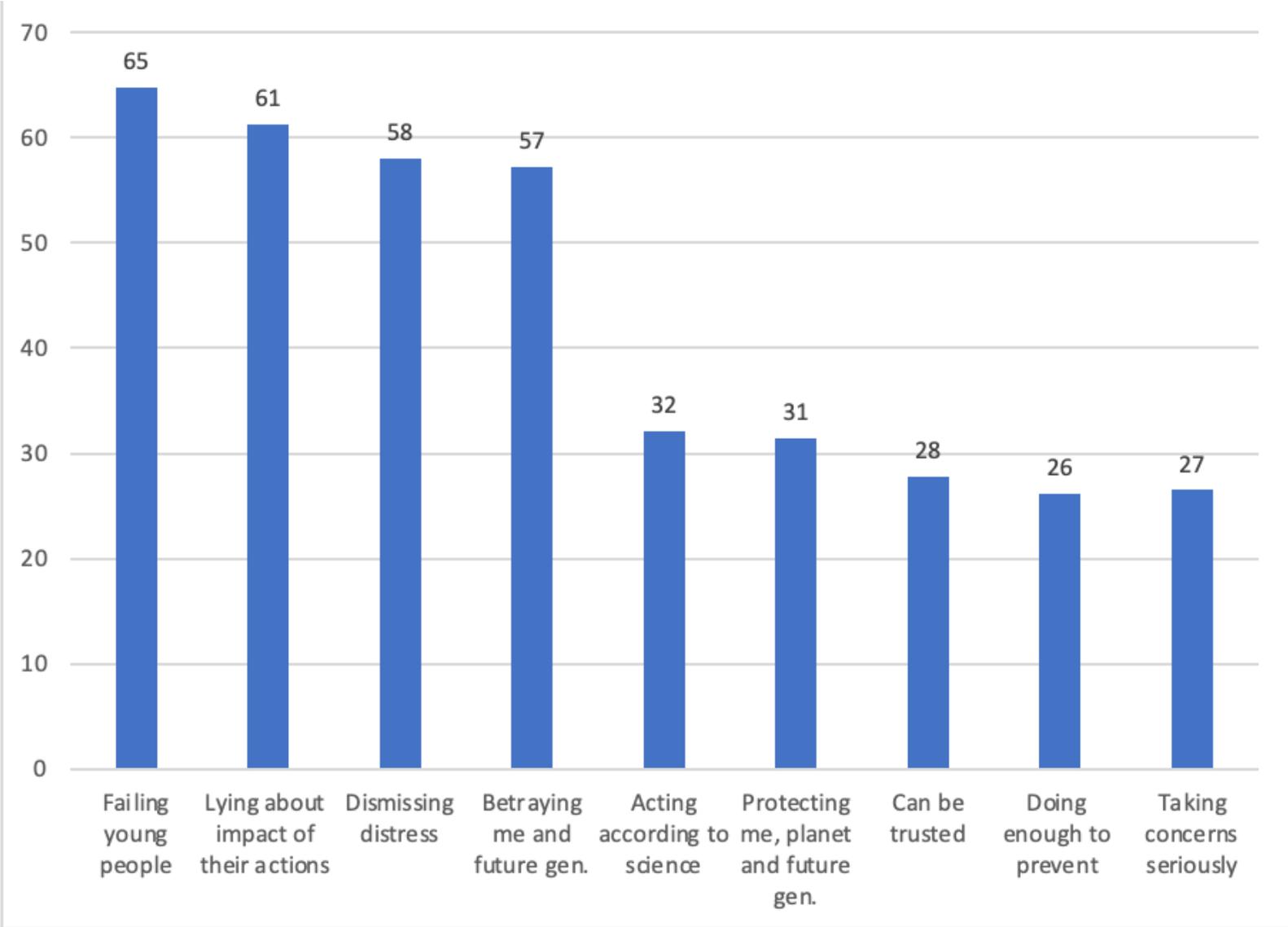
Children and young people reported they have been dismissed or ignored by other people when they try to talk about climate change

Worldwide and in the UK (48%)

Nigeria (66%)

Philippines (51%)

In relation to climate change, I believe that my government / other governments are (UK respondents)



Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey

Caroline Hickman

Dr Liz Marks

Dr Panu Pihkala

Prof Susan Clayton

Dr Eric Lewandowski

Elouise Mayall

Dr Britt Wray

Dr Catriona Mellor

Dr Lise van Susteren



Climate crisis as a human rights issue

‘By endangering and harming fundamental human needs, the climate crisis is also a human rights issue.

Legal bodies recognise an intersection between human rights, climate change, and climate anxiety.

Subjecting young people to climate anxiety and moral injury can be regarded as cruel, inhuman, degrading, or even torturous.

(Hickman & Marks et al 2021, p871)

Climate Trauma Lens

Hyperobject

- Personal
- Family
- Social
- Collective
- National
- International
- Political
- Planetary



Eco anxiety reframed

- *Eco-understanding*
- *Eco-empathy*
- *Eco-compassion*
- *Eco-courage*
- *Eco-community*
- *Eco-awareness*
- *Eco-connection*
- *Eco-belonging*
- *Eco-meaning*
- *Eco-care*
- *Eco-aliveness*



Mature Defences

It is not all
negative

- Acceptance
- Altruism
- Courage
- Emotional self-regulation
- Gratitude
- Humility
- Humour
- Mindfulness
- Patience
- Respect
- Short term suppression
- Tolerance
- Self-talk



Therapy in a time of Climate Crisis

- We are already skilled at supporting people to cope with liminal spaces & transitions (in between the old & the new world)
- Explore relationship with the planet, with ourselves and the planet as it moves into crisis
- We understand & can support people to navigate the process of change
- We understand projection, defenses, wishful thinking
- Empathy & understanding – what can get in the way of this – examine our own defenses and fears
- Feelings linked to climate change – guilt, grief, fear, anxiety, loneliness, depression
- Understanding conscious & unconscious process

Therapy in a time of Climate Crisis

- Attachment issues (ambivalence, secure & disorganised are all played out in relation to climate & biodiversity crisis)
- Explore fantasy & reality expressed by clients – climate crisis is real, but may also have fantasies about how it will all develop – links to existing underlying mental health issues and vulnerabilities
- Understand denial can be a way for people to manage terror and try to control the uncontrollable
- ‘Think the unthinkable’ and a safe space in which to do this
- Working with shame and guilt
- Developing a global mind/sensibility – beyond the personal and into the collective – helps to connect



Therapy in a time of Climate Crisis

- Shadow & soul work
- Borderline states – climate crisis as a borderline state – neither one thing nor another
- Both/and thinking rather than either/or
- Dreams, stories, symbols – all help to create a map
- Terminal ‘end of life’ issues & separation & loss, grief & bereavement
- Imaginal work – cannot see the future, but can engage with imaginal and stay with the trouble
- Community
- Therapeutic Triad





James Hillman: A Psyche the Size of the Earth in Roszak (1995)

- ‘Sometimes I wonder....how psychology ever got so off base. How did it cut itself off from reality? Where else in the world would a human soul be so divorced from the spirits of its surroundings?’
- Psychology, so dedicated to awakening the human consciousness, needs to wake itself up to one of the most ancient human truths:
- We cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet’

Not alone

I am only a single private person, studying in Germany, but I feel the urge to thank you and your colleagues so much for the research about climate anxiety amongst youth around the world.

What the study reveals makes me, for the first time ever, feel that I am not alone with the future and climate anxiety I experience every day. I still don't know what places to go there are in order to learn how to cope better with this anxiety. Still,

I consider the recent study as an incredibly important step for us young people around the world to imaginarily, emotionally connect and even visually realize that no one of us is alone with this huge issue.

I profoundly hope that the message of your study reaches politicians around the world as well as all socio-psychological professions so that they can react to the needs of us young people.



