



Do we need to talk (less) about 'climate anxiety'?

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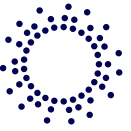


How many of you are worried about
climate change?



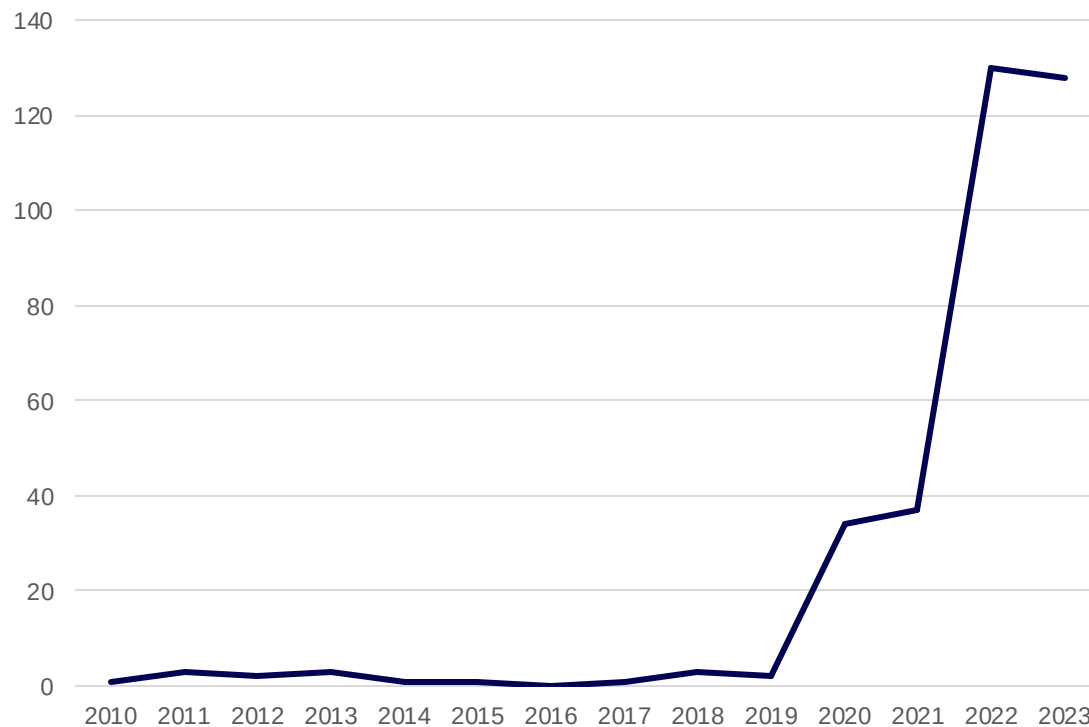
How many of you would say you have
“climate anxiety”?





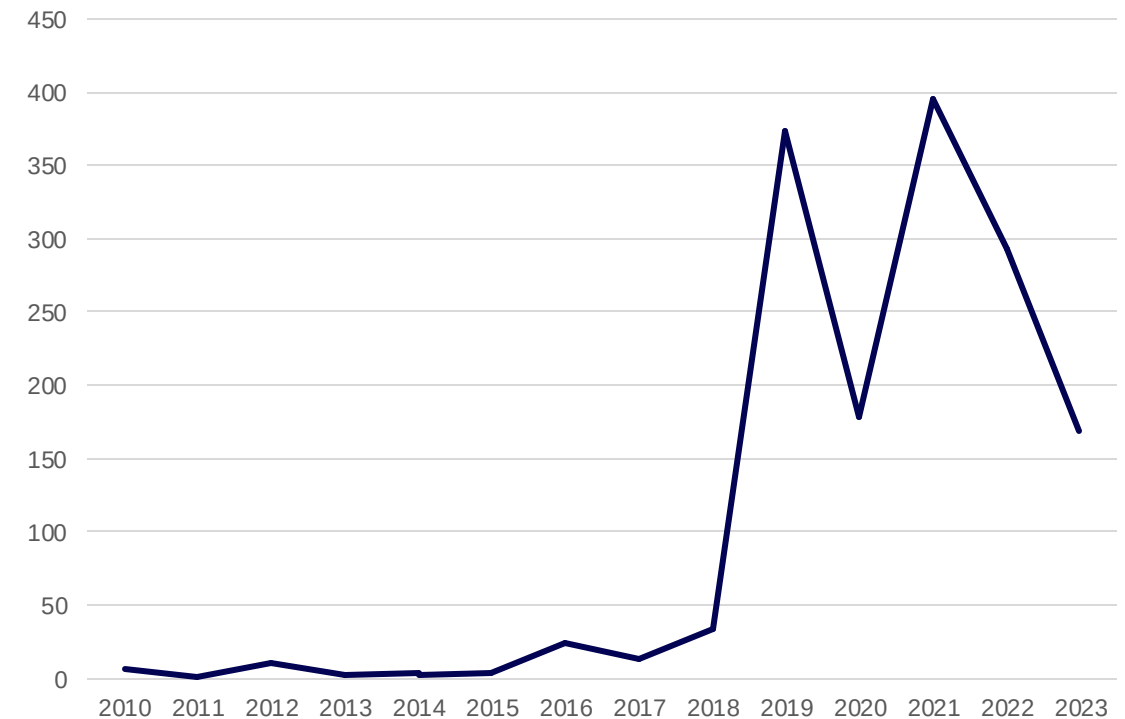
When did we start talking about climate anxiety?

"climate anxiety" OR "climate change anxiety" OR
"eco-anxiety"



In research publications (Scopus search November 3rd, 2023)

"økoangst*" OR "klimaangst*"



In Norwegian editorial media (Retriever search, November 3rd, 2023)



Over en av fire unge nordmenn har klimaangst

Vi må slutte å bruke ordet klimaangst

Jeg har klimaangst. «Vi visste ikke bedre» er ikke godt nok lenger

- Klimaangst er sunt

Hvorfor blir folk så provosert når unge sier de har klimaangst?

■ Mediene påfører barn klimaangst



What is “climate anxiety”?

An umbrella term for a range of more or less severe negative emotional and cognitive reactions related to climate change, used within several disciplines.

- Not considered a mental illness (APA).
- Not a consequence of direct exposure to climate related events.
 - Typically used when referring to young people.

Due to the use of different indicators, drastically different estimations of the prevalence and consequences of climate anxiety have been reported.



The prevalence of climate anxiety among young people

- **56%** of young adults (above the age of 18, born in 1990 or later) in Norway reported being **worried or extremely worried** about climate change in 2023 (Gregersen, 2023).
- In a study of 10,000 young people aged 16 to 25 in 10 countries, **45%** indicated that they **have experienced negative impacts on their psychological functioning** due to concerns about climate change (YES/NO question) (Hickman et al., 2021).
- Responses from a group of Norwegian university students reporting that they are **very or extremely anxious** about climate change suggest a prevalence rate of **28%** among that demographic (Ogunbode et al., 2022).
- In a UK national study, Whitmarsh et al. (2022) found that **9.1%** of respondents below the age of 30 reported **moderate symptoms** of climate anxiety, while approximately **no respondents** in this age group reported **severe climate anxiety** (when measured by symptoms of functional impairment)

The Climate Anxiety Scale (CAS) (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020).



Please rate how often the following statements are true of you.

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1. | Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to concentrate. |
| 2. | Thinking about climate change makes it difficult for me to sleep. |
| 3. | I have nightmares about climate change |
| 4. | I find myself crying because of climate change |
| 5. | I think, "why can't I handle climate change better?" |
| 6. | I go away by myself and think about why I feel this way about climate change |
| 7. | I write down my thoughts about climate change and analyze them |
| 8. | I think, "why do I react to climate change this way?" |
| 9. | My concerns about climate change make it hard for me to have fun with my family or friends. |
| 10. | I have problems balancing my concerns about sustainability with the needs of my family. |
| 11. | My concerns about climate change interfere with my ability to get work or school assignments done. |
| 12. | My concerns about climate change undermine my ability to work to my potential. |
| 13. | My friends say I think about climate change too much. |

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost always

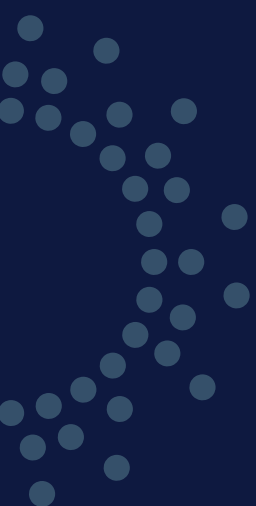


How is climate anxiety different from worry or concern?

Anxiety is one of several anticipatory threat-related emotions (Böhm, 2003). Other emotional reactions, such as worry or concern, also reflect seeing the future as uncertain and potentially dangerous but are **generally considered more cognitive and less intense** (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983; van der Linden, 2017).

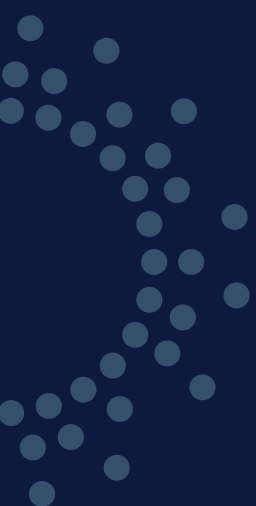
***Anxiety* can range from an appropriate and adaptive reaction to an existing threat to more pathological forms that impede mental health** (e.g., generalized anxiety, panic disorder, phobias; see The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Our paper does not focus on the causes, consequences, indicators, or prevalence of climate anxiety. Instead, we look at how laypeople perceive and react to **the term**.



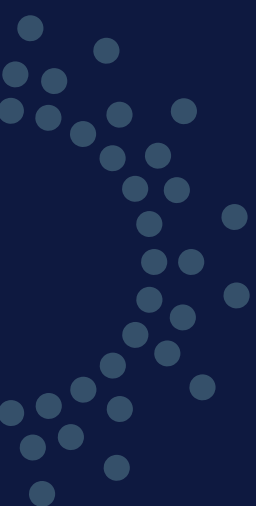
Why might it be positive to use the term “climate anxiety”?

Our paper does not focus on the causes, consequences, indicators, or prevalence of climate anxiety. Instead, we look at how laypeople perceive and react to **the term**.



Why might it be negative to use the term “climate anxiety”?

Our paper does not focus on the causes, consequences, indicators, or prevalence of climate anxiety. Instead, we look at how laypeople perceive and react to **the term**.

- 
1. Emotion beliefs
 2. Associations with the word “anxiety”
 3. A broader discussion regarding the use of “clinical” words in everyday speech.



Emotion beliefs

- People can have different appraisals of emotions; for example, whether they help or hinder, and to what extent they are rational, harmful, important, or controllable.
- Positive beliefs about worry include thinking of worry as a path to problem-solving, and as helpful in anticipating bad things and preventing them from happening. Negative beliefs include thinking of worry as dangerous, uncontrollable, and antagonistic to effective coping.
- Emotion beliefs can change: Wells (2010) refers to a clinical example of how a woman who had previously thought of her tendency to worry as an asset developed negative beliefs about worrying after having “read in a magazine that anxiety and stress could be harmful to the body and should be controlled” (p. 135).



Word associations

- Previous research supports that people differentiate between worry and anxiety in a word association task (Gawda, 2022): **Anxiety yielded more associations related to diseases** (illness and impairments), somatic symptoms, fictional situations, existential aspects, and extreme events as compared to worry.
- Although the term “anxiety” is frequently used among the public when referring to everyday emotional reactions, it tends to describe some sort of **maladjustment** (Wardell, 2020).



The use of “clinical” terms

- The use of psychological terms (e.g., anxiety) to describe climate distress could contribute to recognizing and validating young people’s negative feelings towards climate change, as well as underlining the severity and bringing attention to the situation (see e.g., Wardell, 2020).
- “...a recognisable term allowing us to speak with others of our fears of environmental and ecological vulnerability, collapse and extinction, and so feel less alone” (Hickman 2020, p. 414).

KRONIKK

Nei, du har ikke angst, du er bare litt bekymra

Angsten er den nye glutenallergien. Altfor mange tror de har det.

Vi bor i en verden hvor «alle» har angst og depresjon. Har du hørt om «sadtok»?



Our study

We aimed to investigate how the public perceives and reacts to the term “climate anxiety.” Specifically, we were interested in exploring whether and how referring to climate anxiety influences the level of **support for young people's influence on climate change policy development.**



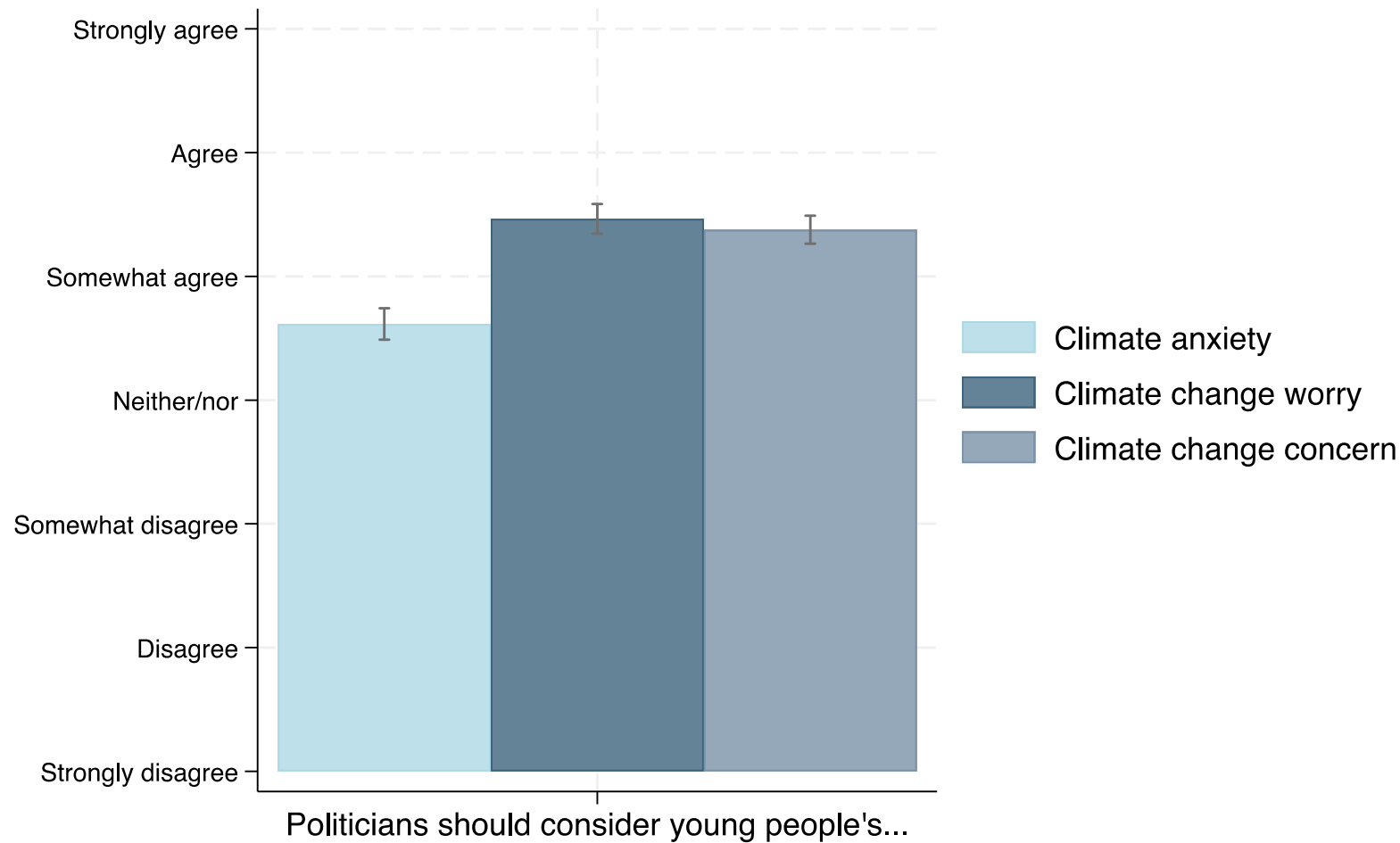
Sometimes we can read in the media that many young people **[are worried about climate change/have climate anxiety/are concerned about the climate issue]**. To what extent do you agree or disagree that politicians should take this into consideration when designing new climate policy?

1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Somewhat disagree), 4 (Neither agree nor disagree), 5 (Somewhat agree), 6 (Agree) 7 (Strongly agree).

N = 2040



When designing new climate policy...





What do you think of when you hear or read the term "climate anxiety"?

Please write down the first thing that comes to mind. We want all types of answers, a couple of sentences, or just a few words if that suits you better.

Category	Examples	Frequency, n (%)
Mere descriptions The answer <i>only</i> gives a neutral description of climate change (e.g., its causes or consequences) or of climate anxiety. The category includes mere definitions of anxiety or climate anxiety.	"Worry about global warming" "Fear of the future" "Natural disasters" "Extreme weather"	978 (52%)
Climate anxiety is unfounded The answer indicates that climate anxiety is unnecessary, excessive, or irrational. The answers may point to climate anxiety as an individual problem (e.g., delusions) or a group problem (e.g., snowflake generation).	"Hysteria" "Hypersensitivity" "Excessive" "Unnecessary"	507 (27%)
Climate anxiety is justified The answer indicates that it is understandable, rational, or reasonable to have climate anxiety.	"Rational" "Understandable" "Everyone should have it" "That anxiety is rooted in real danger" "A logical response to the threats we face"	104 (6%)
Climate anxiety as a (problematic) term The answer refers to problems with the use of the term. The category also contains answers that point to climate anxiety as a term constructed by specific groups (e.g., media, politicians, or climate sceptics).	"The word downplays justified concern" "Psychologizing a social problem" "Made up word to shift the focus away from the real problem" "A term created by the media"	103 (6%)



Age and gender differences?

- The oldest age group (1939 or earlier) differed from all other age groups with regards to seeing climate anxiety as unfounded, with 42% of answers falling into this category, making it the largest category (the category accounted for between 25% and 28% of the responses in all other age groups).
- For the other age groups, mere descriptions were the most frequent category.
- Critiques towards climate anxiety as a term were somewhat more frequent in the younger age groups. The younger age groups were also somewhat more likely to refer to climate anxiety as justified.
- Men more frequently than women referred to climate change as unfounded, while women more often merely described the term.



Political orientation and climate worry

- The category referring to climate anxiety as something unfounded was less frequent among those on the left wing (19%), compared to those in the center (25%) or right-wing (38%). They were also somewhat more likely to answer that climate anxiety is justified (9%) than those in the center (5%) or right-wing (3%).
- Answers given by those with low levels of climate worry were more frequently sorted into the climate anxiety is unfounded-category (62%), especially when compared to the high-worry group (13%). While this category is the most frequent for the low-worry group, mere descriptions are most prevalent within the medium- and high-worry groups, respectively.

In sum...

- The majority merely describes climate anxiety.
- Many (> 30%) have negative associations with the term.
- There is a stronger agreement with the statement that politicians should account for young people's climate change "concern" or "worry" when designing new climate policy than young people's "climate anxiety".

Using the term "climate anxiety" might shift some people's focus from the political- (climate change is the issue) to the individual (anxiety is the issue) sphere.

We should not uncritically use "climate anxiety" as an umbrella term for all types of negative emotional reactions related to climate change.

The results does not...

- Indicate whether having climate anxiety is bad (or good).
- Tell us how many consider climate anxiety irrational (or rational).
- Give insight into what people associate with “climate worry” or “climate concern”.
- Reveal people’s reasons for using the term about themselves or others.
- Say anything about people’s level of support for climate policy.



Limitations & Future research

- Where has the term been used since 2019? By whom? In what context?
- To what extent are the results influenced by people's views on *young people* and their role in politics?
- To what extent are the results influenced by people's views on *emotions* and their role in politics?
- To what extent does the media coverage steer people's views on climate anxiety?
- Generalizability?





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