



# Climate Change and its Effects on the Mental Health of Young People

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## Abstract

Young peoples' mental health has been to the fore in recent years as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic and more recently, with the increasingly high profile of the effects of Climate Change. A recent scan of the scientific articles on Climate Change and the mental health of young people shows that prior to 2018 there were less than 200 papers on this topic but that since then there have been over 2000 journal articles published. This paper, following a brief review of the literature on the effects of Climate Change on young peoples' mental health, will argue that it is the progressively hysterical media coverage and apocalyptic messaging about Climate Change which deprives young people of hope which is primarily responsible for the deleterious effects of Climate Change on young peoples' mental health.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Covid19 pandemic, Mental health

## Introduction

It is widely accepted today among mental health professionals that young people are presenting with increased rates of anxiety and depression to mental health services. The reasons behind this increase are probably complex and multi-factorial rather than one simple explanation. The reasons advanced often consist of today's more complex demands on young people from social media, conformity to same, FOMO (fear of missing out), bullying on social media, vulnerability, prolonged adolescence into the mid-20's for many young people with knock on delays in establishing themselves as independent adults with their own home and own family.

However, there is one major factor which is rarely recognised or mentioned in professional and media outlets, as potentially significant for this rise in mental health issues for young adults, and that is the omnipresent and all-encompassing Climate Change (CC)

messaging, especially when it emphasizes the catastrophic effects and doom-mongering, which is constant. Several times recently, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Guterres, told the world "We are doomed" if CC is not tackled.

This paper will address this issue of how CC, or Anthropogenic Global Warming (AGW) to give its full title, and associated doom-mongering, affects the mental health of young people.

## A Brief History of Anthropogenic Global Warming (AGW) in Recent Times

It is generally recognised that the modern environmental movement commenced with the publication of the "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carson in 1962 which exposed the dangers of excessive use of pesticides for human beings.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the environmental movement has grown exponentially. However, it is worth reminding ourselves that in the 1970's the emphasis was on a coming Ice Age

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rather than on Global Warming. *Newsweek* ran a cover story in 1975 titled “The Cooling World” which outlined how evidence for a forthcoming ice age was accumulating “so massively that meteorologists are hard-pressed to keep up with it”.<sup>2</sup>

Other catastrophic scenarios also emerged including over-population - Ehrlich’s “*The Population Boom*” in 1968, and Paddock’s “*Famine*” in 1975 which added fuel to the flames of doom-mongering.<sup>3,4</sup> Leaving aside altogether the threat of nuclear destruction which over-shadowed the generations growing up from the 1950s on, even today, young people are more exercised about AGW than about the threat of immediate nuclear annihilation, which, with the current war in Ukraine and Putin’s threat to use nuclear weapons, is rather puzzling, to say the least.

“Global Warming” was the phrase which was used up to some years ago until it was discovered that the planet’s warming paused in the 1990’s.<sup>5</sup> The term AGW was then introduced as a rebranding exercise to keep the whole climate “crisis” to the forefront of the public imagination, blaming it on human activities.

Whilst doom-mongering has always been an aspect of AGW, in recent years, especially since the advent of social media (SM) in the early 2000’s, the effect of this doom-mongering appears to have been amplified. Indeed, it is difficult to keep up with the changing terminology used by the AGW doom-mongers which now includes “Climate Breakdown” and “Climate Emergency”.

Young adults under 30 years of age receive their news and opinion pieces from the internet or social media (SM) companies such as Facebook or Instagram. In the light of the greater emotional impact of visual media on the human brain, the effects of this on the maturing brains of young people would appear to be major but as yet unmeasured. Given that the human brain is not fully matured until about the age of 25,<sup>6</sup> it would be reasonable to conclude that the effects of not just SM but of AGW doom messaging on the brains of young people would, concomitantly, be also major.

### Young Peoples’ Mental Health

As indicated earlier, young peoples’ mental health issues of anxiety and depression, including increased incidence of suicides, substance abuse and a dispiriting sense of loss, have increased in recent times and this is across countries and cultures. Patel as far back as 2007,<sup>7</sup> identified mental health of young people as a “global public health challenge”. UNICEF<sup>8</sup> issued a press release in which it claimed that 1 Billion children are “at an extremely high risk of the impact of the climate crisis”. Hickman<sup>9</sup> conducted a survey of 10,000 children in 10 countries worldwide from ages 16 -25 years and found that 59% of the respondents were “extremely worried” and 84% were “moderately worried” about the effects of climate change. More than 50% reported experiencing feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, guilt and helplessness. Strife (2012) in interviews

with 50 children found that 82% of children expressed feelings of sadness, fear, and anger in relation to “environmental problems”. Wu<sup>10</sup> whilst recognizing that the developmental vulnerabilities of young people under 25 years render them more susceptible to be disproportionately affected by AGW doom-mongering, stated that AGW could worsen already existing mental health conditions or even create new psychological issues for young people (although they do not specify what these “new conditions” might be).

As Curry<sup>11</sup> states: “*There is little basis in the IPCC assessments for a level of alarm that would induce such psychological effects — even in context of the IPCC’s numerous erroneous assumptions and dubious judgment calls that were outlined in my previous blog post The climate crisis isn’t what it used to be. The apocalyptic and misleading rhetoric in the media and political discourse about climate change is arguably the driving impetus of these adverse psychological health effects.*”

What is even more worrying however, is the involvement of professional psychologists in fostering anxiety among children and vulnerable young people. Margaret Klein Salamon, an American clinical psychologist, who is an executive director of the Climate Emergency Fund (CEF) is reported to encourage and validate children’s anxieties in order to indoctrinate them in to becoming climate activists.<sup>12</sup> She is not alone, and there is a proliferation of professional psychological consultants climbing aboard the AGW gravy-train offering their services to individuals and companies to generate climate anxiety and then offering solutions to deal with the anxiety which they have created! Something highly unethical methinks.

Given the apocalyptic nature of the AGW messaging, fear mobilizes the human brain into survival mode of fight/flight or freeze. The adrenaline pumped into the human body has short term positive effects in enabling the individual to act in one of these three ways. However, the long-term effects of adrenaline are known to reduce the body’s immune system response and result in an immune-suppressant reaction over time. Furthermore, our thinking and cognitive strategies narrow under stress and result in less effective cognitive solutions to life’s problems).<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

Thus, it would be reasonable to conclude that anxiety and depression would become widespread and this is what we see happening in societies today, especially among young people who are more vulnerable and suggestible than mature adults.

AGW predictions have been commonplace for the last 25 years. Ebell & Molloy<sup>14</sup> have demonstrated that no matter what the incorrect prediction of the Ecodoomsters is, these failures are rarely, if ever, held to account by the main stream media (MSM) who are only too eager for sensational headlines.

The effects of constant negative predications and bad news on mental health has been established for some time now,<sup>15</sup> so it is hardly surprising then when our young people start presenting with increased anxiety and depression in our mental health services. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect a tsunami of mental health problems among young people and this is what we are seeing.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of the AGW doom-mongering is the destruction of hope among the young. If AGW is irreversible and we only have until 2030 to do something about it (according to Senator Ocasio-Cortez in the USA, who is on record with this date, even though IPCC says nothing of the sort), then all hope is destroyed because it is patently obvious that the whole world is not going to be able to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to the level required to "save the planet" by the year 2030. Little wonder is it then that our young people are anxious and depressed, especially when we have Mr Guterres, repeatedly and irresponsibly, telling us that we are all doomed!

So what action should be taken to address the worst effects of the AGW doom-mongering? Given that the World Health Organization (WHO) is responsible for human physical and mental health worldwide, it should perhaps fall to WHO itself to bring some hope and realism to mitigate the worst effects of the inappropriate doom-mongering of the AGW band-wagon. The WHO could begin by taking up this issue with the UNFCCC (which controls the IPCC) and attempting to "advise" Mr Guterres in relation to his doom-mongering. We can only hope! However, with the latest utterings from Mr Guterres claiming that human beings are "weapons of mass extinction" as reported in the media from a COP15 CC and Biodiversity conference in Montreal this week (December 8<sup>th</sup> 2022) then it would appear that peak doom-mongering is, unfortunately still a long way off! If Mr Guterres is not prepared to act responsibly in the true interests of the WHO, he should resign.

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## Conflicts of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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