Supporting Youth in a Changing Climate:
A Climate-Aware Perspective on Mental Health



https://www.momscleanairforce.org/

Advancing Youth Well-Being Through Partnership: A Collaborative Approach to Mental Health
November 7, 2026
Dr. Jon Gorman, PsyD

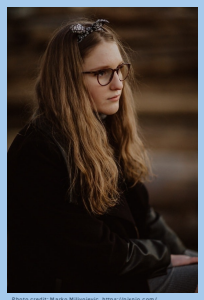
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I. Why this belongs in pediatric care

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Olivia, 14

"Sometimes I wonder why I'm supposed to care about school and college when everything is going to be so bad because of climate change."


Photo credit: Marko Milovojevic, https://pexels.com/

How would you respond?

Is this anxiety to be treated?

Is her appraisal realistic?

Both?

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Supporting Youth in a Changing Climate:
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- Why this matters
- Healthy vs. Problematic Climate Distress
- What clinicians can do



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Why should pediatricians care about climate change?

UN: 50% of children in the world **(1 Billion Children)** are at "extremely high risk" from the impacts of climate change.

WHO: The future is threatened for all children around the world

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Why should pediatricians care about climate change?

AAP Policy Statement (2024):

- Climate change affects both physical and mental health
- Pediatricians should "incorporate climate change counseling into clinical practice." (p. 80)


POLICY STATEMENT Organizational Principles to Guide and Define the Child Health Care System and/or Improve the Health of all Children

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

Climate Change and Children's Health: Building a Healthy Future for Every Child

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Learning Objectives

- Recognize → effects on youth mental health
- Distinguish → adaptive distress vs. clinical concern
- Apply → climate-aware conversations

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Why should pediatricians care about climate change?

- Climate change affects children's

physical health + mental health + developmental context





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What are young people experiencing?

- Climate change affects mental health through multiple pathways

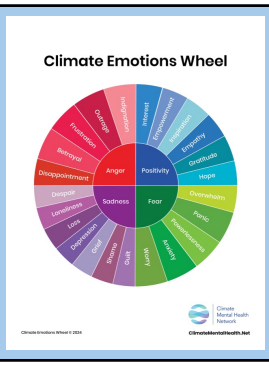
DIRECT	INDIRECT	ANTICIPATORY
• Heat	• Family Stress	• Awareness of future threats
• Wildfire/smoke	• Economic disruption	• Media exposure
• Floods/storms	• Food/housing insecurity	• Uncertainty
• Displacement	• Community disruption	• Perceived societal inaction

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Unique impacts on children and adolescents

- **Developing**:
  - cognitive/emotional systems still developing.
- **Dependent**:
  - their safety depends substantially on adults and institutions.
- **Future-oriented**:
  - climate projections concern the decades in which they'll build their lives
- **Limited power**:
  - they have relatively little ability to change the systems producing the threat

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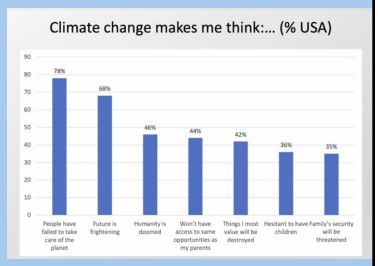
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II. What are young people experiencing?

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Youth

- 2021 global study of 10,000 ppl age 16-25
- >80% of young people across the world (incl. U.S.) worry that c.c. is threatening people and the planet
- **45% report negative impact on daily functioning**
- 60% report feeling anxious or sad
- 48% have been dismissed or ignored when they try to talk to other people about climate change

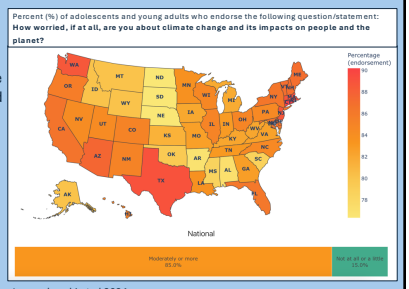


Hickman et al 2021

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Youth

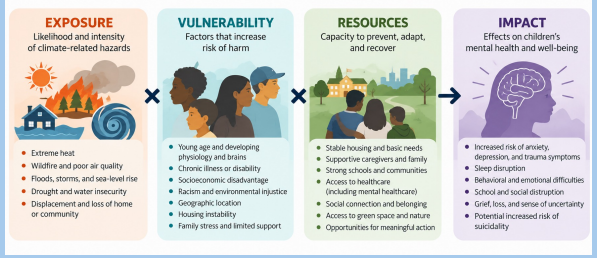
- 2024 study of 16,000 American youth aged 16-25
- 85% at least moderately worried about climate change
- 58% very or extremely worried
- 88%: "People have failed to take care of the planet"
- 66%: "Climate change will threaten my health"
- 76%: "The future is frightening"
- **No differences by political party**



Lewandowski et al 2024

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Climate change is also an equity issue



(Clayton et al. 2023)
(Ahdoot et al. 2024)

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Distress is not necessarily disorder

A painful emotion can be an appropriate response to a painful reality.

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III. When is climate distress clinically concerning?

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Climate Anxiety



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A continuum, not a binary

ENGAGED CONCERN →	DISTRESS →	IMPAIRMENT
Worry	Rumination	Sleep disruption
Sadness	Difficulty disengaging	School interference
Anger	Heightened fear	Social withdrawal
Seeking information		Persistent avoidance
Desire to act	Periodic hopelessness	Significant hopelessness
		Anhedonia

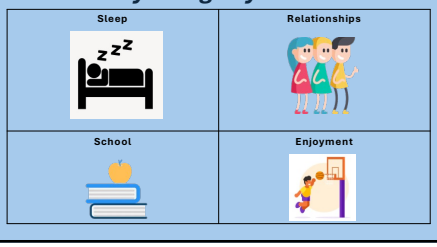
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Instead of:

Are you worried?

Try:

What is the worry doing to your life?



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5 questions clinicians can ask:

1. What have you heard about climate change?
2. How does thinking about it make you feel?
3. How often do you find yourself thinking about it?
4. Does it affect your sleep, school, relationships, or things you enjoy?
5. Who do you talk to when you feel this way?

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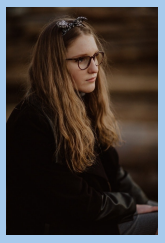


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IV. What makes an approach "climate-aware?"

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Different from standard anxiety treatment



"The smoke from the wildfires was so bad last summer that we couldn't play outside. What if that starts happening every summer?"

Classic anxiety formulation:
The threat is being overestimated.
"How likely is it that every summer will be like that? Are you overestimating the threat?"

Vs.

Climate-aware formulation:
There is a real threat. How can this young person relate to it without becoming overwhelmed?
"Hmm…maybe that's a realistic possibility. If so, how can find ways to practice dealing with the uncertainty and stay engaged with the things you care about?"

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Both are true:

Climate change is genuinely concerning
AND
A meaningful, joyful future remains possible.

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"If you aren't outraged by what's going on, you aren't paying attention. But if at the same time you aren't overwhelmed and awed by the beauty of life and nature, you aren't paying attention. So how do you hold both of these awarenesses simultaneously?"
–Daniel Schmachtenberger

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Two-thirds of youth surveyed have tried to talk to others about climate change concerns…

…but over half of those reported that they have felt ignored or dismissed by those they've tried to talk to.

(Lewandowski et al. 2024)

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What climate-aware care does instead:

VALIDATE → EXPLORE → CONNECT → ACT

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V. What can clinicians actually do?

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1. VALIDATE

Instead of:

"Try not to worry about that."

Try:

"It makes sense that learning about climate change could bring up some big feelings."

Or:

"You're not the only young person who feels worried about this."

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2. EXPLORE



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3. CONNECT

- To people
- To nature
- To values/meaning
- Community



Photo credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Region, Public Domain Mark

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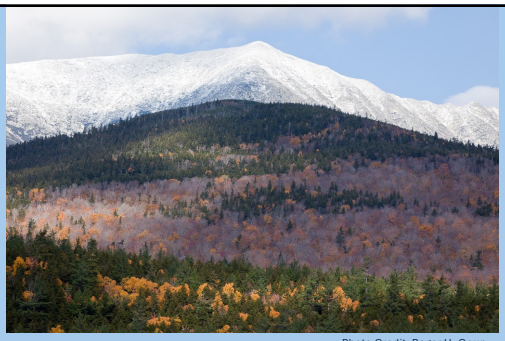


Photo Credit: Roger H. Goun

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4. ACT

- Agency can be an antidote to helplessness—but responsibility is not.

"There are things you can do" ≠ "It is your job to fix this."

- Examples:
  - **Young child:** garden, habitat project, family activity
    Adolescent: school project, community organization, advocacy, restoration work
    Family: preparedness, transportation/food choices, community participation

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VI. Working with parents/caregivers

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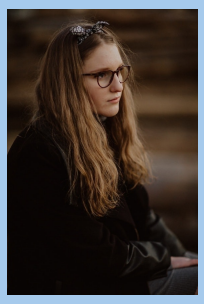
What Parents Can Do

1. **Ask** what they've heard
2. **Listen** before correcting
3. **Validate** emotions
4. **Model** coping and engagement
5. **Protect** childhood

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Olivia, 14

"Sometimes I wonder why I'm supposed to care about school and college when everything is going to be so bad because of climate change."



How would you respond?

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Olivia, 14

"Sometimes I wonder why I'm supposed to care about school and college when everything is going to be so bad because of climate change."

VALIDATE
"It sounds like you're thinking seriously about what climate change could mean for your future."
EXPLORE
"When you imagine that future, what are you most afraid is going to happen?"
ASSESS
"Has thinking about this made it harder to enjoy things, sleep, or feel motivated about school?"
CONNECT
"Who can you talk to about these feelings?"
ACT
"Would it be helpful to think about something you could do with other people that matters to you?"

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Key Takeaways

1. Climate distress isn't inherently pathological.

Fear, grief, and anger can be proportionate responses to a genuine threat.

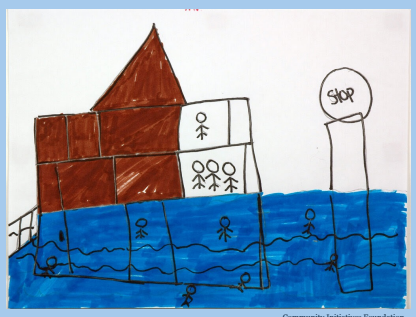
2. Assess function—not simply the presence of worry.

Look for impairment, rigidity, hopelessness, avoidance, and co-occurring mental health concerns.

3. Don't choose between validation and hope.

We can acknowledge reality while strengthening connection, meaning, resilience, and agency.

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Community Initiatives Foundation

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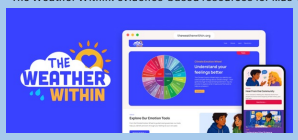


Held v. Montana is a constitutional court case in the State of Montana regarding the right to a "clean and healthful environment" in Montana for present and future generations" as required by the Constitution of Montana. The case was filed in March 2020 by Our Children's Trust on behalf of sixteen youth residents of Montana, then aged 2 through 18. On June 12, 2023, the case became the first climate-related constitutional lawsuit to go to trial in the United States.

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Resources

The Weather Within: evidence-based resources for kids 14+



Climate Mental Health Network: Robust section of Gen Z/Youth resources

Climate Mental Health Network

Books:





Children's Environmental Health Network

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Questions/Comments?

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