

A young person with curly brown hair and a serious expression is holding a white protest sign. The sign has a blue and green globe and the word 'LOVE' in green. The background is a blurred crowd of people outdoors.

# CLIMATE CONCERNS AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

FINDINGS FROM THE 2022  
MISSION AUSTRALIA YOUTH SURVEY



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

This report was developed by Orygen in partnership with Mission Australia. The work was led by Caroline Gao, Shu Mei Teo, Nicholas Fava and Kate Fila from Orygen, and Naheen Brennan and Tamara Freeburn from Mission Australia. The expert input of other contributors from Orygen and Mission Australia who provided helpful insights, feedback, design and support were instrumental in shaping the work.

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*A special thank you to the young people who shared with us, via the 2022 Mission Australia Youth Survey, their responses on current issues – especially in regard to concerns around climate change and their mental health and wellbeing.*

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Mission Australia Youth Survey* has been capturing the aspirations, experiences and concerns of young people annually since 2002. As the largest survey of its kind in Australia, it provides a platform for young people to share what matters to them and give their perspectives on a range of issues. In 2022, the *Youth Survey* was completed by 18,800 young people aged 15 to 19 across the country.

In this survey, over half (51%) identified *the environment* as one of the most important issues in Australia today, while over a quarter (26%) reported they were *extremely or very concerned* about *climate change*.

These findings are not surprising considering in the last three years, record-breaking climate catastrophes have impacted large parts of Australia (e.g., 2019/2020 Black Summer mega fires and widespread flooding in 2020, 2021, and 2022) resulting in extensive damage to homes, infrastructure, ecosystems as well as people's health and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.

For the majority of young people, concerns and negative emotions regarding the climate are significant, as climate change represents a realistic threat to their lives in the foreseeable future<sup>2</sup>. Further, adolescence is a critical development period marked by significant physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes, and the disruption caused by mental ill-health can severely disrupt their pathway to adult independence and functioning. Almost half of all mental health disorders onset before the age of 18<sup>3</sup>, and rates of mental ill-health in adolescents are higher now than ever before<sup>4</sup>. Climate concerns and climate anxiety are likely contributors to the exacerbation of mental ill-health for some young people<sup>5,6</sup>.

A recent study in Australia found more than half of those who experienced climate-related disasters (e.g., exposure to severe air pollution, loss of lives, damage to properties, and interruptions to daily living) were more

likely to report moderate to high levels of impact on their mental health<sup>7</sup>. The indirect effects of these disasters were felt by many Australians (e.g., via media/social media exposure, having family or friends directly impacted, and increases in the cost of living). Ongoing exposures to increasingly severe climate events are likely to increase the psychological burden for individuals and communities, and for young people particularly, shape a negative view and diminished outlook for the future<sup>8</sup>.

Steps can be taken to reduce negative emotions stemming from climate concerns. Research suggests climate anxiety can be mitigated through practical actions such as:

- talking to others about how you feel,
- joining groups that are taking action to fight climate change,
- limiting media exposure,
- connecting with nature,
- making lifestyle changes based on personal values, and
- developing personal climate adaptation actions<sup>9,10</sup>.

The purpose of this report is to better understand the cohort of young people who are highly concerned about climate change, and the impact this concern has on their mental health and perceptions of the future. The [full academic publication](#) associated with this report is made publicly accessible with details on the study design, methods, and results.

The findings from the 2022 Youth Survey show that young people who were very or extremely concerned about climate change were more likely to identify as gender diverse or female, live in major cities or report experiencing financial difficulties in the past year.

Even though concern about the climate is an appropriate response to both the threat and direct effects of climate change, this emotional response may have a deeper impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people when it overwhelms them and makes it difficult to manage.

The 2022 Youth Survey data revealed that young people with high levels of climate change concerns were more likely to report concern about coping with stress and mental health, say they had poor/fair self-perceived mental health, record low subjective wellbeing, and self-report a mental health condition.

Upon deeper analysis, the data showed that climate concern among young people was linked to psychological distress and a dampened outlook for the future, with close to two in five (38%) young people with strong climate concerns reporting they were experiencing high psychological distress, while over one in five (23%) had a negative outlook about their future. This link was stronger among young people who identified as gender diverse, Indigenous, or those living in regional/remote areas.

We cannot conclude from this study that climate concerns cause psychological distress and a less positive outlook about the future, and this linkage is likely to be bidirectional.

In considering the implications of these findings for policy and practice, Orygen and Mission Australia advocate:

- ensuring future government youth and mental health strategies include actions to mitigate and reduce the mental health effects of young people's climate concerns;
- partnering with young people in designing actions to address the impact of climate change on their mental health;

- providing training to professionals who work with young people to improve their awareness of climate change-related mental health issues and their ability to provide youth-friendly support; and
- funding targeted research that focuses on the intersection of youth mental health and concerns about climate change.

We believe this will help drive action to better support young people and, in doing so, reduce the impact of climate change on psychological distress, foster hope and avoid despair, and motivate climate actions.

If we can achieve this, we can help young people decrease the negative impacts of climate change on their mental health and improve their outlook for the future.



#### IN THE WORDS OF A YOUNG PERSON:

##### **Biggest personal challenge experienced in 2021-2022**

*"I have struggled deeply with climate anxiety..."*

##### **How they handled the challenge**

*"For climate anxiety for myself and others, I started a school climate group that was supported by the school and teachers."*

##### **What could be done to help them in the future?**

*"Every school should have a climate action group supported by a teacher to create change and to help with climate related anxiety."*

**Male, 17, NSW,  
very/extremely concerned  
about climate change**

# Climate change concerns and young people's mental health

## What are the impacts of climate concerns?

Those who reported being more concerned about climate change also reported:

- Higher psychological distress and poorer mental health
- Lower personal wellbeing
- More negative future outlook

They were also more likely to be involved in environmental groups

## Whose mental health is most affected?

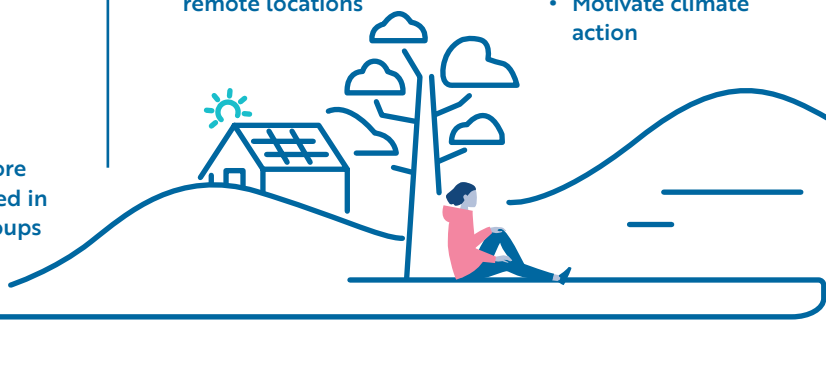
Stronger links between climate concerns and poor mental health among those who identified as:

- Gender diverse
- Indigenous; or
- Living in outer regional/remote locations



## We need to:

- Reduce impact of climate change on psychological distress
- Foster hope and avoid despair
- Motivate climate action



## What needs to be done?



### Include climate change in future government youth and mental health strategies

National, state and territory governments to act in a coordinated and urgent fashion



### Partner with young people

Co-design actions to mitigate climate-related mental health impacts



### Provide training

Upskill professionals working with young people to identify climate-related distress and provide support



### Targeted research funding

Targeting intersection of youth mental health and climate change



## 2. KEY FINDINGS

### Young people and concerns about climate change

Over two-thirds (67%) of young Australians were concerned about *climate change*, with over a quarter (26%) reporting they were *very or extremely concerned* about *climate change*, see Figure 1. Young people who were *very or extremely concerned* about *climate change* were more likely to:

- Identify as **gender diverse** (47%) or **female** (29%) as compared to **male** (16%).
- Live in **major cities** (27%), as compared to those who live in **inner regional** (23%) or **outer regional, remote or very remote** areas (21%).
- Report having experienced **financial difficulties** in the past year.

Participants who reported higher levels of climate concerns were also likely to be older, non-Indigenous, not studying or studying part-time, and from areas with higher socioeconomic status; [see details in the publication](#).

Multiple factors can shape climate concerns, such as:

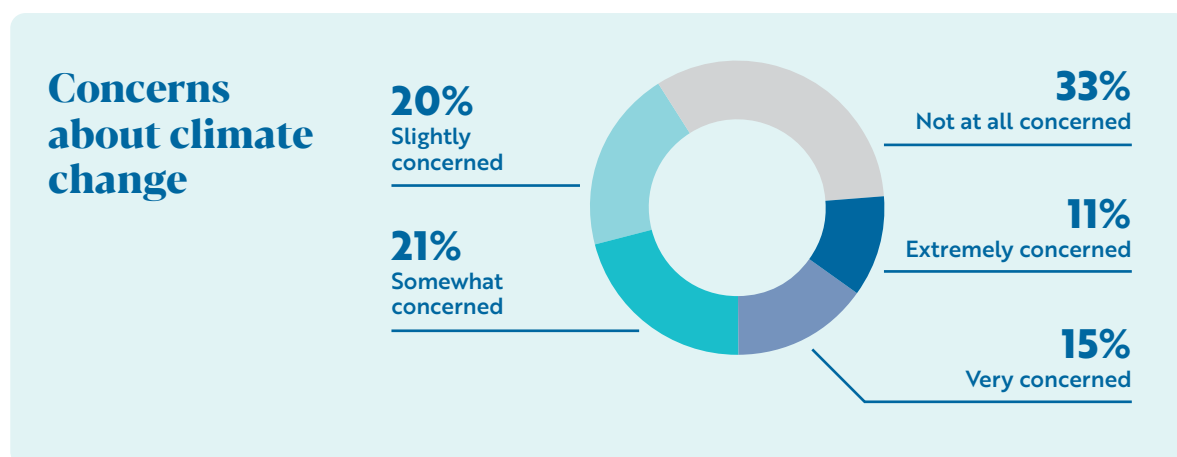
- exposure to climate change-related information (media and social media platforms);
- exposure to educational programs;
- peer influences;
- direct impact from climate-related disasters;
- sense of personal connection with the environment;
- political views; and
- influence from family and the broader community.

In our sample, the profiles of young people from Australia who were more concerned about climate change were

largely comparable with studies conducted internationally on both adults and youths<sup>11-14</sup>. What we found was that young people who identified as gender diverse were more likely to report being *very or extremely concerned* about *climate change* compared with those who identified as either male or female. This disparity may be a result of compounding stress faced by gender diverse individuals<sup>15</sup> and possibly a greater level of social and political awareness and activism, rendering them particularly vulnerable to climate change-related stress.

While concerns and worries are appropriate emotional responses to both the threat and direct effects of climate change, these emotional responses may impact the mental health and wellbeing of young people when they become difficult to manage<sup>16</sup>.

Figure 1. Levels of concern about climate change and percentage of “very” or “extremely concerned” among different demographic groups



*% young people who reported feeling very or extremely concerned about climate change*



Young people living in **unstable housing<sup>a</sup>** had relatively similar levels of concern about climate change as those living in stable housing.

Young people experiencing **financial difficulties<sup>b</sup>** were slightly more likely to report feeling very or extremely concerned about climate change than those not experiencing financial hardship.



- a Among those with unstable housing, 26% were very/extremely concerned about climate change, while 31% were not at all concerned. Among those with no evidence of unstable housing, 26% were very/extremely concerned about climate change, while 34% were not at all concerned.
- b Among those with financial difficulties, 27% were very/extremely concerned about climate change, while 32% were not at all concerned. Among those with no evidence of financial difficulties, 25% were very/extremely concerned about climate change, while 34% were not at all concerned.



## Climate change concerns and other wellbeing aspects

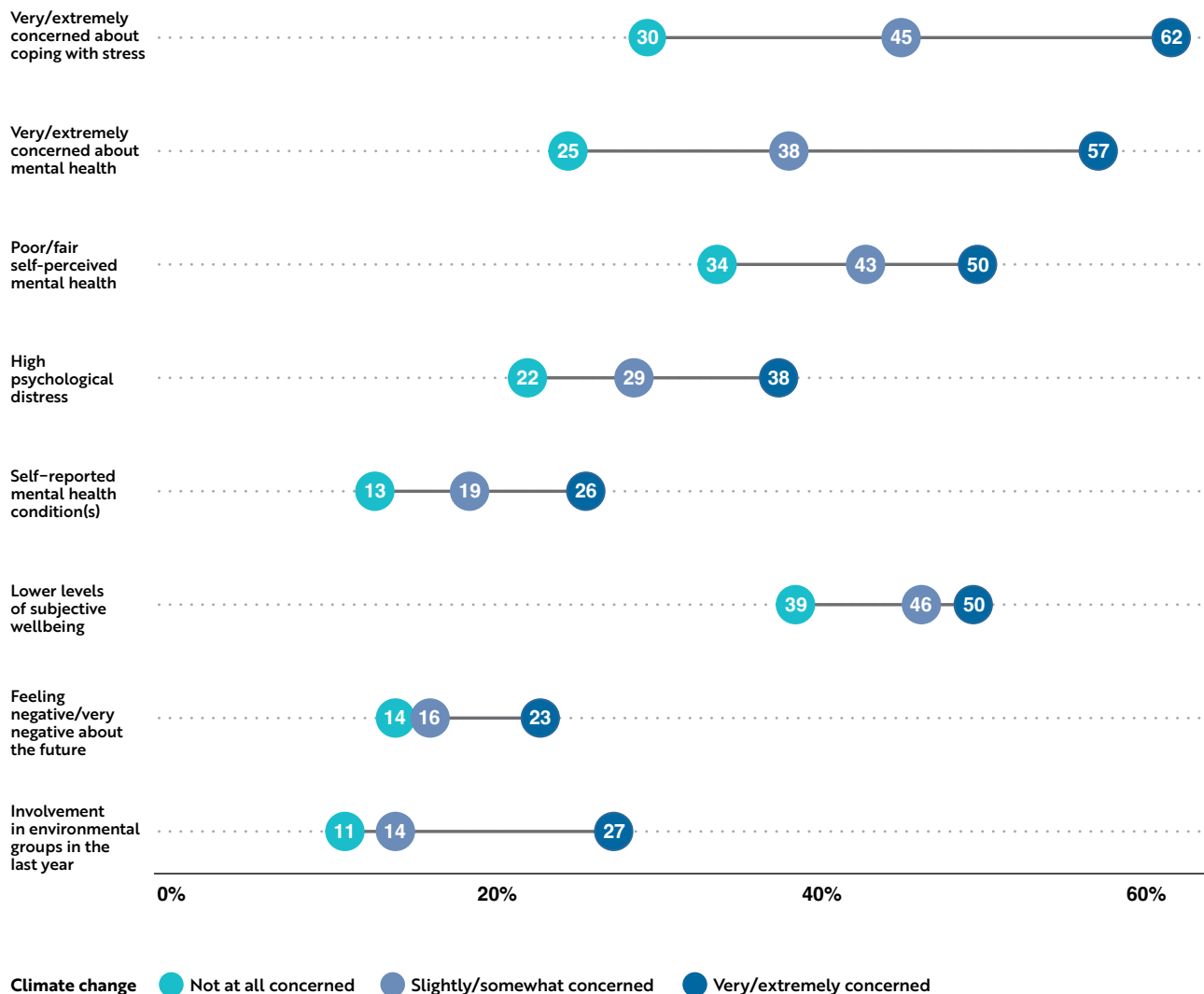
Young people with higher levels of climate change concerns (see Figure 2) were more likely to:

- Report high levels of concern about **coping with stress** and **mental health**
  - Among those who were *very/extremely concerned about climate change*, 62% were *very/extremely concerned about coping with stress*, as compared to 30% among those who were *not at all concerned about climate change*.
- Have **poor/fair self-perceived mental health**
  - 50% of young people who were *very/extremely concerned about climate change* reported *poor* or *fair* self-perceived mental health as compared to 34% among those who were *not at all concerned about climate change*.
- Have **higher psychological distress**
  - 38% of young people who were *very/extremely concerned about climate change* vs. 22% of those who were *not at all concerned about climate change* had high psychological distress.
- Self-report a **mental health condition(s)**
  - Among those who were *very/extremely concerned about climate change*, 26% reported having a mental health condition(s), as compared to 13% among those who were *not at all concerned about climate change*.
- Have **low subjective wellbeing**
  - 50% of young people who reported being *very/extremely concerned about climate change* also scored lower in the personal wellbeing index measure, as compared to 39% among those who reported *not at all concerned about climate change*.
- Feel more **negative about the future**
  - Among those who *very/extremely concerned about climate change*, 23% reported feeling *negative* or *very negative* about the future, as compared to 14% among those who reported feeling *not at all concerned about climate change*.





**Figure 2. Climate change concerns and associations with other aspects of a young person's life**



Note: Please refer to Appendix for further details on the variable definitions.

Although young people who were *very/extremely concerned* about *climate change* had generally higher levels of psychological distress and mental ill-health, they were also more likely to **be involved with environmental groups or activities** in the last year (27%), as compared to those who were *not at all concerned* (11%) or *slightly/somewhat concerned* (14%) about *climate change*.

## Investigating the association between climate change concern, mental health and negative outlook about the future

Figure 2 shows that close to two in five (38%) young people with strong climate concerns reporting they were experiencing high psychological distress, while over one in five (23%) had a *negative* outlook about their future.

We used statistical modelling techniques (see Statistical Methods in the Appendix) to explore associations between climate change concerns, psychological distress, and negative future outlook. We found that there were common risk factors contributing to higher levels of climate change concerns, psychological distress, and negative outlook (e.g., having a self-reported mental health condition). However, **climate change concerns** were associated with **higher psychological distress** and **negative future outlook**, even after accounting for the influence of these common risk factors. This suggests a genuine connection between climate change concerns, psychological distress and negative outlook that is not influenced by the presence of common risk factors.

We also looked at whether the links between climate change concerns, psychological distress and negative outlook were similar across different population subgroups (e.g., gender, rurality, Indigenous status). The relationships were stronger among those who identified as

- **gender diverse;**
- **Indigenous;** and
- **living in outer regional areas** (particularly for psychological distress).

This suggests that for young people in these marginalised groups, climate change can impact more significantly on their psychological distress and/or future outlook.

With information from one time point, we cannot conclude from this study that climate concerns *cause* psychological distress, but this association is likely bidirectional. That is, concerns about climate change may contribute to a young person's psychological distress (e.g., climate anxiety), and at the same time pre-existing psychological distress may increase the likelihood of worry and concerns, including about climate change.

Regardless of the direction, other studies have shown that climate change-associated severe negative emotional responses, such as climate anxiety, can be mitigated through activities such as:

- talking to others about how you feel,
- joining groups that are taking action to fight climate change,
- limiting media exposure,
- connecting with nature,
- making lifestyle changes based on personal values, and
- developing personal climate adaptation actions<sup>9,10</sup>.



### IN THE WORDS OF A YOUNG PERSON:

#### Biggest personal challenge experienced in 2021-2022

*"...I have also been suffering with major climate anxiety."*

#### How they handled the challenge

*"With regards to my climate anxiety, I struggle being able to mediate that and often cannot read the news without panicking."*

#### What could be done to help them in the future?

*"I think I need to work a better routine. I used to find that being active was always great for my mental health, but I struggle to find the time."*

Female, 19, VIC,  
very/extremely concerned  
about climate change

## Access to mental health supports

Young people who had reported feeling *very or extremely concerned* about *climate change* were more likely to **report needing support with mental health in their lives**, as compared to those *not at all concerned* about *climate change* (66% vs. 42%).

Among those who needed support, young people who had reported feeling *very or extremely concerned* about *climate change* were also more likely to have **sought support**

**for their mental health**, as compared to those *not at all concerned* about *climate change* (61% vs. 56%).

The top source of mental health support among those who accessed support was a *health professional*. For those who didn't seek out support, the top barriers were *stigma or shame associated with mental illness*, and *concerns about confidentiality*.

**Table 1. Needing and accessing mental health support among young people with high level of climate concern vs. those with low level of climate concern**

Mental health service needs and access	Young people who were <i>very or extremely concerned</i> about <i>climate change</i>	Young people who were <i>not at all concerned</i> about <i>climate change</i>
Report needed support with mental health in their lives	66%	42%
Sought mental health support (among those who needed support)	61%	56%
Top sources of mental health support among those who accessed support		
A health professional (e.g. doctor, psychologist)	74%	63%
Family	56%	53%
Friends	46%	46%
Top barriers to accessing professional mental health support among those who didn't seek out support		
Stigma or shame associated with mental illness	49%	39%
Concerns about confidentiality	49%	37%
Don't know where to go	36%	29%



### 3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this report point to an urgent need to better understand how climate change is impacting the mental health of young people in Australia, and to develop measures to respond accordingly. We recommend:

- ensuring future national, state and territory youth and mental health strategies include actions to mitigate and reduce the mental health effects of young people's climate concerns;
- partnering with young people in designing actions to address the impact of climate change on their mental health;
- providing evidence-informed training to professionals who work with young people to improve their awareness of climate change-related mental health issues and their ability to provide youth-friendly support; and
- funding a targeted call or special initiative for research focused on the intersection of youth mental health and concerns about climate change.

#### 1 Include climate change in future government youth and mental health strategies

Climate change is worsening, which in combination with the current global youth mental health crisis<sup>17</sup> can result in significant burdens to individuals, communities and society more broadly. Where relationships exist between known factors and mental health, actions should be implemented to mitigate and reduce the effects. As such, we recommend that future national, state and territory youth and mental health strategies

include actions to address the mental health issues impacting young people experiencing climate concerns. Such actions could include, for example, effective psychological treatment and social support for traumatic exposure to severe climate events. Including these actions in future youth and mental health strategies ensure that changes can be considered across all relevant systems, services and practice.



## Partner with young people

In designing actions to mitigate and reduce the mental health effects of young people's climate concerns, partnerships with young people are essential. Young people have the expertise required to define how they are impacted and provide meaningful insights into how we should conceptualise, assess and work to reduce the impact of climate change

on mental health for different populations (e.g., Indigenous and gender diverse young people). The national and state/territory governments should build and resource mechanisms to support the participation of young people in designing and implementing actions that address the mental health impacts of climate change.



## Provide training to professionals working with young people

Professionals working with young people, in roles such as youth mental health clinicians, teaching and other school staff, university counsellors, and general practitioners, are in ideal positions to identify climate-related distress, provide support and/or promote early help-seeking. Where young people express climate concerns, professionals should be appropriately skilled and resourced, to safely discuss climate change and provide support or

referrals to appropriate support services. Evidence-informed training packages should be developed and deployed for a range of settings including education, health and youth community services. These packages should include resources for identifying severe climate impacts, guiding youth-friendly communication, and explaining evidence-informed prevention and intervention actions for climate-related mental ill-health.



## Targeted research funding

The impact of climate change on mental health is an emerging but significant issue. There is an urgent need to mitigate potential impacts, including on populations vulnerable to mental ill-health such as young people. We recommend a targeted call or special initiative from research funding bodies, with a unique focus on young people, to canvass:

- approaches to effectively identify those most at risk of mental health impacts of climate change, including those with pre-existing mental ill-health and other factors associated with higher vulnerability;
- an understanding of the relationship between climate concerns and mental ill-health;
- opportunities to support resilience; and
- effective ways to reduce the mental health impact of climate change.



#### IN THE WORDS OF A YOUNG PERSON:

##### **Biggest personal challenge experienced in 2021-2022**

*“The largest personal challenge I’ve experienced over the past year is probably dealing with anxiety around climate change. I’ve found that general responses to anxiety, such as CBT [cognitive behaviour therapy] or distraction, aren’t helpful for large, borderline world-ending events, and that instead I need to find my own ways of dealing with climate anxiety.”*

##### **How they handled the challenge**

*“I’ve ended up sort of just coming to a point of acceptance with the fact it’s unlikely society will persist in a positive state, and just going on with it anyway - just sort of going “Ok, your home might be destroyed, you’ll possibly die from a climate-related thing, but none of that is happening right now so you just have to keep moving forward.” It’s obviously not the perfect coping mechanism, but it works pretty well for me, and I’m fine with that. Also, I’ve tried consuming less news specifically about environmental damage or predictions - I get stressed more when I’m hearing about how terrible things will be from an official source rather than just my brain.”*

##### **What could be done to help them in the future?**

*“If the government/s (Australian but also internationally) and corporations took stronger action against climate change, I think I’d be less worried. Alas, shareholders won’t be affected in the same way the average Australian will, so it’s unlikely anything will be done.”*

**Female, 15, NSW,  
very/extremely concerned  
about climate change**



## Variable definitions for Figure 1 and 2

Item	Explanation
Gender	Self-identified gender options included <i>female, male, non-gendered, non-binary gender, transgender, not listed and prefer not to say</i> . <i>Non-gendered, non-binary gender, transgender, and not listed</i> were grouped as “gender diverse”.
Location	Remoteness information were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) by matching participants’ residential postcodes to one of five categories: <i>Major Cities of Australia, Inner Regional Australia, Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia, and Very Remote Australia</i> . The latter three were combined in our analyses as “Outer regional, remote or very remote”.
Financial difficulties	Young people were noted as having experienced financial difficulties if they answered the question: <i>In the past year, have you and/or your family received support or assistance from a charity or foundation?</i> With <i>Yes, Mission Australia, Yes, a different charity or foundation</i> , or <i>No, but I needed support or assistance</i> ; or indicated an affirmative response to the question <i>In the past year, have you and/or your family experienced any of the following because of money concerns?</i> With responses: <i>Could not pay bills or car expenses, Could not pay rent/mortgage, Gone without a meal, Could not afford school supplies or go on school excursions, or Sought financial help from family, friends or a charity</i> .
Housing instability	Young people were noted as experiencing housing instability if they answered <i>Yes</i> to any of the following: <i>Have you experienced a time when you had no fixed address or lived in a refuge or transitional accommodation within the last year? Within the last year, have you spent time away from home because you felt you couldn’t go back? Or In the past year, have you ever worried about having a safe place to stay?</i>

Item	Explanation
Concern about climate change/ coping with stress/mental health	These were part of a grid question <i>"In the past year, how personally concerned have you been about...?"</i> that looked at 17 common concerns. Answers were presented on a five-point scale from <i>not at all concerned</i> to <i>extremely concerned</i> . High levels of concern in this report refers to <i>very concerned</i> or <i>extremely concerned</i> responses.
Self-perceived mental health	<i>"In general, how would you rate your mental health and wellbeing?"</i> Answers were presented on a five-point scale from <i>poor</i> to <i>excellent</i> . <i>Poor</i> and <i>fair</i> were combined in this report.
Self-reported mental health condition(s)	<i>"Do you identify as a person with a mental health condition?"</i> Answers were Yes, No or Prefer not to say. The figure captures those who responded with Yes.
Psychological distress	Psychological distress was assessed using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale – 6 item version (K6) <sup>18</sup> . A score of >18 is classified as high psychological distress <sup>19,20</sup> .
Subjective wellbeing	Subjective wellbeing was assessed using the Personal Wellbeing Index <sup>21</sup> , with the question <i>"How happy are you..."</i> for nine different aspects of life. Answers were on a ten-point scale from <i>very sad</i> to <i>very happy</i> . The combined score was converted into the standard 0-100 scale format, and a score < 50 (below the Australian normative range <sup>21</sup> ) is referred to as low subjective wellbeing in this report.
Feelings about the future	<i>"How would you describe your feelings when you think about the future?"</i> Answers were presented on a five-point scale from <i>very negative</i> to <i>very positive</i> . <i>Very negative</i> and <i>negative</i> were combined in this report.

## Statistical methods

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the demographic profiles of survey participants. In Figure 1, we showed the breakdown of the five levels of climate concerns among all participants, and the percentage of those who reported feeling "very" or "extremely concerned" among various demographic groups. In Figure 2, we showed that participants with different levels of climate concerns also differ in other aspects such as their concern about stress, or involvement in environmental groups.

To explore the relationship between climate concern, psychological distress, and future outlook, we fitted three multivariate multinomial logistic regression models. Model 1 tested whether climate concerns were linked to high psychological distress,

controlling for confounding factors such as gender, age group, Indigenous status, full-time studying, paid work, IRSAD, remoteness, unstable housing, financial difficulties, and self-reported mental health conditions. Model 2 tested whether climate concerns were related to a more negative future outlook, adjusting for potential confounders. Model 3 assessed whether climate concerns were linked to negative future outlook, while also controlling for participants' psychological distress and other confounders. We also conducted stratified analyses of Models 1, 2, and 3 to understand the effects on different demographic groups, stratified by gender, Indigenous status, geographical remoteness, housing stability, financial difficulties, and self-reported mental health condition.

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## Who is Mission Australia?

**Mission Australia is a national Christian charity motivated by a shared vision of an Australia where everyone has a safe home and can thrive.**

Since 1859, we've been standing alongside people and communities in need across Australia, offering real hope that has lasting impact. Backed by our supporters, churches, partners and funders, we work together for the longterm wellbeing of anyone who needs us by collaborating with them to tackle the root causes of their challenges.

Every day we deliver homelessness crisis and prevention services, provide social and affordable housing, assist struggling families and children, address mental health issues, fight substance dependencies, support people with disability and much more.

We measure our impact, collecting evidence of what works to inform our service design and delivery, and to advocate for change.

Mission Australia believes a person's circumstances shouldn't define their future and that given the right support, everyone can reach their full potential.

That's why we stand together with Australians in need, for as long as they need us.

## Who is Orygen?

**Leading the revolution in youth mental health**

At Orygen, we believe that every young person deserves to grow into adulthood with optimal mental health. Everything we do is focused on delivering this outcome.

Orygen is Australia's centre of excellence in youth mental health and the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focused on mental ill-health in young people.

We believe in treating early and focusing on recovery. Pioneering reform to deliver real-world practical solutions.

Our research is world-leading, impactful and creates change. Working directly with young people, their families and friends, we pioneer new, positive approaches to the prevention and treatment of mental disorders.

We advocate to make sure that policy makers understand the need and cost of mental ill-health in young people.

And educate to ensure our research and evidence-based practice is used to develop innovative training programs and resources.

Our goal is to see all young people with mental ill-health get well and stay well.







**Contact Mission Australia**

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If you are a young person and need  
someone to talk with, you can contact

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7)

[Kidshelpline.com.au](http://Kidshelpline.com.au)

