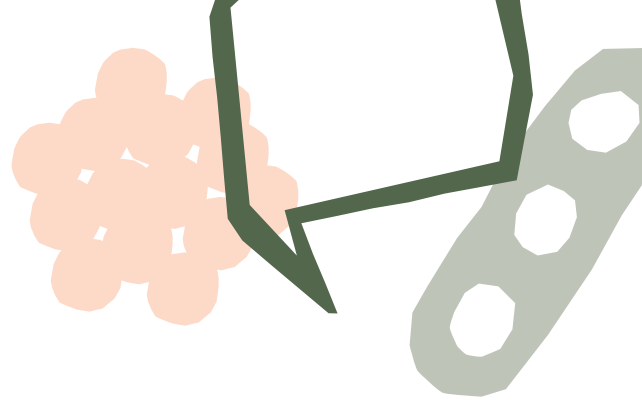


orygen



# Climate of distress

RESPONDING TO THE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH  
IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Nationally and internationally, young people have expressed high levels of concern about climate change, which has been consistently associated with psychological distress. Young Australians have reported that climate distress has impacted their functioning, their hope for the future and their mental health. Climate distress is not a clinical diagnosis, and likely includes healthy and adaptive responses that can lead to productive action against climate change, as well as clinically-relevant distress that requires greater support.

Young people have recognised that addressing climate distress needs to go beyond a focus on their individual mental health and include a focus on climate policy. While climate distress is often related to distress about the direct impacts of climate change, it can also include distress relating to a lack of climate action or the impact of media coverage about climate events impacting others. Opportunities have been identified in both clinical and non-clinical settings.

To inform this report, Orygen commissioned a YouGov survey of young Australians (16–25 years old) to understand how climate distress is impacting the mental health and wellbeing of young people. A total of 1,000 young people participated between April and May 2023.



## Issues

### Inconsistent definitions and research gaps

Climate distress may involve a range of emotions, such as anxiety, sadness and anger. Climate distress interventions should not aim to reduce climate concern, but mitigate high levels of distress and significant impacts to young people's wellbeing and functioning. A lack of consistency in definitions, terms, concepts and measures of climate distress has been a barrier to drawing clear conclusions and understanding effective interventions. Additionally, until recently, there has been little research on the intersect of climate change, young people, and mental health, and a number of research gaps remain.

### Mental health and young people missing in climate policy

Currently, the intersect of climate change, young people and mental health have not been consistently considered in national, state and territory plans. Strategies related to climate change and health have not always identified young people as a group disproportionately impacted by climate change, or incorporated youth-specific activities that address the unique needs of young people. There is a need to increase partnerships with young people to inform policy relating to climate change and health.

## A lack of support available for health professionals, schools and the media

While Australian health professionals have observed the impact of climate change on young people's mental health in their practice, there is currently little information available about effective interventions. Additionally, while schools and the media both play a role in informing young people about climate change and climate-related events, they are not currently supported by comprehensive and evidence-informed resources and advice on discussing climate change with young people safely.

“I have no future to look forward to. I fear the collapse of civilisation. I fear natural disasters like those seen increasing in frequency and severity already. This is the reality we have been told is coming, and yet nobody seems to care.” Young person

“We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it.” Young person

## Solutions

While further research is needed to understand the effectiveness of climate distress interventions, young people can be supported through opportunities across the government, the media, and the health and education system. These opportunities include:

### Research and knowledge

- Define and conceptualise climate distress.
- Address mental health and climate change research gaps and develop research infrastructure.

### Government and policy

- Include climate change in youth-related strategies and plans.
- Ensure the effective development and implementation of the National Health and Climate Strategy.
- Ensure a health impact assessment of climate-related policy and investment.
- Adapt the Annual Climate Change Statement for young people.
- Establish and resource climate change youth advisory groups in states and territories.

### Supports and activities across settings

- Develop climate distress media guidelines.
- Develop and evaluate an online climate change repository for students and teachers.
- Design and pilot a brief intervention for young people experiencing climate distress.
- Assess climate distress training needs and develop resources for health professionals.
- Fund the development of a youth-specific climate distress online hub.

## REVOLUTION IN MIND *ory gen*

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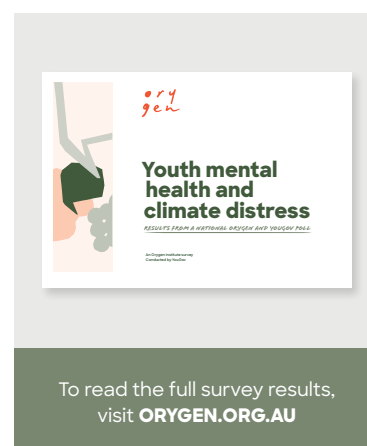
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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their Country, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today.



To read the full survey results,  
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