



Distinguishing climate change worry from state climate anxiety across 32 countries: implications for subjective wellbeing

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Abstract

The concepts of “climate change worry” and “climate change anxiety” are often used interchangeably in climate research, but they may reflect distinct emotional responses to climate change, which could potentially have different implications for public mental health. This research brief aims to empirically examine the differences between these two constructs by comparing their associations with key indicators of subjective wellbeing. Using survey data from 32 countries ($N=12,246$), we compared how strongly climate change worry and state climate anxiety were each associated with subjective wellbeing, as measured by the WHO-5 Wellbeing Index and life satisfaction. State climate anxiety showed stronger associations with both WHO-5 Wellbeing Index and life satisfaction than climate change worry. This underscores the importance of treating the two as distinct emotional responses, each with different implications for public wellbeing. These insights are especially relevant for policymakers and climate communicators, who must carefully consider the emotional tone of climate messaging to foster constructive engagement while safeguarding the psychological wellbeing of the public.

Keywords Climate Emotions · Climate Change Worry · State Climate Anxiety · Subjective Wellbeing · Mental Health

Introduction

The escalating climate crisis has sparked widespread public concern and is driving a growing demand for urgent action, as reflected in numerous global surveys (Carrington 2021; Gubbala et al. 2022; Ipsos 2022; Pew Research Center 2022; UNDP 2021). More critically, growing awareness of climate impacts has been linked to a range of emotional and mental health outcomes, including insomnia, generalized anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Crandon et al. 2022; Hickman et al. 2021; Ogunbode et al. 2022; Reyes et al. 2023; Schwartz et al. 2023). These concerns have also been linked to self-reported disruptions across multiple domains of daily life, from routine activities such as socializing and

work performance to broader life considerations, including reproductive intentions (Dillarstone et al. 2023; Hickman et al. 2021). Recognizing the impact of negative climate emotions on public wellbeing, stakeholders are increasingly integrating climate-related psychological challenges into broader environmental and sustainability initiatives (Martin et al. 2024; United Nations 2015).

Recent research on climate emotions strongly focuses on the concepts of 'climate change worry' and 'climate change anxiety' (often referred to as 'climate anxiety'; Martin et al. 2024). Despite frequent usage of these terms, there remains limited clarity on how these terms are conceptually and empirically distinguished. Climate change worry is often conceptualized as a component of, or as closely related to,

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