

ECO-ANXIETY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

Introduction

Eco-anxiety refers to negative emotional reactions to the environmental crisis of climate change and environmental degradation, whether directly experienced or not (Gago et al., 2024). It is considered a natural human response to a changing climate (Bhullar et al., 2022; Marks & Hickman, 2023). However, eco-anxiety is also recognised as an emerging health risk in Europe and is viewed as a climate change-related occupational safety and health (OSH) concern, affecting workers' psychological wellbeing and mental health (CCOHS, 2023; European Climate and Health Observatory, 2022a).

According to the Eurobarometer (European Union 2023)¹, 77% citizens consider climate change to be a very serious problem. The countries rating climate change frequently as a serious global problem include Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Finland, and Sweden (European Union, 2023)². Thus, understanding eco-anxiety and taking action, both from a societal and a European OSH policy and practice perspective, is important. However, there is limited research on this topic in Europe (European Climate and Health Observatory, 2022a). Even less attention has been given to eco-anxiety as an emerging risk for workers' wellbeing and health at work. OSH practitioners (OSH managers and workers' representatives) need to begin considering eco-anxiety as part of their responsibility to provide safe and healthy working environments.

The prevalence of eco-anxiety has not been measured with representative occupational surveys. However, eco-anxiety has significant implications for overall wellbeing and health among the general population. A meta-analysis conducted by Gago et al. (2024) revealed a moderate negative correlation between the level of climate anxiety and psychological wellbeing. Eco-anxiety has also been linked with feelings of apathy or paralysis (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Furthermore, a review conducted by Boluda-Verdú et al. (2022) found a clear association between eco-anxiety and symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia as well as cognitive-emotional and functional impairment. However, research evidence on the impacts of climate change on mental health and wellbeing is still limited (Lawrance et al., 2021; White et al., 2023). Assessing eco-anxiety poses a challenge due to the variety of available measures, underlining the novelty of the topic (see e.g. Gago et al., 2024).

It is also worth noting that eco-anxiety can be a driver of change at the individual, and even, societal level. In fact, individuals experiencing eco-anxiety can be motivated to take action towards addressing climate change (Powell & Rao, 2023). Research indicates that eco-anxiety is associated with individuals' proactive action towards the environment (Budziszewska & Jonsson, 2021; Cunsolo et al., 2020). In addition, eco-anxiety, as measured by surveys, shows a positive correlation with climate action (Sangervo et al., 2022). As such, experience of it can motivate environmental actions, since it provides a way to address climate change, thereby helping individuals cope with their anxiety (Cunsolo et al., 2020; Pihkala, 2022).

A healthy and prosperous environment is connected with human health (UNEP, 2019), and eco-anxiety highlights the mental health impacts of the deteriorating state of the environment. The effects of climate change are increasingly impacting everyday life in Europe (EEA, 2024), including the effects of citizens' mental health (European Climate and Health Observatory, 2022a). Due to the possible negative health and wellbeing impacts of eco-anxiety, this emerging issue should be acknowledged by OSH community. Responding to eco-anxiety requires OSH practitioners and decision-makers to provide support for those experiencing eco-anxiety. Moreover, addressing climate change requires action from both policymakers and workplaces, and it is vital that OSH practitioners are capable and prepared to ensure safe, healthy and resilient working conditions in times of environmental change.

¹ Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2954>

² Ibid

Box 1: Key concepts for the topic of this paper

Eco-anxiety: negative emotional reactions to the environmental crisis of climate change and environmental degradation, whether directly experienced or not (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Gago et al., 2024). Closely related terms to eco-anxiety are climate anxiety (Pihkala 2020) and eco-grief (Noy et al., 2022).

Climate change worry: active and emotional engagement with climate change and feelings of being personally troubled by its effects (Bouman et al., 2020).

Environmental degradation: deterioration in environmental quality from ambient concentrations of pollutants and other activities and processes such as improper land use and natural disasters (UNEP, 2019). Examples of environmental degradation are deforestation or biodiversity loss, for instance.

Environmental action: efforts that harm the environment as little as possible or even benefit it, or reduce the threat of environmental change (Following Cunsolo et al., 2020; Steg & Vlek 2009).

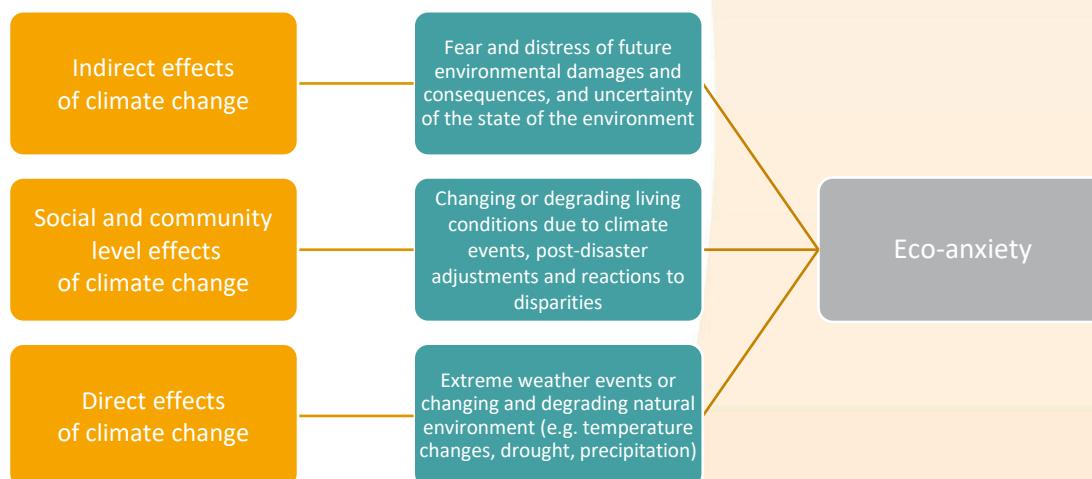
This article discusses eco-anxiety in the context of working life and highlights the current and potential future OSH implications of eco-anxiety both for policy and practice.

Defining eco-anxiety

Eco-anxiety is considered a mental health impact that arises as a consequence of climate change (CCOHS, 2023; European Climate and Health Observatory, 2022a). However, there are different definitions for the concept. Eco-anxiety generally refers to the intense emotions associated with climate change and other environmental crises, and the awareness an individual has of them, but there has been a call for more conceptual clarity (Coffey et al., 2021). Usher and colleagues (2019, p. 1233), describe eco-anxiety as 'a specific form of anxiety relating to stress or distress caused by environmental changes and our knowledge of them'. The American psychological association defines eco-anxiety as 'a chronic fear of environmental doom' (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 68). Thus, eco-anxiety is often viewed as a negative phenomenon associated with fear, distress and anxiety towards the negative consequences of climate change.

As illustrated in Figure 1, eco-anxiety can be experienced indirectly, directly or on a community level (CCOHS, 2023). Indirectly experienced eco-anxiety refers to negative emotions, such as fear and distress, about future consequences of climate change without being directly affected by climate change (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). Climate and environmental change, however, also directly affect mental health. For example, as a consequence of experiencing extreme weather events, these direct mental health effects may further intertwine with eco-anxiety (European Climate and Health Observatory, 2022a). In addition, eco-anxiety can also be experienced at the community level as a consequence of worsening living conditions due to climate change related events (CCOHS, 2023; Clayton et al., 2017).

Figure 1: Potential causes of eco-anxiety (direct, indirect and social and community level effects) following CCOHS 2023 and Doherty and Clayton (2011)



The need to include both direct and indirect consequences of climate change on mental health policy is underlined by the European Climate and Health Observatory (2022a). Extreme climate events, such as floods, droughts or heat waves, are expected to increase in Europe (EEA, 2024). When discussing eco-anxiety and its impacts on health and wellbeing, it is important to consider both the distress caused by the changing local environment and working conditions and the distress and fear caused by climate change without being directly affected.

The concept of eco-anxiety is closely linked to general anxiety, a form of mental distress. This linkage can lead to the medicalisation of eco-anxiety, meaning that a condition previously not considered to require medical treatment is being treated as a medical issue. In fact, some scholars view eco-anxiety as a natural human reaction to the fear of future environment-related risks (Bhullar et al., 2022; Cunsolo et al., 2020; Noy et al., 2022; Van Valkengoed, 2023). Nevertheless, despite ongoing conceptual debates, eco-anxiety has become a widely used concept to describe the negative emotions stemming from the awareness of the environmental crisis and its impact on individuals and ecosystems.

Previous research on workers' eco-anxiety and implications for OSH

Research on the working population's eco-anxiety is limited. Given that eco-anxiety can be associated with both distress and engagement in different forms of environmental action, it is relevant to consider both consequences in the context of work.

Prevalence of eco-anxiety among the EU working population

The European Social Survey conducted between 2020 and 2022 revealed that 42.8% of participants across 25 countries reported feeling very or extremely worried about climate change, which researchers consider an indicator of eco-anxiety (Niedzwiedz & Katikireddi, 2023). Regarding the findings on the prevalence of eco-anxiety, it is important to note that the methodological quality of studies is questionable due to the use of various survey instruments for measuring eco-anxiety (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022). For example, in their meta-analysis, Cago et al. (2024) mention six different multi-item measures that aim to capture emotional reactions to climate change, climate crisis or eco-crisis.

There are some country-specific studies addressing the prevalence of climate change related emotions and distress. For example, a survey of workers conducted in Germany and the UK (N=4003) in March and April 2022 revealed that 47% of surveyed workers in Germany and 42% in the UK reported feeling quite or very anxious about climate change. Moreover, a total of 42% feel fearful of climate change, whereas 43% of German respondents and 50% from the UK also voice that they are hopeful about climate change (Trappmann et al., 2023). A recent representative employee survey conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and Statistics Finland among a random sample of the Finnish working population (n=1917) reveals that 30% of the respondents are concerned about the negative environmental consequences of their jobs (Moilanen et al., 2024). However, there are no longitudinal studies investigating workers' eco-anxiety or related environmental emotions and how they might change in time.

Eco-anxiety and OSH

From the OSH perspective, research on eco-anxiety and its implications seems to be very scarce, although eco-anxiety is considered a potential challenge for OSH (CCOHS, 2023). A scoping review on climate change, mental health and workplace behaviours conducted by Brooks & Greenberg (2023) found only five published articles discussing the topic. Three of the studies were conducted in New Zealand, and one each in the United States and Australia. Four of the articles relate to the effects of natural hazards on mental health, such as job stress and burnout, after experiencing an extreme climate event (Brooks & Greenberg, 2023). The article by Noy et al. (2022) examines the impact of climate change on the mental health and wellbeing of workers who have not directly experienced a natural hazard but who work with environmental topics.

Additionally, two occupational surveys conducted in Germany and Finland sought to evaluate the potential of eco-anxiety as an OSH risk. The representative survey from Germany provided insights into the perspectives of managers (N=453) and employees (N=533) on the connection between climate change and OSH within their respective companies (Klotz et al., 2022). Respondents identified psychological stress responses and mental disorders at work as potential risks from climate change, with over 30% largely or fully agreeing with the statements related to this concern. Additionally,

managers rated the risks slightly higher than workers. In the survey of OSH practitioners (N=521) conducted in Finland in 2021, 20% of the surveyed practitioners identified climate change-related worry and mental overload as a risk factor for the workplace, with an additional 7% considering it an emerging risk for the near future (FIOH, 2022). Furthermore, less than 10% of respondents considered workers to be worried due to climate change (FIOH, 2022). Notably, in Finland, the perception of OSH practitioners regarding the level of workers' climate change worry are inferior and do not align with the actual levels of worry experienced in the working population (Moilanen et al., 2024).

Specific groups of workers more at risk of experiencing eco-anxiety

The mental health effects of climate change have been studied in the context of OSH (Schulte et al., 2023), but previous examinations do not necessarily distinguish eco-anxiety as a separate component. Some evidence is available on occupational groups that experience symptoms of eco-anxiety, such as distress and negative emotions, because of environmental or climate change. These findings are not based on a systematic analysis of various occupations, and the literature is not exhaustive. However, they do indicate in which occupations workers might be more vulnerable.

Extreme weather events and environmental change can trigger eco-anxiety in workers whose livelihood is dependent on ecosystems, or who work in nature. Climate change has been found to cause distress and anxiety among land-dependent workers, namely farmers and other agricultural workers (Abunyewah et al., 2023; White et al., 2023). Although extreme weather conditions also affect the wellbeing of European farmers (Euronews, 2023), there is currently no evidence regarding the eco-anxiety of European farmers and its potential consequences.

Occupational groups such as climate researchers (Head & Harada, 2017), corporate social responsibility managers (Collard, 2020) and workers in the environmental sector (Fraser et al., 2013; Noy et al., 2022) can experience feelings of hopelessness and distress while working with environmental topics and information on a regular basis. Environmental sector workers (Noy et al., 2022) and mental health professionals (Li et al., 2022) can feel helpless when they are unable to prevent climate change and its consequences or improve environmental issues. A study of climate scientists found that scientists have developed emotional management tools in order to cope with climate change knowledge (Head & Harada, 2017). As such, some workers may experience eco-anxiety indirectly, even though climate change would not influence their physical working environment.

It is possible that some workers have eco-anxiety when climate change affects or is evaluated to affect the communities they work with. The inability to provide necessary support for those suffering as a consequence of climate change might be one element of eco-anxiety among the workers in the health and social care sector (Powers & Engstrom, 2020; Samuel et al., 2022). Powers & Engstrom (2020) view that social workers' eco-anxiety may increase when they realise their clients' potential suffering due to climate change related events. Workers may have eco-anxiety due to their customers' or students' eco-anxiety as well. Noy and colleagues (2022) also show that eco-anxiety may impact workers through project partners, who grieve the state of the environment and seek support. Also, teachers may need help and tools to support their students' eco-anxiety (Jimenez & Moorhead, 2021; Verlie et al., 2021). Despite individuals potentially having to deal with their own eco-anxiety, some workers may need to deal with their colleagues' or students' climate change emotions at work.

There is little research on eco-anxiety at the workplace level (Noy et al., 2022; Verlie et al., 2021). For instance, there is no research on how eco-anxiety affects occupational health, or absenteeism and turnover of personnel (Brooks & Greenberg, 2023). However, the occupational fields of healthcare, disaster relief and military provide organisational structures for workers to incorporate and manage emotional distress, and it is suggested that adoption of these procedures might be helpful in other fields to cope with eco-anxiety (Gordon et al., 2019). It is important to conduct future comparative studies on eco-anxiety in the European working population to identify groups who may increasingly face eco-anxiety at work and find methods to support these groups.

There is some evidence on specific groups among the general population who are more vulnerable to eco-anxiety (White et al., 2023). Land-dependent, indigenous people, young people, people in disadvantaged communities, people with strong connectivity with nature, women, older adults and climate migrants are more prone to experience eco-anxiety (Clayton et al., 2017; Coffey et al., 2021; White et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2020). Furthermore, those who have physically experienced the effects of climate change, for example flooding, are also more prone to suffer from eco-anxiety (Coffey et al., 2021). Although there is no research on how eco-anxiety affects children and youth (under the working age) in the long term (Aylward et al., 2021), these are important groups to follow up on since they are

the future workforce. According to a global study of 10 countries (including France, Finland and Portugal from the EU) surveying 16–25 years old young adults, 45% view that climate-change-related feelings negatively affect their daily life and functioning, and almost two-thirds assess that the government is not doing enough to avoid a climate catastrophe (Hickman et al., 2021). Future research will provide more evidence on whether eco-anxiety experienced by young people affects their labour market transitions.

Eco-anxiety driving sustainable change at work and in the society: a resource for OSH?

In the context of OSH and eco-anxiety, caring for workers is important. However, it is important to simultaneously improve the global action to prevent environmental degradation and climate change, which are the main reasons for eco-anxiety (Marks & Hickman, 2023). Global policy agendas on sustainability transformations call for multi-level change in the society involving citizens, businesses and policymakers to solve environmental sustainability challenges, since current actions to halt climate change and environmental degradation are insufficient (GSDR, 2023; UNEP, 2022). In the EU, almost nine out of ten citizens view that greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced to achieve a climate-neutrality target by the year 2050, and 67% view that the national government is not doing enough to tackle climate change (Eurobarometer 2023). The target of OSH policymakers and practitioners to incorporate and prevent OSH risks could be reflected with these European and global agendas of sustainability transformations. Could actions on behalf of the environment be strengthened by OSH, not only as a response to eco-anxiety but also as a means to ensure safe and healthy working conditions in times of environmental change?

Addressing eco-anxiety at the workplace has potential to bring co-benefits for the environment, workplace and OSH. Environmental concerns and eco-anxiety have been researched from the viewpoint of their constructive effects, such as the role of eco-anxiety motivating the adoption of different forms of more environmentally sustainable ways of living and working (Cunsolo et al., 2020; Mathers-Jones & Todd, 2023; Trezise & Richardson, 2023). Engaging in meaningful environmental action, along with grieving and distancing, are considered as coping mechanisms for eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2022), and action may reduce one's own feelings of anxiety (Samuel et al., 2022). Therefore, increasing opportunities for workers to participate in meaningful environmental initiatives at work has the potential to improve both the state of the environment and mitigate employees' eco-anxiety³. Moreover, workers who prioritise environmental issues may shift to jobs aligned with their values (Trezise & Richardson, 2023). A Swedish interview study found that eco-anxiety can drive some individuals to leave the formal labour market for more sustainable living (Vlasov et al., 2023). However, climate-oriented workplace actions can reduce turnover among environmentally-conscious workers (John et al., 2024). Many workers are willing to contribute to their workplace's environmental goals (Polman, 2023) and feel motivated when they can engage in climate actions at work (Kite Insight, 2022). OSH practitioners could have a role in improving workers' opportunities for participation in an organisation's environmental work, since it can have benefits for both the organisation, OSH processes and worker wellbeing.

How OSH policy, OSH practitioners and healthcare can respond to eco-anxiety

This section discusses how eco-anxiety could be tackled (recognised, evaluated, coped with and followed up on) in working life. Key stakeholders in this context are decision-makers in OSH policymaking, employers, OSH practitioners (including OSH managers and workers' representatives) and healthcare personnel.

OSH policy

The efforts to address eco-anxiety through legislation and policy are still in the very early stages of development. Currently, only a few countries of the 32 in the European Environment Agency have included measures related to eco-anxiety in their national climate change adaptation or health policies. These countries include Hungary (both in adaptation and health policy); Estonia, Norway and Turkey in adaptation policy; and Finland, Greece and Lithuania in health policy (European Climate and Health

³ It is important to note that turning eco-anxiety into hopeful and meaningful action is not straightforward. It often requires two elements: first, the resources to deal with the complex and negative emotions of eco-anxiety, and second, a sufficient amount of meaningful environmental activities in which to engage (Pihkala, 2019). As a consequence, workers need sufficient capacities and an action perceived as meaningful so that workplace environmental action has the potential to help with eco-anxiety.

Observatory, 2022b). Although eco-anxiety has negative health and wellbeing consequences, its comprehensive inclusion in national policies is still limited. However, based on current research, eco-anxiety can be considered as a potential new OSH risk, and thus, it may need to be considered in future OSH policies.

As mentioned earlier, eco-anxiety can have both paralysing and motivating effects (Sangervo et al., 2022), driving individuals (including decision-makers) to take more climate action. These actions can manifest in various ways, such as legal actions against governments and companies for their inadequate efforts to address climate change, often in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Individuals may also make career-related choices, such as selecting occupations, businesses or workplaces that align with their environmental values or provide work on environmental or climate topics. Conversely, the potential of eco-anxiety as a factor affecting work performance requires further attention from the research. Overall, both motivating and impairing consequences of eco-anxiety can have a range of implications for the labour market. Decision-makers should measure and keep track of the consequences of eco-anxiety, and plan and implement adequate policies for prevention and support.

OSH practitioners and employers

As noted earlier, some workers experience eco-anxiety in their work. Moreover, eco-anxiety has been found to be associated with negative effects for health and wellbeing among the general population. OSH practitioners and employers may have a role in understanding the potential connections between eco-anxiety and work and developing methods for addressing it at the workplace, if needed.

The first step required is raising awareness among OSH practitioners regarding eco-anxiety and its potential consequences to workers. More research is needed to assess how prevalent eco-anxiety is among the working population, the extent to which it is caused by their occupation, and how eco-anxiety might influence wellbeing and productivity at work even if it is not directly work-related. This should be done in collaboration with other workplace actors such as HR and management (i.e. employers). Awareness raising improves the competences of OSH practitioners to embed new eco-anxiety related procedures into the current OSH policies and processes in the workplace. Teperi (2019) have investigated the crucial phases in transforming safety practices from being technology- and risk-centric to a human-oriented and solution-based approach. These developments can help guide OSH practices to become more aware of their environmental connections. Awareness and skill, in addition to the commitment and motivation of OSH practitioners, is of high importance in the OSH management of new challenges such as eco-anxiety.

OSH practitioners can begin their eco-anxiety prevention work by surveying workers' experiences of eco-anxiety. This provides valuable information on the prevalence of eco-anxiety in the workplace and the needs and challenges of the workers. Despite the differences between the survey instruments mentioned in the introduction (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022), there are already validated **eco-anxiety measures** that have the potential to be applied in workplace level surveys. Results of workplace surveys and discussions with workers can provide valuable information on workers' needs and proposals for solutions, which may vary depending on the workplace and its context.

OSH practitioners can provide **information and training** to workers on eco-anxiety and how best to cope with it. Brooks & Greenberg (2023) argue that workplace social support might mitigate workers' eco-anxiety. If measures show that there is eco-anxiety in the workplace, it could be addressed by OSH as a shared distress between employees in an organisation, even though there is less research conducted on eco-anxiety as a group experience (Noy et al., 2022). When OSH practitioners address eco-anxiety collectively in the workplace, it can bring benefits to the work organisation. By discussing and developing solutions for eco-anxiety together, the capacities of OSH can be further strengthened. Moreover, collective discussion can simultaneously build trust and compassion in the organisation. Indeed, earlier research findings indicate that addressing eco-anxiety or environmental concerns at the workplace is not easy for an individual. For instance, colleagues may lack interest and addressing concerns can disrupt social norms in the workplace (Noy et al., 2022; Trezise & Richardson, 2023). If workplace surveys show that eco-anxiety is not experienced in the workplace, addressing it collectively might be unnecessary. Self-help guidance exists on how individuals can manage difficult emotions related to eco-anxiety (e.g. Pihkala, 2019; Ray, 2020). Individual mechanisms to deal with eco-anxiety include action, emotional engagement and self-care (Pihkala, 2022).

Noy and colleagues (2022) present the idea that workplaces can **set mental health and wellbeing plans that address eco-anxiety** or include eco-anxiety as part of general mental health programmes.

Mental health risk plans suggested by EU-OSHA provide useful guidance (EU OSHA, 2024). Workplace plans to address eco-anxiety could include resources and training for workers on how to mitigate eco-anxiety, and they could also include group debriefing sessions with co-workers (Noy et al., 2022, p. 13), an idea also proposed by Gordon and colleagues (2019). Such organisation-level peer-based mental first aid⁴ procedures have already been used in workplaces, after critical incidents, for example, and they have been reported as useful and easy-to-use (Teperi et al., 2019). Therefore, it would be relevant to research and develop these processes further, in the context of eco-anxiety. If workplace programmes are put in place, as illustrated by Noy and colleagues (2022), their effective functioning requires a certain level of trust and psychological safety for workers to feel secure to speak up of difficult emotions, such as eco-anxiety. A pre-existing and fair, no-blame safety culture paves the way for constructive and solution-based collaborative discussions at workplaces on issues such as eco-anxiety (Teperi et al., 2023).

Workplace risks assessments are a well-established OSH practice and eco-anxiety could be considered as a potential OSH risk to be assessed. Embedding it into regular workplace risk assessment would ensure that eco-anxiety is followed up. For instance, risk assessments could provide information to monitor changes in workers' levels of eco-anxiety, which could trigger actions such as updates on information or specific training provided to workers. In other words, to systematically address eco-anxiety as part of OSH requires it to be framed as a risk that must be systematically managed. Measures and tools for managing eco-anxiety could be implemented as a part of safety management systems, defined as a system containing management principles and activities for controlling risks and preventing accidents at work (Li & Guldenmund, 2018). Applying a safety management system could provide ideas for proactive actions, such as preparedness and the creation of a just and fair workplace culture for open discussions (Dekker, 2007; Edmondson, 2019).

Finally, **routine assessment of work-related mental health risks** along with the reporting and analysis of these risks and incidents, should be conducted in a manner similar to traditional practices for technical safety or biological and chemical risks. It is essential to integrate environmental issues into workplace processes and practices with a holistic approach rather than leaving it solely to concerned individuals (Van Valkengoed, 2023). It will be imperative to conduct additional research on these issues from the OSH perspective in the future.

Embedding eco-anxiety into established OSH processes would ensure continuous learning on eco-anxiety and on the best ways to address it among OSH practitioners.

Occupational health services

While the organisation of healthcare services for the working population varies across the EU, these services have a role in supporting workers with eco-anxiety (see e.g. Cunsolo et al., 2020; Samuel et al., 2022). The effects of eco-anxiety on functional capacities (particularly the ability to work) require further attention from the healthcare sector (Cunsolo et al., 2020; Noy et al., 2022; Van Valkengoed, 2023). Healthcare workers may benefit from specific skills and training on how to support patients' eco-anxiety (Cunsolo et al., 2020; Silva & Coburn, 2023), but they can also use methods they already have, while acknowledging and affirming the emotions and concerns expressed by patients. Moreover, Li and colleagues (2022) provide means for mental health professionals to support patients with eco-anxiety, since some seek support for coping with eco-anxiety from mental health services (Hoppe et al., 2023) or psychotherapy (Budziszewska & Jonsson, 2022). For instance, a survey conducted among mental health professionals in the state of Minnesota in the United States estimates that about half of their patients in treatment, regardless of the diagnosis, refer to climate change related issues (Hoppe et al., 2023). Altogether, more research is needed on workers referring to healthcare services for eco-anxiety related reasons, and how eco-anxiety affects the functional capacity of individuals, particularly in the context of work in the short and longer term (e.g. younger adults affected by eco-anxiety).

⁴ Mental first aid (MFA) = term 'defusing' is used in crisis psychology (Mitchell & Everly, 2000) to refer to structured colleague-to-colleague discussion revealing thoughts, feelings and symptoms right after critical incidents. The MFA is trained to peers in workplace, for a low threshold recovery. Benefits are found in well-established implementation in school sector in Finland (Teperi et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The current projections for the state of the global climate and environment suggest that eco-anxiety poses a challenge for OSH in the future. So far, efforts to limit global mean temperature from rising and adapt to the changing climate are currently considered inadequate (IPCC, 2023; UNEP, 2022). It can be anticipated that a significant portion of the European population will continue to experience distress regarding their future and wellbeing in the face of a changing environment and climate. Eco-anxiety may become an emerging risk to OSH. It is important for OSH practitioners and policymakers to incorporate eco-anxiety into their monitoring, evaluation and anticipation plans and closely monitor its consequences in the workforce.

While it is recognised that eco-anxiety and concern about climate change can be linked to positive outcomes, such as pro-environmental behaviours and increased hope (Sangervo et al., 2022), it has negative consequences on the health and wellbeing of a significant number of people who experience it (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022), requiring some individuals to seek professional help to cope (Van Valkengoed, 2023). Involving climate-conscious individuals in the workplace can offer solutions for OSH and address local environmental challenges. In addition, it can improve the wellbeing of concerned individuals by engaging them in meaningful environmental actions.

There is a general lack of research conducted in Europe on eco-anxiety (European Climate and Health Observatory, 2022a), and in particular, there are many gaps in the literature discussing OSH and eco-anxiety. Systematic assessments of the effects of eco-anxiety on occupational health, wellbeing and work in different sectors and age groups are missing, as noted by Brooks & Greenberg (2023). Longitudinal analysis of the topic with sufficient follow-up would provide further insight on the consequences and antecedents of eco-anxiety. Although eco-anxiety might become part of an individual's overall stress or worries, it might also have long-lasting impacts on health, wellbeing, or behavioural outcomes as well as on work performance, which should be better understood. It is essential that OSH practitioners – whose responsibility is to take care of workers' safety, health, and wellbeing at work – fully acknowledge eco-anxiety and its various consequences for workers. Future research is needed on workplace interventions that could reduce eco-anxiety, and what elements should be tailored to specific job characteristics.

Eco-anxiety is a phenomenon on the rise known to affect mental health and wellbeing, and potentially to increase individual and community interest and engagement in action to conserve and preserve the environment. The negative health and wellbeing consequences and risks of eco-anxiety as well as its power in driving change should be acted upon by OSH policymakers and worker and employer representatives. OSH policymakers and practitioners have a role in supporting workers suffering from eco-anxiety. The future engagement of OSH practitioners, employers and workers in environmental issues may provide opportunities for workplaces to better cope with eco-anxiety from an organisational perspective, providing improved insights on how to best support workers with eco-anxiety. Overall, ensuring a healthy and safe environment is essential for human flourishing and for healthy and safe workplaces, now and in the future.

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Authors: Fanni Moilanen, Jarno Turunen, Anna-Maria Teperi (FIOH). Finnish Institute of Occupational Health

Project management: Annick Starren, Nada Vilahur - European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).

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