

# Exploring eco-anxiety in Gen Z to inspire climate action.



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**next**

Defining

# Eco-anxiety



**“A chronic fear of environmental doom”**

American Psychological Association (2017)



# Eco-anxiety

## The psychology

Eco-anxiety is a chronic fear of environmental doom. But it's not just anxiety, the term can also come with "feelings of loss, helplessness, frustration, and guilt, as the sufferers feel they are unable to stop climate change".

Eco anxiety has been on the rise for roughly 10 years and is more prevalent in Gen Z - they're young enough to be born into a world falling apart, but old enough to understand something must be done. Mala Rao and Richard Powell (Imperial College London, Primary Care and Public Health) note young people feel eco-anxiety a disproportionate amount more than other age groups.

Global research has found that UK Gen Z are relatively equal to other countries in their climate anxiety. The most worried markets are those seeing the physical effects of climate breakdown around them.

Eco-anxiety is a healthy response to a pathological problem, although the literature suggests it can be paralysing. Sufferers are so consumed with stress to act – which is not good news for taking climate action.

“Eco anxiety is not a mental health problem that needs to be fixed or cured, rather it is a healthy response to the situation we are facing.”

**Caroline Hickman**

Author of “How to cope with eco anxiety” (2020) Friends of the Earth UK.



Nearly **60%** of young people globally said they felt very worried or extremely worried about the future. (Bath University, 2021)

Influencers like Greta Thunberg are a 'voice' for Gen Z.

# Eco-anxiety, a complete picture.

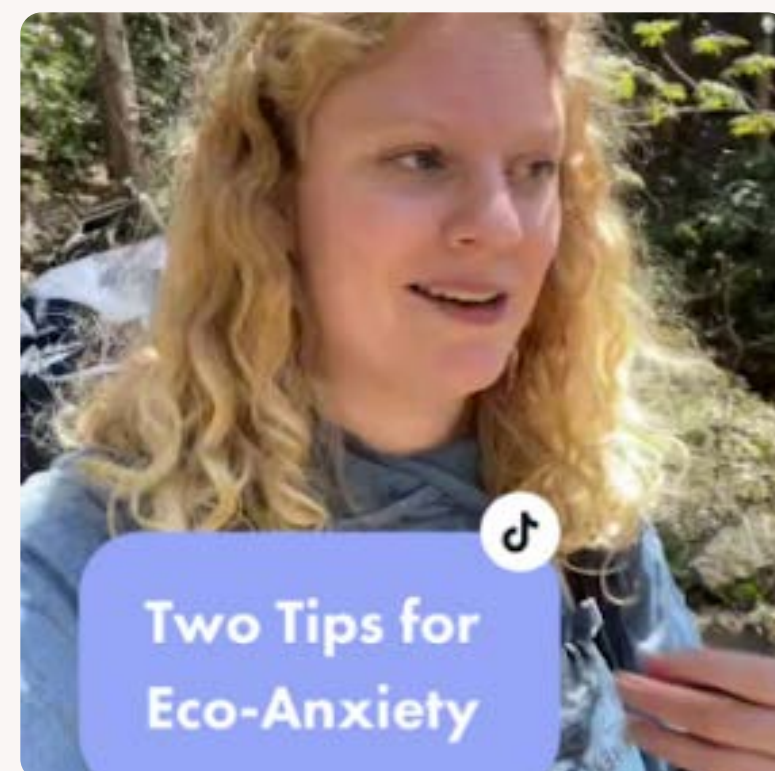
Eco-anxiety is used as a catch-all term for feeling emotions around climate change. In popular culture, climate concern is often labelled eco-anxiety.

However, research has identified nuanced eco-emotions – which represent different feelings we can have around climate anxiety. Although the research is in its infancy, there's a focus on three common eco-emotions. They are not mutually exclusive but **eco-anxiety feels the most prevalent in culture today.**

The extent to which they inspire change can also differ, with recent research suggesting that eco-anger and eco-depression are more likely to inspire action than eco-anxiety.

“While all negative emotions are unpleasant, their degree of activation differs. **Eco-anger is uniquely associated with greater engagement in both personal and collective pro-climate behaviors, while eco-depression and eco-anxiety were unrelated to personal behavior, and eco-anxiety predicted lower engagement in collective action.**”

Stanley et al, 2021



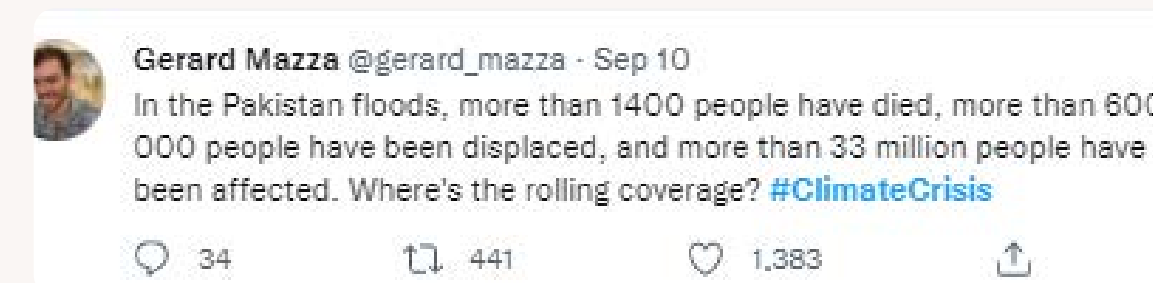
## Eco-anxiety

‘anxious, afraid’



## Eco-depression

‘depressed, miserable’



## Eco-anger

‘angry, frustrated’

# Negativity + Eco-anxiety

## Too much = Paralysis

One hypothesis presented in the proposal was that negativity leads to inactivity and that a more positive mindset would help encourage action.

The results from the desk research confirm this hypothesis ONLY IF an individual does not pass a certain threshold. Passing this threshold induces a state known as “paralysis”, in which an individual becomes overwhelmed and no-longer engages in climate issues or pro-environmental behaviours.

**If we are to harness the power of eco-anxiety, and aim to use that negative emotion to inspire action, we must understand when eco-anxiety becomes overwhelming and tips into inducing despair/paralysis.**

“**Psychological responses, such as conflict avoidance, fear, helplessness, and resignation, are serious barriers to collective action to mitigate further global warming and to build resilience and adaptation strategies.**”

**Mala Rao & Richard A Powell**

Authors of the climate crisis and the rise of eco-anxiety (2021) The BMJ Opinion.

# Eco-anxiety in the UK.

**UK Gen Z are relatively equal to other markets in their climate anxiety. The most worried markets are those seeing effects around them.**

A 10 market study (UK, Finland, France, the US, Australia, Portugal, Brazil, India, the Philippines and Nigeria) led by Bath university revealed the UK feels similarly to the Global average on environmental concerns.

There’s an undoubtable fear across the world amongst this age group that the future of the planet is frightening, and other people have failed to take care of the planet.

The countries of highest concern are in the Global South and more directly impacted by climate change, with Portugal taking the lead. A country reminded of climate change heavily, having experienced multiple wildfires.

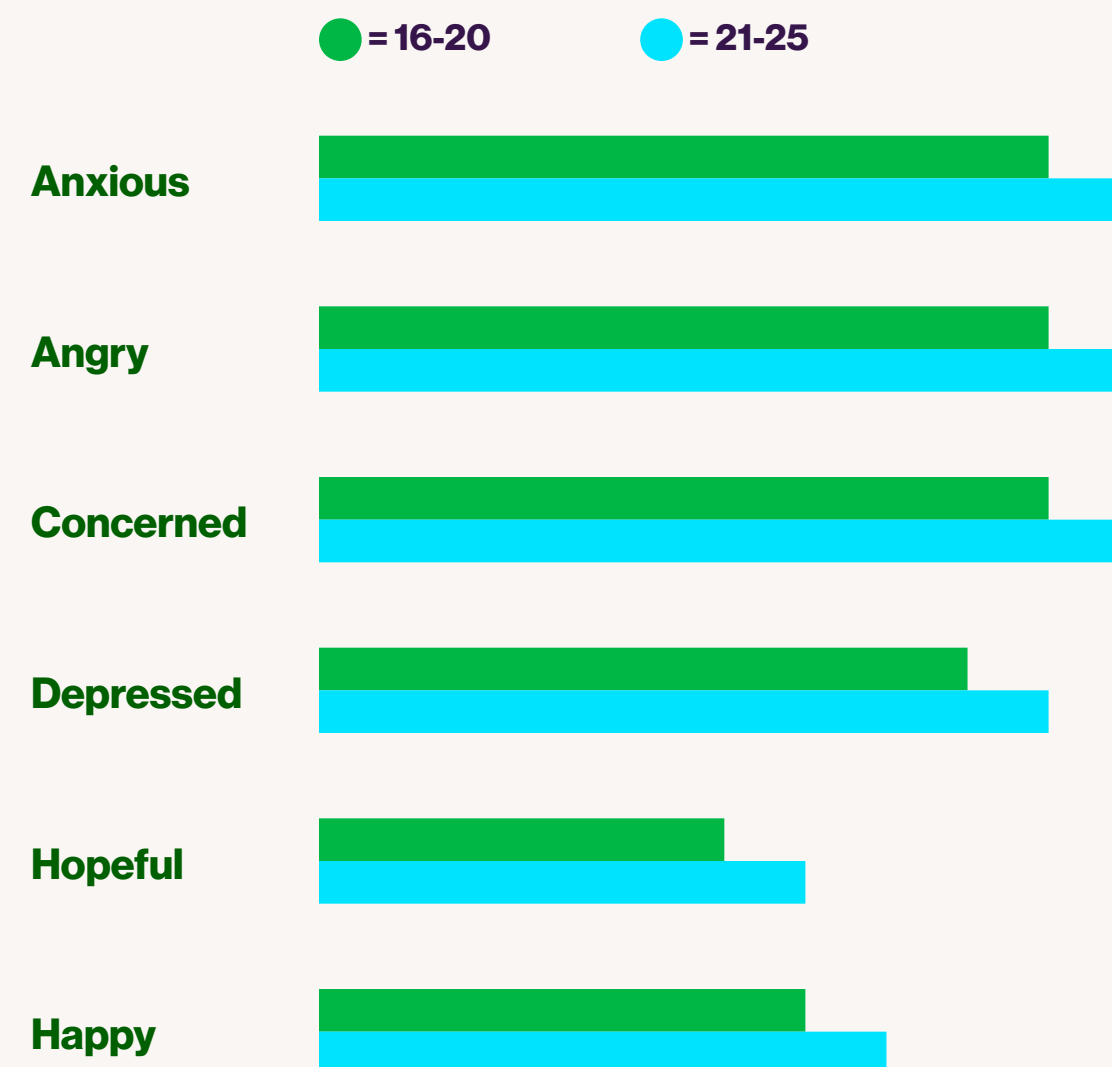
In 2020 in the UK, more than half (57%) of child psychiatrists are seeing young people distressed about the climate. (The Guardian, 2020)

- People have failed to care for the planet: 83% agreed globally / **UK 80%**
- The future is frightening: 75% / **UK 72%**
- Governments are failing young people: 65% / **UK 65%**
- Governments can be trusted: 31% / **UK 28%**

# Eco-anxiety is prevalent amongst Gen Z.

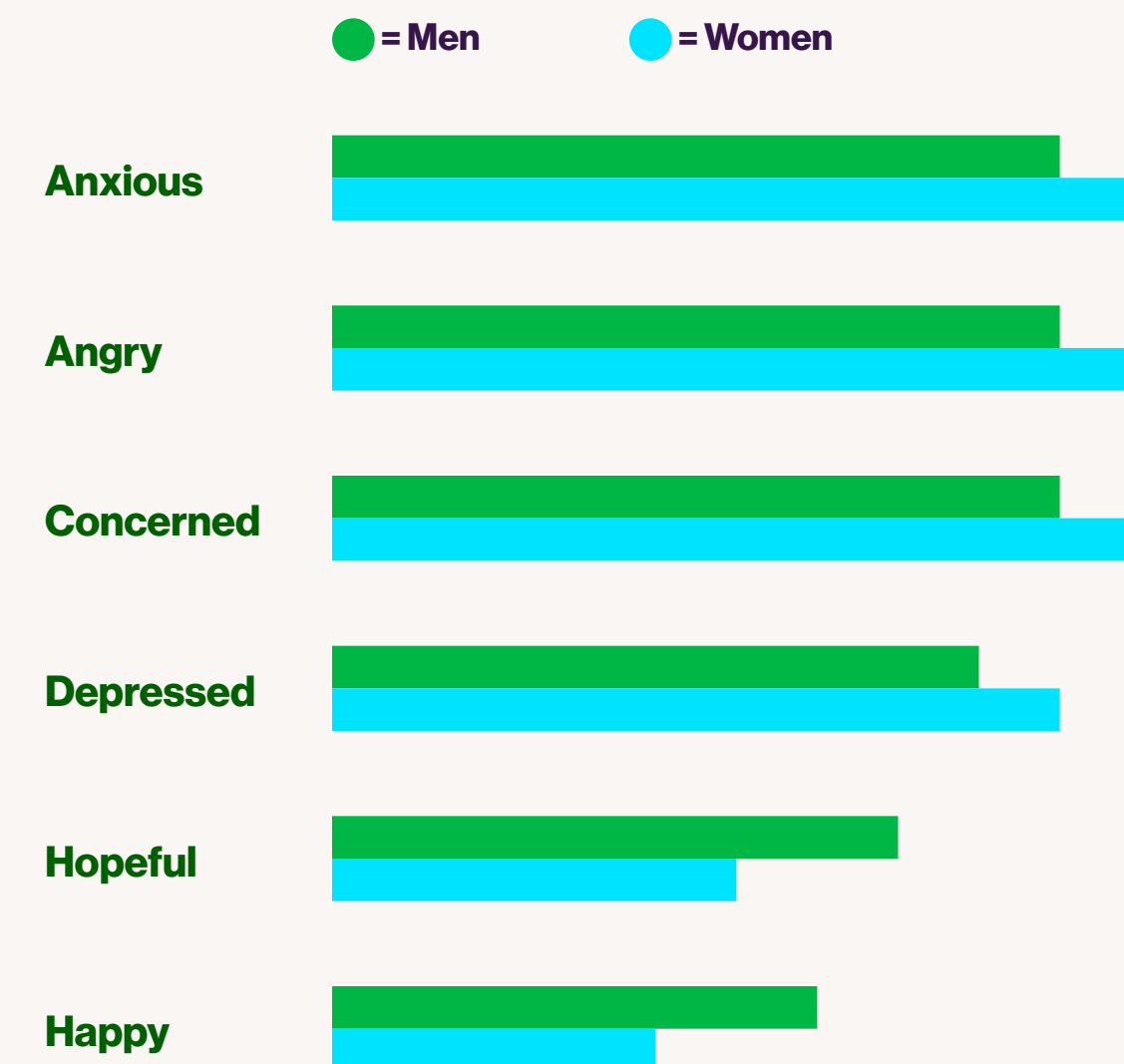
When asked to about how climate change makes them feel, Gen Z said it is most likely to provoke feelings of anxiety, anger, concern and depression. Positive eco-emotions, hope and happiness, also feature in the mix, but are felt less intensely.

Women are more likely than men to have felt a negative eco-emotion. Older Gen Z are more likely than younger Gen Z to feel any eco-emotion.



**i** **2 in 5** felt an emotional response towards climate change within the last week. **Rising to 3 in 5** in the last fortnight.

**i** **37%** experienced eco-anxiety in the last week. Rising to **59%** in the last fortnight.

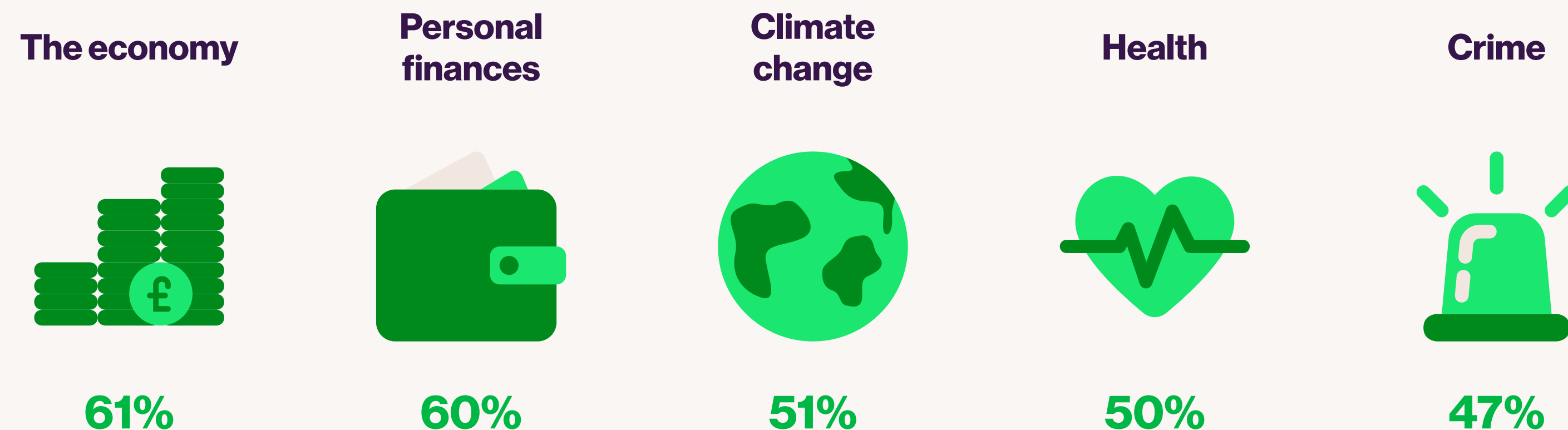


# Eco-anxiety is ever-present in Gen Z lives.

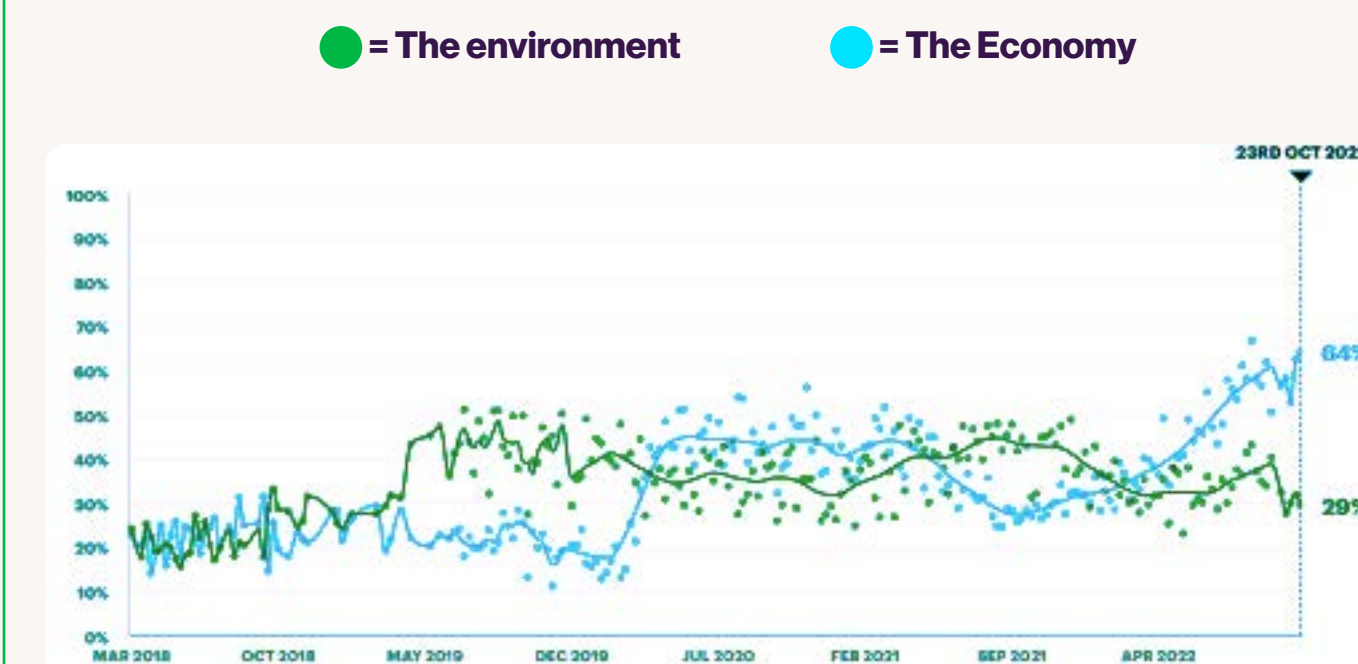
There is a lot for young people to be worried about: health pandemics, economic instability, international war, ecological disasters, the list goes on. Right now, money worries are paramount, but climate change is still a key concern for half of Gen Z – comparable to health and crime.

Concerns around the climate are constantly present in Gen Z lives, ready to flare up when provoked.

## How do Gen Z's concerns stack up?



The most important issues facing the UK 18-24 years (YouGov)



**addey1983 (Adam)** @addey1983 · 28 Feb  
 @Worldchild09 So you don't think people have been kept in a constant state of fear? (Climate change, Covid, Putin)

**SeymourStrange (Seymour Strangely)** @SeymourStrange · 28 Feb  
 things to worry about now include: global warming energy and fuel price rises Brexit Covid Boris P\*kin Johnson and his cronies and nuclear war. and it's still only Monday 🤔

**Maddie** @mads\_arm... · 20/07/2019  
 we care about hot girl or hot boy summer but I think we forgot it's also **hot earth summer** climate change is happening people!!

**Georgia** @OMGeorgia2 · 23/10/2022  
 Sobbing my eyes out at **Frozen Planet II** 🥹 happy Sunday 🥹

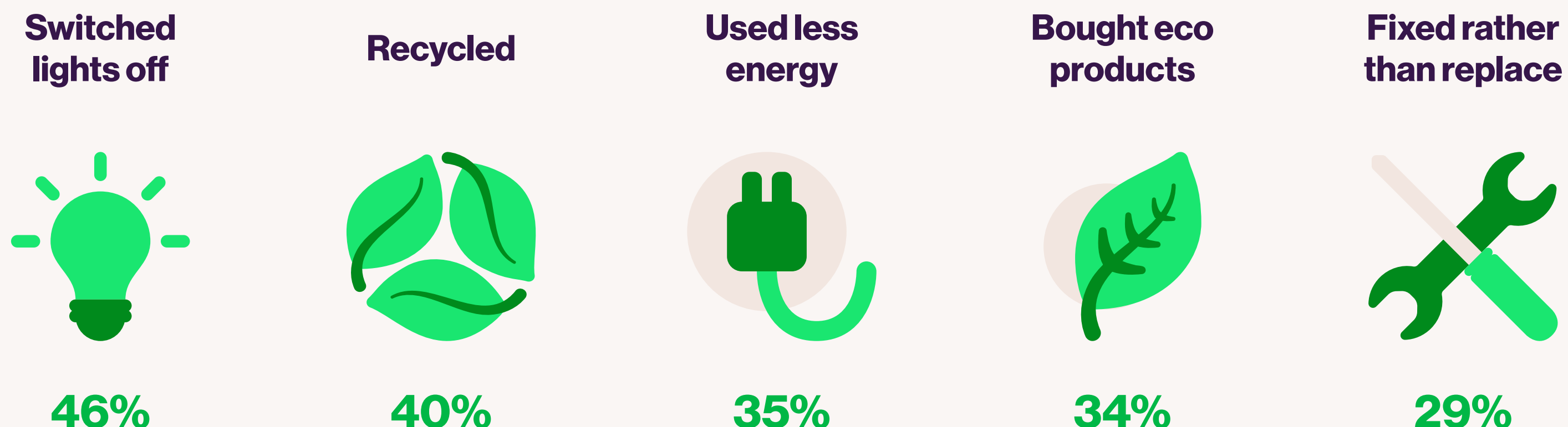


# Gen Z feel pressure to do more.

Positive environmental behaviours (PEBs) are commonplace among Gen Z – nearly all have done something in the last year. However, half recognize that they could be doing even more, but are restricted by cost and time constraints, as well as feelings of powerlessness. There is also a tendency to overvalue the impact that their PEBs have.

Gen Z are fully aware of the challenge facing the planet, but with a lot of other very real concerns in their lives, they need help and guidance on where to best focus their eco-efforts.

## 93% have done some form of positive environmental behaviour in the last year, mainly:



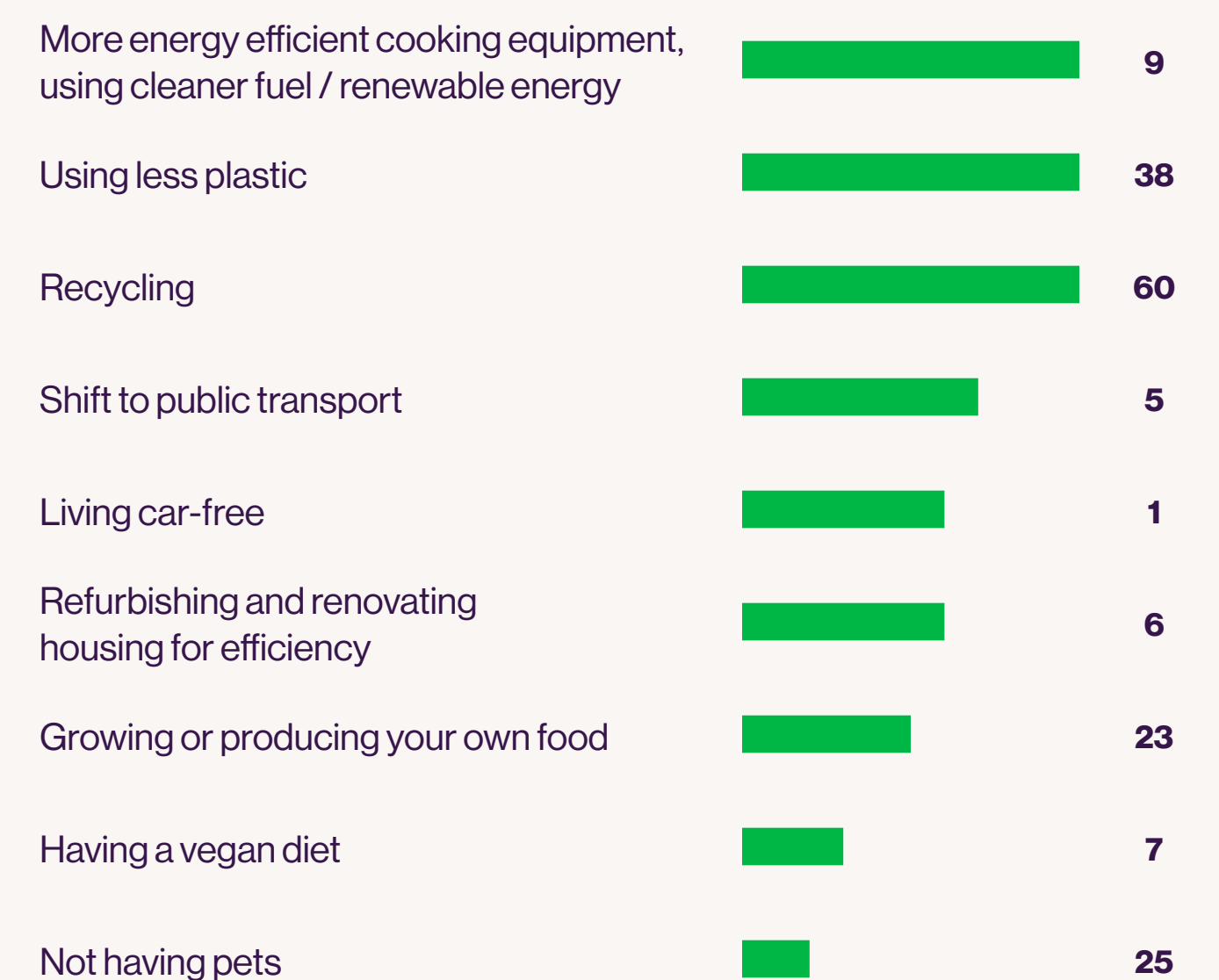
(Top 5 behaviours ranked highest to lowest)

**76%** of Gen Z agree that “**my generation is under too much pressure to fix the world’s issues**”. (Spotify, 2022)

**49%** think that they **do everything they personally can to help the environment**.

### Which actions are perceived to best impact the environment?

(ranked in top 3)





**Eco-anxiety = A healthy response to a pathological problem.** But it can stimulate lower collective action – promoting disengagement with the pro-climate movement.

Eco-anxiety is a chronic fear of environmental doom. But it's not just anxiety, the term can also come with “feelings of loss, helplessness, frustration, and guilt, as the sufferers feel they are unable to stop climate change.”

Researchers have found that eco-anxiety predicts **lower collective action**, making it the most paralysing element compared to eco-depression and eco-anger.

Eco-anxiety is closely connected with other negative emotions such as grief, guilt, and despair. Yet, anxiety also has an adaptive quality – it can help us be aware of the reality we're in, rather than bury our heads in the sand.

“**Eco anxiety is not a mental health problem that needs to be fixed or cured, rather it is a healthy response to the situation we are facing.**”

**Caroline Hickman**

Author of “How to cope with eco anxiety” (2020) Friends of the Earth UK.



# Root causes

## **What triggers eco-anxiety?**

Eco-anxiety can arise from first-hand experience or via secondary information channels.



# 5 main causes

**Solastalgia\*** is a depression caused by environmental change. It often brings a long-lasting disruption to an individual's sense of identity, belonging and security regarding where they live.



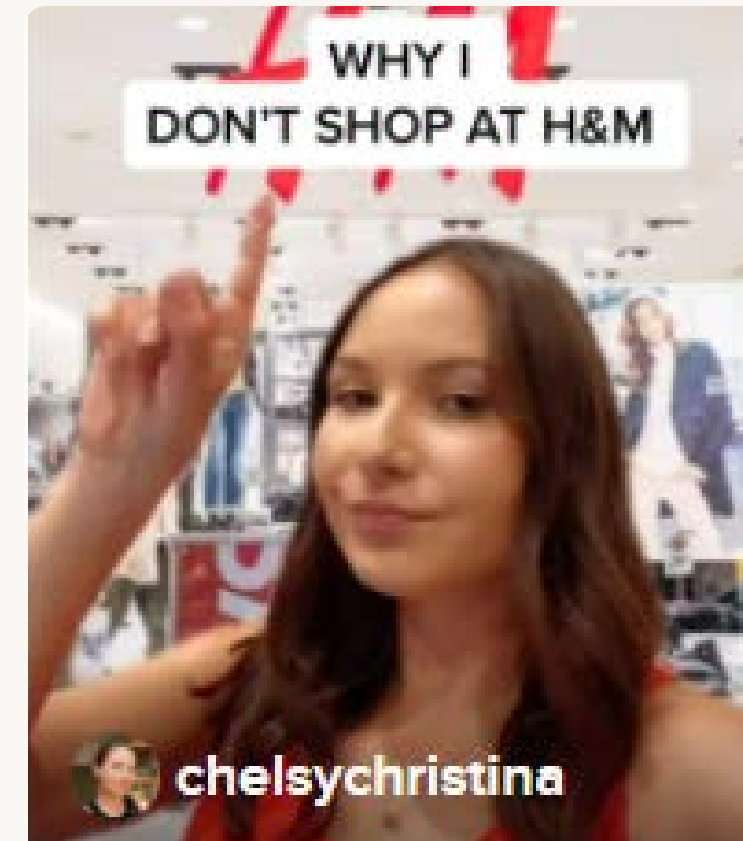
## Experiencing an ecological event

Experiencing a trauma like an ecological disaster. This can lead an individual to question their safety, and in a similar manner to PTSD, an individual may then struggle to see the world as a safe place.



## Constant exposure to information

This can often follow directly after an ecological disaster. Media is flooded with images of the event and pessimistic headlines. This can lead to feeling overwhelmed, a lack of control, and an inability to escape.



## Measuring ecological footprint

Tracking our footprints may reduce it, but it can have a negative psychological impact. No one person can solve climate change alone. Individual efforts may seem like a drop in the ocean, leading to feelings of powerlessness.



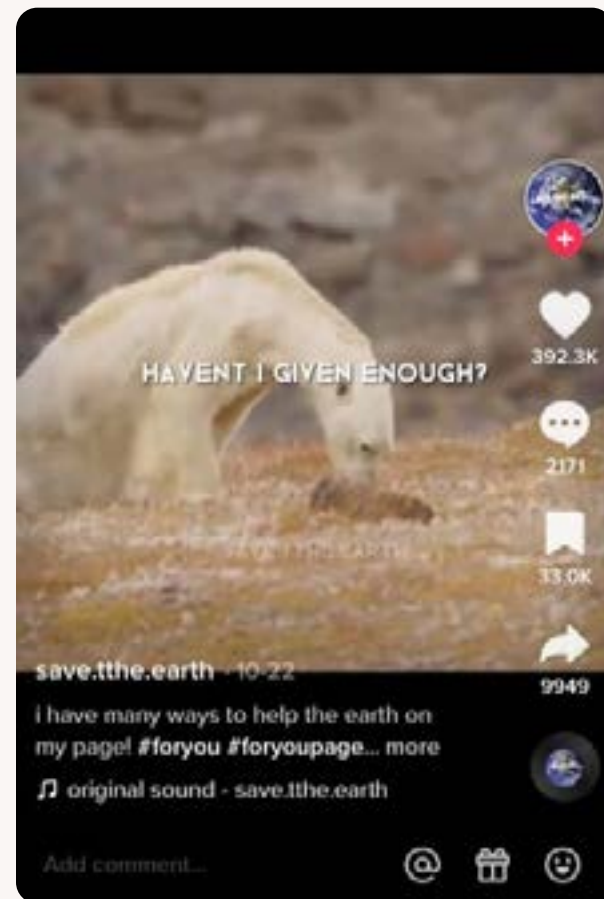
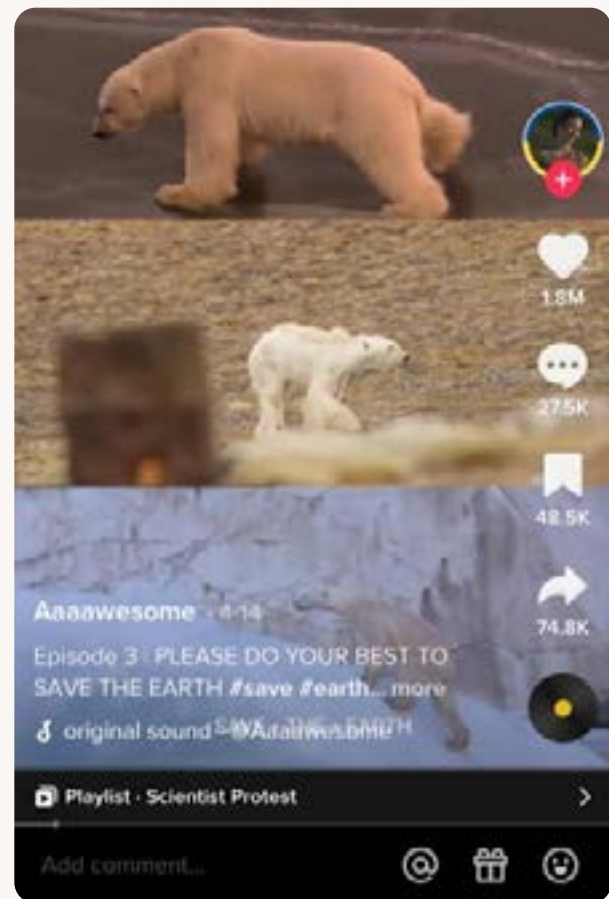
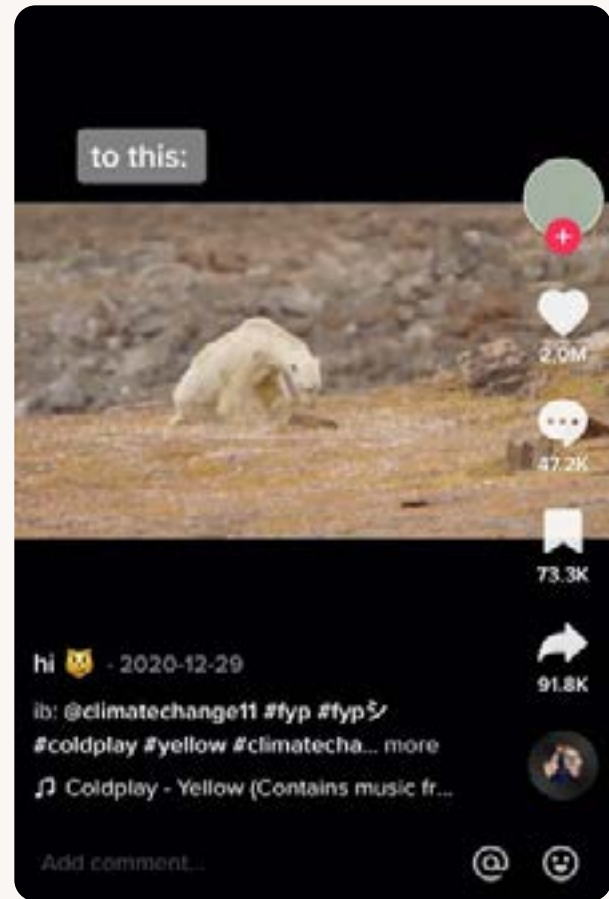
## Seeing smaller signifiers of climate change

An area doesn't need to be impacted by an ecological disaster to feel the effects of climate change. Droughts, loss of eco-systems, more pollution (which also blocks sunlight) can all lead to solastalgia\*.



## Being a member of a vulnerable population

Some groups (younger populations, indigenous communities that rely on the land & sea, women, lower SES, those with chronic health issues) all have a higher risk of developing eco-anxiety.



**Repetitive imagery, audio, messaging and formats** are being shared across TikTok.

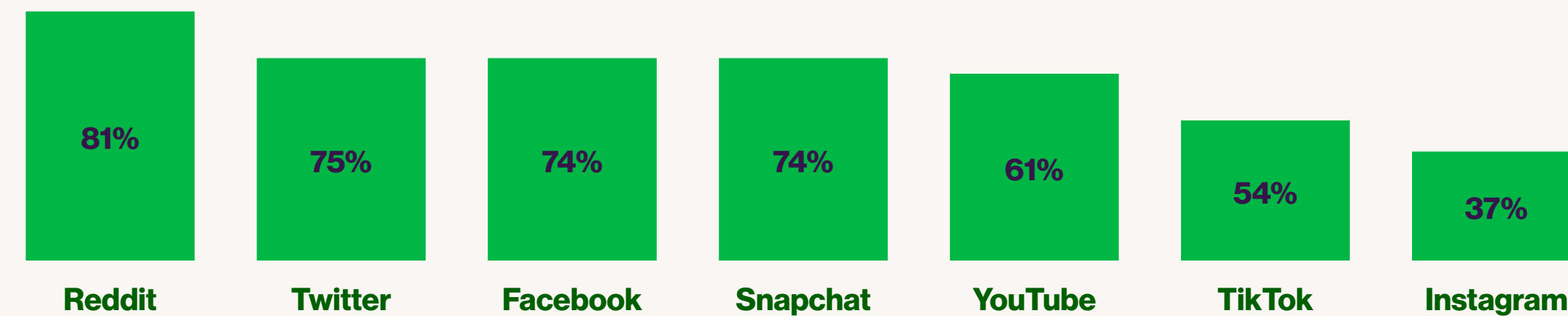
**#ecoanxiety** has over 8.6 million views on TikTok.

E.ON Next proprietary research – Nov 2022

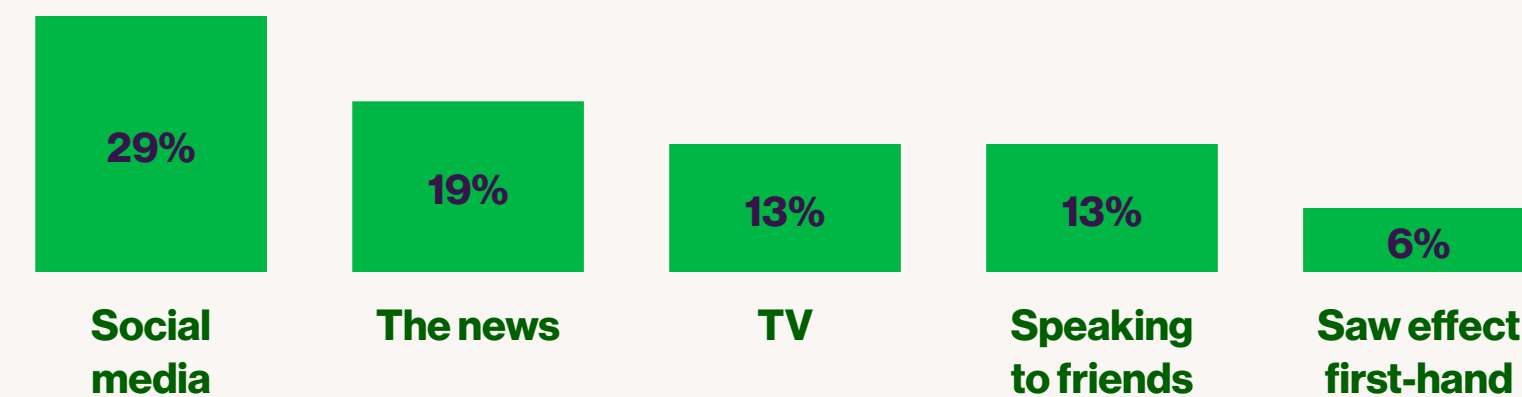
# Social media amplifies Gen Z eco-anxiety.

Social media usage is very high among Gen Z, with close to 9 in 10 (87%) visiting at least one platform daily. Social media is also a key platform that Gen Z use for news (53%), rivalling more traditional news routes/outlets such as the BBC. Subsequently, eco emotions (particularly negative ones) tend to be triggered by seeing something on social media, with TikTok and Instagram the key instigators – in line with Gen Z’s social media consumption generally. Gen Z are great amplifiers of the social content they interact with, sharing content and reacting to posts – without necessarily having originated it.

## Social media usage (% daily)



## Triggers of eco-anxiety



**A way  
forward**



# Soothing content has a positive effect.

Different types of social content can have very different effects on Gen Z's eco emotions. Agitative content is likely to cause a negative shift in emotions, whereas exposure to Soothing or Inspiring content can have a profoundly positive impact. Scare content does little to shift the emotional dial either way.

The type of social content can also impact one's response to it. Inspire content, whilst positive emotionally, leads to the lowest amount of action overall.

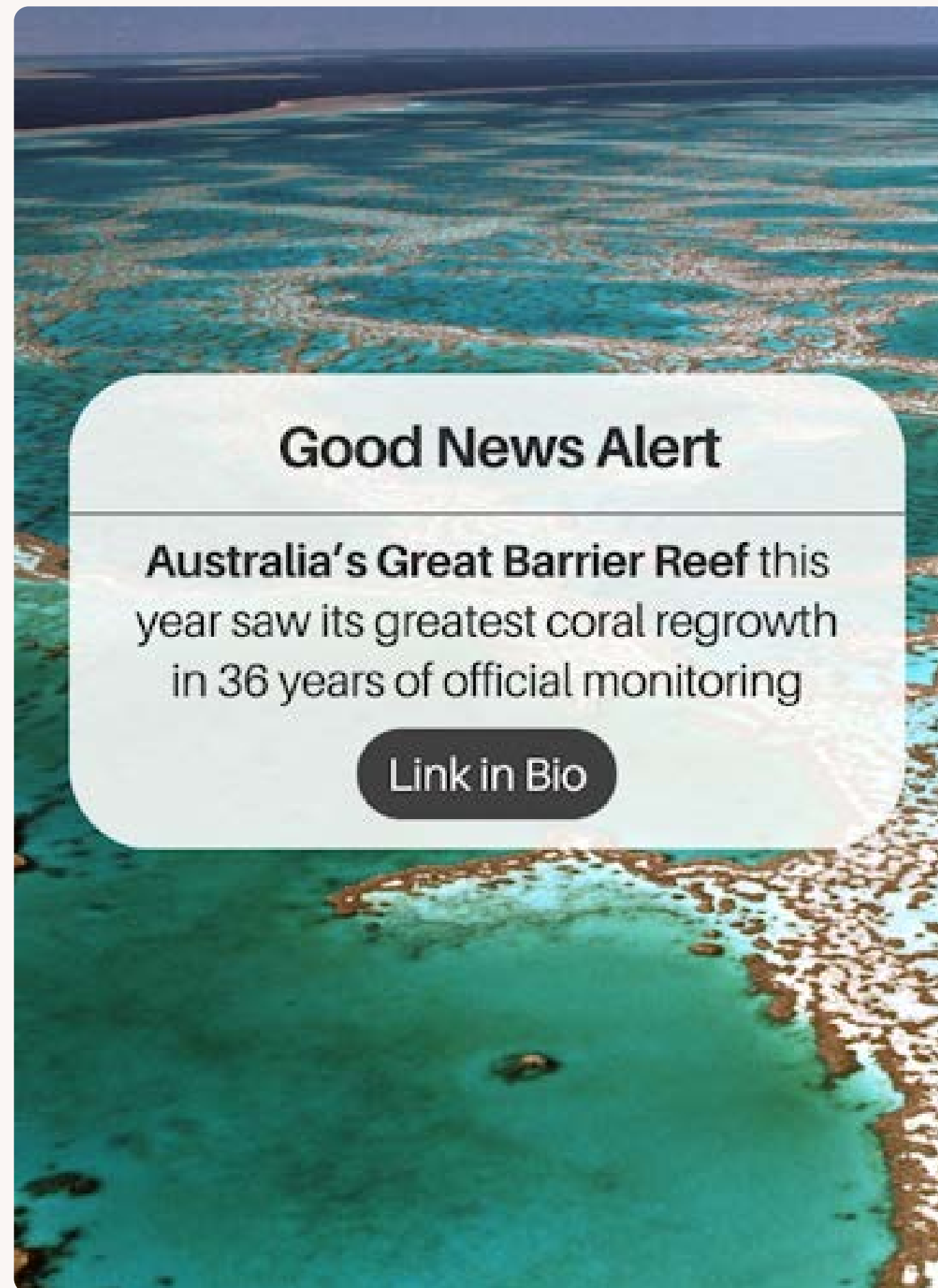
Soothe content, however, drives the greatest level of Escapism and Communication actions, the second highest Learning, and the lowest Trigger management and 'nothing' responses.

The positive emotional impact of Soothe content works to calm eco-anxiety and provide Gen Z with the mental headroom to do something bigger than self.

**Mean scores on 0-100 scale**  
(0 = not at all this way, 100 = a great deal)

	Eco-depressed	Eco-anxious	Eco-angry	Eco-concerned	Eco-happy	Eco-optimistic
<b>Pre-exposure</b>	53.0	60.3	59.9	59.5	34.6	39.8
<b>Post-exposure</b>						
<b>Agitate</b>	63.1	58.3	69.6	64.1	27.9	31.8
<b>Inspire</b>	36.4	37.4	35.4	40.9	56.2	61.0
<b>Scare</b>	52.1	56.2	58.9	52.1	38.3	41.1
<b>Soothe</b>	31.9	34.9	32.7	37.9	69.4	69.5

	To scare	To agitate	To soothe	To inspire
<b>Escapism (TV, reading, music)</b>	37%	42%	44%	30%
<b>Trigger management (put phone away, avoid climate news)</b>	27%	28%	22%	18%
<b>Learning (read up about climate change, join a group)</b>	41%	38%	39%	37%
<b>Communication (talk to someone, post on socials)</b>	38%	34%	40%	35%
<b>Go for a walk / exercise</b>	26%	15%	25%	18%
<b>Meditate</b>	11%	10%	11%	13%
<b>Nothing</b>	11%	10%	8%	15%



# The psychology of soothe.

**Soothing content is best for action.** When information is presented in an encouraging light (positive framing), people feel more positively about the changes their actions can make.

Conversely, information presented negatively (like Agitate) can be more effective for raising awareness. But our research shows that more is needed than simply awareness raising – awareness is not an issue for this audience. Instead, taking the right kind of action is.

Additionally, we like to know the outcome of our actions. If we are unsure of the outcome of an action, our motivation can be lowered because of uncertainty.

On social media, it may be that if we see that others have engaged in a pro-environmental behaviour, and there was an obvious and positive outcome, then this could inspire someone to reciprocate (especially if someone feels eco-negatively).

The feeling of helplessness that is associated with eco-anxiety could be countered by viewing soothing content on social media and showing that their actions CAN have an impact.

This is important because individual actions have been found to be critical in helping the climate.

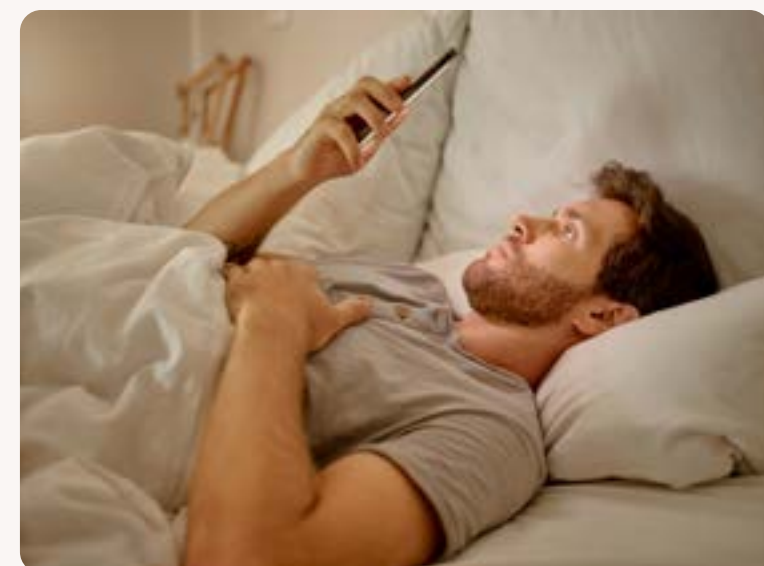
# Potential coping mechanisms on the rise.

As eco-anxiety has components of both anxiety and depression, we can take insights from coping strategies of generalised anxiety and mood disorders to help individuals manage eco-distress surrounding the climate crisis.



## Communication

Humans are social beings. Offloading to someone who listens and empathises is vital when you're feeling anxious or burned out.



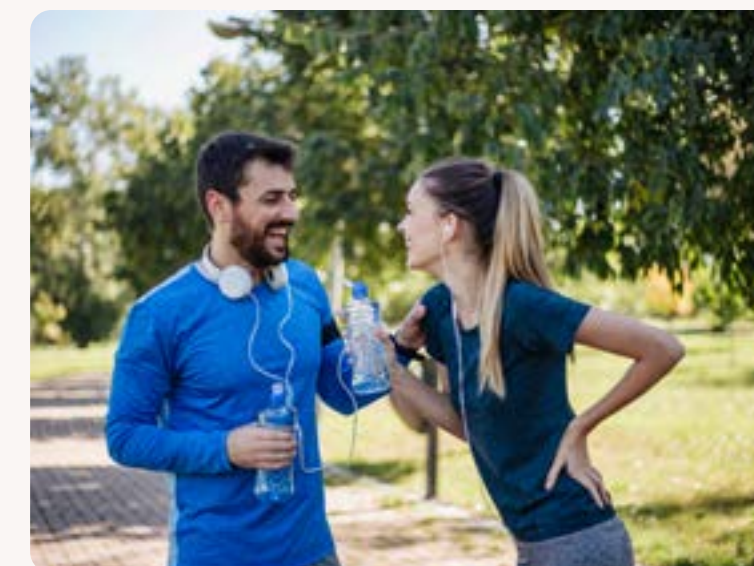
## Understanding your triggers

In many cases, it's likely that an individual will have specific triggers to their emotions. Being able to identify and avoid, or limit, these things will help. For example, limiting time scrolling through social media.



## Mindfulness and meditation

The aim of meditation is to bring your attention to the present moment, rather than rushing into the future or dwelling in the past.



## Exercise and lifestyle

When stressed, some of the basic elements of how we look after ourselves can go out the window. For example, getting exercise boosts our physical resilience, releases endorphins and can help us step away from the racing mind and into the grounded body.



## Learning

Doing something new can make us feel more capable and confident. Trying something you've not done before could help increase resilience.