



Physicians for Social Responsibility  
10 Dumfries Court  
Sacramento, California 95831  
www.sacpsr.org • info@sacpsr.org  
916-955-6333

## Eco-Grief

By Sydney Reese

Student at Pioneer High School, in Woodland, California

There is a certain feeling of validation brought when able to articulate a very specific feeling with a very specific word. I came across the term eco-grief when trying to understand the feelings of anxiety I had when researching and thinking about the impact and effects of climate change that I have seen and eventually will see. In short, environmental studies can be very depressing. President Obama's words, "We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it" serve as a reminder of the gravity of the situation and the immense responsibility that my generation has. This responsibility can feel overwhelming, and it is not outlandish to suggest that it can take a toll on my generation's mental health.

As the term eco-grief implies, my generation is grieving over the irreversible damage that our planet is experiencing. However, to put it bluntly, my generation cannot waste time by wallowing in the first stage of grief: denial. To deny effects of climate change is to deny future generations of a future. The California wildfires, unsettlingly close to home, served as a tragic reminder of the proliferation of our environmental crisis. As LaUra Schmidt, Humboldt State environmental studies student said succinctly, the first step is to "admit there's a problem" (1).

It is imperative that we skip to the second stage of grief—anger—productive anger. Fiery anger that burns up and fuels tangible efforts towards change. We should be angry about the way that we have been treating our planet for profit. However, we cannot make it up to our planet by simply swapping out a plastic straw for a paper straw. Adopting sustainable living habits as individuals is imperative and should not be trivialized. Nevertheless, when just 100 companies have been responsible for 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988, our values and economic system that encourages the exploitation of the planet for profit needs to be addressed (2). We need to listen to the recommendations of scientists, not world leaders with ulterior motives who refer to coal as "beautiful, clean coal" (3).

The willingness of people to exploit the planet for unsustainable profit at the cost of the Earth's future is sobering. However, the way in which social issues can be addressed by confronting climate change is slightly more optimistic. For an example, a Johns Hopkins study has found a link between income, race, ethnic origin, and susceptibility to asthma, as there is an "inner city asthma epidemic" (4). That is not the optimistic part, but by addressing the air pollutants associated with climate change, both public health and environmental social justice issues too can be addressed. The health and quality of life for children living in these inner cities can be improved.

When overcome with eco-grief, I remind myself of the positive social changes that will arise when my generation gains the impetus to make necessary changes to secure a future for our future.

#### Footnotes

1. <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/22/524557600/first-step-to-eco-grieving-over-climate-changeadmit-theres-a-problem>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companiesinvestors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change>
3. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-unionaddress/>
4. [https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/time\\_to\\_rethink\\_the\\_inner\\_city\\_asthma\\_epidemic](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/time_to_rethink_the_inner_city_asthma_epidemic)