COVID-19 and climate change:
Managing existential anxiety in your students

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"THIS IS A VERY CHALLENGING TIME for teenagers in particular," said BC's Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry in one of her daily addresses, and she could not be more right. COVID-19 has thrown us all a curveball, but for youth, this hits especially hard.

Even before this pandemic, youth anxiety was a concerning issue. Anxiety disorders in youth are common and are associated with higher rates of comorbid psychiatric conditions, suicidality, and difficulties with cognition, attention, sleep, academic performance, and maintaining peer relationships. Despite the stark outlook, there is a silver lining: teachers can play a large role in maintaining students' mental well-being by supporting them to use strategies to manage anxiety.

Normal feelings of existential anxiety, or anxieties about our survival as a species, can result from real threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In a May 2020 statement, United Nations health experts warned that this pandemic may lead to a long-term mental health crisis. Since the COVID-19 pandemic is the largest global event that has occurred during the lifetime of today's youth, they may be especially affected. For instance, adolescents spend much of their time with peers outside the home; these interactions are limited during the pandemic. Additionally, adolescents graduating during the pandemic face an unsteady job market and an uncertain post-secondary education experience, providing only more potential anxieties.

As we are amidst this pandemic, I cannot help but draw parallels between COVID-19 and climate change. Perhaps this is because both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change are driven by our global economic model. Capitalism has encouraged industrialized farming and the trade of wild and domestic animals, creating more opportunities for pathogens to pass between species. For instance, the avian influenza (bird flu) is commonly spread when the virus passes from wild fowl, to domestic poultry, and then to humans. Similarly, scientists believe the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated from bats and/or pangolins that humans came into contact with during wildlife trading. Similarly, capitalism has encouraged us to overconsume non-renewable resources such as oil and metal to drive our economies, with little regard for the environment.

As these human activities have negatively affected the climate, many people feel fearful, a feeling psychologists call "eco-anxiety." Eco-anxiety, another example of existential anxiety, is a well-justified response to a real threat: there is ample evidence that human-driven activities are leading to coastal erosion, thawing permafrost, and increased heat waves, droughts, and flooding.

There are also significant health effects associated with these changes, including the spread of infectious diseases, a loss in land-based food security for Indigenous populations in Canada, and increased respiratory conditions because of air pollution. Inuit peoples have described the impact of climate change on their environment and culture through the word *uggianaqtuq* (pronounced OOG-gi-a-nak-took), meaning "friend who is acting unpredictably." No matter how real the threat is, psychiatrist Dr. Lise van Susteren explains, "You want to be anxious enough to take action, but not so anxious that you become paralyzed."

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Eco-anxiety may disproportionately affect youth because it feels like the world is looking to them for solutions. "We have been increasingly concerned about anxiety and disempowerment in our [youth] audiences," says Dr. Mary-Wynne Ashford, a retired high school teacher and physician who offers high schools a 90-minute present-ation about preventing nuclear war. "They tell us they feel helpless, particularly about climate change. We do not want to add to their sense of a world out of control, but rather to make them aware that we can make a difference."

Youth may be uncertain about their futures and feel frustrated toward governments and large corporations because of their inaction, a sentiment voiced by youth activist Greta Thunberg. As we return to schools this September, teachers can prepare themselves to address students' ongoing fears and worries about climate change, along with their concerns about the pandemic.

So, what are some ways you can be prepared? There are many strategies that can be applied to the COVID-19 pandemic in the short-term and extended to climate change over time to manage existential anxiety and promote mental wellness. Below are some suggestions.

Strategies to manage anxiety and promote wellness

Be vigilant for students showing signs of mental distress, especially those who have pre-existing conditions. Start conversations with students about how the pandemic has affected them to gauge their mental well-being. This can also be applied to eco-anxiety; provide space for discussions about current events, including their emotional impact on students. Be aware of the healthcare professionals available to support students.

Take students' concerns seriously; this is a large worry for students reaching out to their teachers for support. It is normal to feel anxious during a pandemic; validate their feelings. Being non-judgmental, empathetic, and an active listener may be enough to put your students' minds at ease, as students often look to their teachers for reassurance. These skills will be particularly important to practice during online teaching, where non-verbal communication is limited.

Be especially mindful about how these issues affect your students individually. Their socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender, among other factors, may affect their experience, and it is important to acknowledge these differences. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked an increase in overt anti-Asian racism; it will be particularly important to be aware of and stop any bullying that may occur in the classroom.

Identify yourself or other school staff as a resource to students and their families. There are also many websites that can provide guidance outside of the school setting: the BC government's erase website *www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase* and Open School BC's Keep Learning webpage *www.openschool.bc.ca/keeplearning* are two examples.

Provide students with tools to manage their mental well-being. Explore coping strategies such as meditation, exercise, creating art, limiting news consumption, and connecting to others.

Remember that youth are resilient. During the pandemic, youth have found creative ways to stay connected, manage their feelings of anxiety, and help their communities. Similarly, youth have been leading climate justice discussions and are at the forefront of recent climate strikes. Show them you care by supporting their advocacy and community initiatives. Taking action is the best way to manage normal feelings of existential anxiety.

Be a good role model. Practise physical distancing, wash your hands properly, and follow the government's guidelines. Regarding climate change, take the time to learn about climate issues and support climate justice efforts. Practical ways to reduce your school's eco-footprint can be switching from paper to electronic systems for assignments and using green transportation.

Take care of yourself. As the adage goes, "you can only give to others what you have yourself." Take some time to reflect on how these uncertain times have affected you. Your hard work, patience, and care are appreciated by your students, their families, and the community.

While this pandemic may have temporarily changed the school system, there are lessons that we can all learn. The strategies above can be useful to address students' existential anxieties both in the coming months and beyond. As teachers, you can help foster mental wellness in your students; this will be especially important to keep in mind as students navigate their lives with COVID-19. ❧