

GREEN HEROES

SUPPORTING YOUTH WITH CLIMATE STRESS

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Supporting young people with
climate change, natural
disasters and other
environmental stresses

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CHILDREN TODAY: ADULTS TOMORROW

Supporting young people in times of environmental uncertainty

Adolescents, like adults and young children, experience a range of emotions. During adolescence these emotions can be tumultuous and inexplicable. By this stage in their development, young people are likely to be able to identify their emotions and have the language skills to share this information with others. They may not know, however, that their feelings are linked to their thoughts, their attitudes and their experiences (including their experience of other people's opinions).

When it comes to climate change, natural disasters and other environmental stresses, young people can have a strong emotional response. These issues can be a significant concern to them and perceptions of adult action (or inaction) can be a source of frustration. Adults and educators can make valuable connections when they acknowledge and validate a young person's feelings and listen to their views. During adolescence, a young person may benefit from support to identify the thoughts and attitudes that drive their reactions and the actions they can take to relieve any distress.

By way of example, a young person who thinks that the world is going to end no matter what and believes they are powerless to contribute to any solution, is likely to feel helpless, hopeless and afraid.

A young person who thinks that current problems are the fault of the government, their parents or any other group (real or fictitious) is likely to feel angry or resentful.

By contrast, a young person who can identify a problem and how it came to be (if this is known) but can also identify what people are doing to find solutions, and how they might contribute, will have an entirely different attitude. They may still be apprehensive and concerned but they are less likely to be paralysed by fear and hopelessness.

The role of adults in the lives of young people is to assist them in identifying the link between their cognitions (thoughts, attitudes, opinions, etc) and how they feel. How they think and feel will influence their actions and their willingness to be part of the solution.



Adults who have knowledge to share can teach young people about the issues and support them to make informed decisions.

Alternatively, working together to undertake further research on the subject might be appropriate.

Adults can model proactivity and problem solving and guide young people towards reducing extremes in thinking. This balances negative (and, at times, realistic) world-views with hope and personal agency. They can support a young person to identify strength and cohesion within the community by connecting them with others who share their concerns.

It is helpful to keep in mind that a young person may not share the views of their family or peer group and this can present additional challenges. This is an opportunity to encourage a young person's free thought and openness to the views of others.

Adults can model conflict resolution by encouraging young people to respectfully consider the views of others, hold their own views in the face of opposition and, when appropriate, graciously concede that they were ill-informed. These skills will be invaluable as they progress to adulthood.

Meaningful actions for older children and youth could include:

- Joining or forming an environment club within their school or peer group.
- Working as a team on projects that raise money or awareness, e.g. fundraising for wildlife groups/shelters in bushfire-affected areas, hosting or sponsoring a wildlife feeding station and organising a habitat restoration event.
- Raising awareness about the environment on social media by creating or sharing short films, clever advertising campaigns, etc.
- Researching instances where community groups have made a difference on social issues and sharing this information with educators and peers.
- Hosting a screening of films such as 2040 to raise awareness about new approaches and solutions to climate change.
- Joining a debate team to gain confidence in public speaking and understanding of different perspectives.
- Completing projects to raise awareness about how different community groups are affected by current events.
- Taking action by writing to local political representatives and signing online petitions.
- Becoming active with the Australian Youth Climate Coalition.

WHEN YOU NEED PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

When young people present with significant concerns about the world or their future, you may need to seek additional support; these worries may lead to, or contribute to, symptoms of anxiety or depression. If you have concerns about a young person's safety or wellbeing, encourage them to engage with Beyond Blue, your local youth mental health service or their family GP.

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

Young People's voices in the climate crisis. *Psychology Week 2019 Report*,
Australian Psychological Society

Australian Bushfires: Student Wellbeing and support for teachers.
A resource from Emerging Minds - National Workforce Centre for Child Mental
Health & the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

Green Heroes is working in collaboration with other groups to support passionate young conservationists who want to advocate for native wildlife and habitat protection within their schools and local communities. Our wildlife ambassador program will provide young people with practical advice, information, resources and planning tools to coordinate projects that directly assist Australian wildlife conservation.

This program will be available for free download on our website in March
2020 @ www.greenheroes.org.au/

Contact our team by email: scribble@greenheroes.org.au

