

We need to talk about mental health

Environmental scientists can find themselves exposed to a range of mental health challenges, and we all need to support each other in addressing them.

In late 2021, the Ecological Society of Australia published a resource that aims to help scientists to cope with increasing pressures on their mental health (<https://www.ecolsoc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Improving-mental-health-and-wellbeing-resource-.pdf>). These pressures come from a range of sources, some of which overlap with those experienced by the general public, but which also include those that are a direct result of our work. It's important that we talk about mental health, supporting each other and reaching out to mental health professionals where appropriate.

Environmental change is already having devastating physical and mental effects on people in many parts of the world, where loss of livelihoods, displacement of communities, damage to property and emotional upheaval are occurring. Environmental workers are amongst those dealing with acute physical stress or trauma, particularly when working in conflict zones. Beyond these acute effects, however, ecological grief (Cunsolo, A. & Ellis, N. R. *Nat. Clim. Change* 8, 275–281; 2018) is a recognized response to anthropogenic changes in climate and biodiversity. This sense of loss at seeing ecosystems degraded and species lost can affect those who witness it first hand, but also those who are acutely aware of it from reported evidence. Researchers and allied workers are therefore particularly susceptible.

Environmental researchers often witness changes to the ecosystems they study over the course of many years, often in myriad ways and in minute detail. They are also exposed on a daily basis to data from colleagues around the world and from related disciplines, compounding the sense of overwhelming loss. In most cases, a passionate concern for the natural world is a driving reason behind them doing such work in the first place. Many of us are also particularly aware of the failings of governments and corporations in addressing global change, and in some cases have our own frustrating experiences of trying to work with such bodies. These factors can combine to cause intense ecological grief.

That is not to say that some scientists don't have positives in their arsenal: they

are part of an engaged and supportive community working to address these problems; sometimes they can see their work make a direct positive impact (either on the ground or through policy change), leading to a sense of empowerment; and exposure to nature in the field, when loss is not directly obvious, can have mental health benefits in itself. There are some welcome recent moves to share positive ecological stories, such as Conservation Optimism (<https://conservationoptimism.org/>), the IUCN Green Status of Species (<https://www.iucnredlist.org/about/green-status-species>) and the Ecological Society of Australia's Feel Good Fridays (<https://www.ecolsoc.org.au/feel-good-friday-archives/>).

For many researchers, the interface between personal and professional lives is also a source of stress. Being immersed in data on global change, and interacting with other researchers who also understand it, can lead to frustration when interacting with friends and family who don't see the problem in the same way or on the same scale. Our social networks are a key source of mental wellbeing, so anything that compromises them is of concern. Similarly, all of us still need to make personal choices about our environmental impact, but these choices are constrained by the societies we live in, and this can lead to intense feelings of guilt about what we choose to enjoy, and even to crushing inertia when trying to lead our everyday lives.

Environmental grief and related concerns are not the only pressures affecting the mental health of our community. Academic careers are notoriously stressful and insecure, with concerns about long hours, burnout, bullying, financial insecurity and, for many, the pressure of moving away from friends and family to a different culture. These stresses are often compounded and magnified for researchers from underprivileged backgrounds and/or marginalized communities. The pandemic has also taken a toll on mental health in a range of ways, including isolation, lack of childcare, loss of research time and physical illness. Some ecology and evolution researchers have also experienced the acute stress of working on COVID-19 itself.

How these positive and negative pressures affect people will vary between individuals, each with their unique set of internal and external circumstances. Mental health problems can arise from these circumstances — but they can also just exist, for no reason. All of these concerns are real and require support.

The symptoms of mental health problems are varied, and include cognitive, emotional, physiological and behavioural difficulties. Different individuals will respond to the same triggers with different combinations of these symptoms, and the symptoms can be hard to recognize. Similarly, different coping methods and treatments will work for different people, and some of these can be self-administered while others will require professional help. Reflection, mindfulness and building resilience may work well for some people, but others will need more substantial external help, and potential disruption to careers needs to be mitigated.

It is very welcome that, in the past few years, conversations about the mental health of our community are becoming more widespread. A broader awareness of these conversations will help us to recognize problems in ourselves and be able to support others. Having resources available from institutions and scientific societies is a good step, and everyone should take the time to read them, whether or not they feel in direct personal need at that particular moment. Mental health awareness training and mental health first-aid courses should be made widely available, so that we can recognize when there is a problem and obtain the appropriate treatment. It is particularly important that we recognize when to seek professional help, from general medical practitioners or from trained psychologists and psychiatrists. Most importantly, we all need to keep talking about this. The causes of mental health problems are not going to go away, but together we can make progress in reducing their impact. □

Published online: 3 March 2022
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-022-01707-0>