



Tree planting takes root to combat climate distress

Planet Ark is encouraging Australians to get outdoors and do something good for their mental health this National Tree Day, with research suggesting climate-related impacts on mental health are significantly affecting people's wellbeing.

Eco-anxiety and climate distress are terms used to identify the feelings of concern and distress that result from climate change, which are particularly prevalent among young Australians.

A study released by youth mental health organisation Orygen in late 2023 found more than three in four (76 per cent) young people aged 16-25 are concerned about climate change with two thirds indicating these climate concerns are having a negative impact on youth mental health.¹

Headspace also commissioned a national survey of young Australians aged 18-25 last year, finding that more than half (53 per cent) fear for the future due to climate change. Just under half (46 per cent) worry about whether they're doing enough to slow climate change, while almost six in ten (59 per cent) agreed not enough is being done at to address climate change at the government level.²

These results are reinforced by the results of the Australian Psychology Society's recent *Thinking Futures* report released in April, which found a staggering 94 per cent of psychologists said they believe climate change will affect Australians' mental health in the future, and 77 per cent think natural disaster related mental health issues will increase in the next three years.³

"We know through our experiences with the National Tree Day program that there are significant benefits associated with spending time in nature, including enhanced learning, concentration, healing, relaxation and recovery, to name just a few," said Planet Ark CEO Rebecca Gilling.

"Time in nature helps us thrive as individuals - physically, intellectually, emotionally, mentally, and ethically – and research suggests this is something young Australians really need at this time."

"By engaging young minds in environmental initiatives like National Tree Day, we are equipping them with the tools they need to support mental health and wellbeing and become responsible stewards of our planet."

Engaging in nature care activities such as planting trees to restore biodiversity, build urban green areas and improve community amenity can help address issues of climate distress and eco-anxiety from two angles.

Firstly, time in nature is proven to have a positive impact on mental health in general. Even a brief interaction with nature, such as a walk in a tree-rich park, can significantly boost mood and cognitive function, with the calming effect of green spaces, as demonstrated by reductions in stress hormones when engaging with nature, particularly noteworthy.

¹ Orygen (2023). 'New research shows the scale of climate distress among young Australians: we have 12 solutions', 18 August 2023. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3VFzCyy>

² ABC (2023). 'Eco-anxiety looms as headspace survey reveals young people want climate change action', ABC News, 7 September 2023. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3XnH6Y9>

³ Australian Psychological Society (2024). 'Thinking Futures: Psychology and Climate Change', 23 April 2024. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3zA2fob>



Secondly, pro-environmental behaviours – where individuals take protective actions toward the environment – have been identified as a potential intervention for climate distress. Evidence suggests engaging in pro-environmental activities can provide a sense of hope, help them feel like part of the solution, and make them feel like they are being heard.

Previous Planet Ark research has shown that 82 per cent of Australians feel spending time in nature is good for their physical and psychological wellbeing, while 69 per cent agree spending time in nature increases their desire to protect the environment. Despite these significant benefits, the majority (75 per cent) feel like they don't spend enough time in nature.

Planet Ark's National Tree Day provides an opportunity for individuals, schools, and community groups to contribute to a more sustainable future and create lasting change. This year, the program will celebrate Schools Tree Day on **July 26**, and National Tree Day on **July 28**.

Since the program was established in 1996, over five million volunteers have participated in National Tree Day events, planting over 27 million native trees, shrubs and grasses across every state and territory in Australia.

These results would not have been possible without the support of Major Sponsor Toyota Australia, who are this year celebrating 25 years of mobilising their dealer network and brand ambassadors to assist schools, councils and groups in caring for their local environment.

To find out how to participate or locate an event near you, visit the National Tree Day website - treeday.planetark.org.

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- Rebecca Gilling – CEO, Planet Ark Environmental Foundation
- Spokespeople from Orygen and Australian Psychological Society available on request.

About Planet Ark

Planet Ark Environmental Foundation is an Australian not-for-profit organisation with a vision of a world where people live in balance with nature. Established in 1992, it is one of Australia's leading environmental behaviour change organisations with a focus on working collaboratively and positively. Planet Ark promotes and creates simple, positive environmental actions – for everyone.