

Empowering Eastwick: A Community-Based Approach to Addressing Eco-Anxiety

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Abstract

Climate change affects physical health and has significant implications for mental health as well. Its impact can be direct, such as trauma from natural disasters, or indirect, as individuals experience increased anxiety due to future threats. Climate change-related worry, also known as eco-anxiety, has been linked to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Coffey 2021; Clayton, 2020), potentially exacerbating existing mental health disorders. Mental health difficulties are common and costly, with 25-35% of individuals experiencing mental illness in their lifetime, primarily anxiety and mood disorders (Coffey 2021). Even subclinical levels of distress can impair psychological and immunological functioning, reducing the ability to cope with adversity (Coffey 2021; Clayton 2020). However, there is a paucity of data on the short and long-term impact of climate change on mental health.

Eastwick, PA, is the southwestern-most neighborhood in Philadelphia, located at the downstream end of the Cobbs-Darby Creeks Watershed, which drains 77 square miles in three suburban counties and parts of Philadelphia. Frequent flooding has led to the area being designated a Special Flood Hazard Area by FEMA, i.e., within the 100-year floodplain. Eastwick has experienced several catastrophic flooding events, most notably Hurricane Floyd in 1996 and Hurricane Isaias in 2021. Eastwick meets the EPA's definition of an Environmental Justice Community (80% African American, >20% living in poverty), making its residents vulnerable to repeated flooding, loss of personal belongings, and the cost of repairs.

To address the aforementioned knowledge gap, we propose a mixed-methods pilot study to examine the relationship between climate change and eco-anxiety and mental health in Eastwick. The study will focus on the community's experience of flooding and other environmental stressors related to climate change and will test interventions designed to reduce anxiety related to the changing climate. At baseline, data on the prevalence of climate related anxiety will be collected via the validated Eco-Anxiety Questionnaire from a sample of youth and adults in the community (Clayton 2020) in order to investigate the mental health impacts of displacement due to flooding and anticipatory stress associated with climate change threats. Next, qualitative data will be collected from participants via semi-structured interviews and focus groups, exploring general awareness and knowledge about climate change and its effects on individuals' lives and futures in Eastwick. Finally, the study will evaluate the efficacy of two interventions designed to reduce climate related anxiety.