

Impact of Climate Change on Eco-Anxiety and Mental Health

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Research group NUDGE:

Behavioural models and public policies for
sustainable development

Impact of climate change

There are many continuous changes in the ecosystems and climate, which give real reasons for alarm and worries

Environmental crises and climate change have been leading issues in public discussion, policy and scientific analysis since the beginning of the 21st century

There are a lot of everyday examples of climate change impact in last months over the world

Impact of climate change

The climate changes require the need for well approved and targeted actions to stop, reduce and prevent the harmful consequences for humanity

It is necessary to overcome partial actions and to take into consideration the development of systematic and holistic approach based on integration of knowledge and practices of different scientific fields

Impact of climate change

Most of these climate changes are defined as anthropogenic, resulting from direct human intervention, the exploitation and depletion of natural resources, and changes in lifestyles

Changes in the environment and climate, although directly or indirectly caused by humans, can be beyond their control and create a series of threats that have wide social, economic and political consequences

Impact of climate change

Among the most emblematic of these are:

deforestation in the Amazon

carbon emissions

global warming

forest fires

natural disasters such as floods, including the possibility of uncontrollable cloud seeding

Some of these changes have not only short term negative effect, but create serious consequences in the long term perspective

Eco-anxiety and climate change anxiety

Eco-anxiety is introduced to describe the feelings that arise in the face of climate change and environmental threats

These feelings are expressed in anxiety, nervousness, fear, worry arising from uncertainty, unpredictability and lack of control (Coffey et al., 2021)

Eco-anxiety is understood as anxiety generated in response to environmental crises and disasters, while climate change anxiety stems from anthropogenic climate change

Eco-anxiety and climate change anxiety

Climate change anxiety is a complex psychological response associated with negative emotions and symptoms

It is being introduced as a leading concept related to mental health, used by a wide range of experts in the social sciences and public health, and increasingly disseminated in the media and popular culture

Climate change anxiety

Climate change anxiety correlates strongly with depressive symptoms

Lead to low sense of safety

Need of safety is a basic human need according the psychological theories

Role of anxiety and stress as a determinant of pro-environmental behavior in the context of climate change

Solostalgia

The concept of solostalgia is introduced as a neologism, by analogy with the nostalgia that people feel when they are separated from their beloved home environment

Solostalgia refers to distress caused by changes that directly affect lifestyle in the surrounding home environment in which people continue to live (Albrecht et al., 2007)

Solostalgia

The sources of environmental changes that cause solostalgia are ranked by their impact

Solostalgia is caused by dominating changes in weather and natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, deforestation and forest fires, drought, climate change, continuous environmental transformations, extraction of resources in the mining industry, wars, political decisions and rapid industrial development

Manifestations and characteristics of climate anxiety

It can be constructive and adaptive and, therefore, could have a positive impact and mobilize to change attitudes and behaviour

Eco-anxiety could be entirely destructive and can lead to defense mechanisms such as rejection, denial and apathy for example

Maladaptive and paralyzing forms of eco-anxiety include trauma and depression

The destructive forms of anxiety are related with panic, lack of rationality, feeling of despair and hopelessness

Characteristics of climate anxiety

The psychoanalytic perspective in the study of climate anxiety considers two main manifestations

- The first contains the fear of death, destruction and extinction
- The second evokes complex feelings of loss, grief, dependence, and guilt regarding actual or foreseeable future losses

Climate anxiety

The defense mechanisms that arise in eco-anxiety are of two main types and are directed at emotional threats

One type of defense mechanism refers to the denial of reality, namely that climate change does not exist and is the result of a conspiracy, which finds expression in a wide range of conspiracy theories and views

The second type of defense mechanisms comes down to denial of loss, for example nature may perish but we will be fine, it is caused by other people or natural changes beyond the control of humans.

Consequences of climate change for mental health

Climate change is seen as a significant source of stress that affects mental health and well-being

Its consequences range from relatively mild, related to the experience of stress and distress

The more serious symptoms are anxiety, suicidal thoughts, depression, personality mood disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder

Consequences for mental health

A set of consequences is established as a result of the experience of disasters and climate change on the mental health:

Distress reactions manifest in changes in sleep, isolation and avoidance, decreased sense of safety, irritability and distraction

Psychic disorders that can occur as a result of experiencing environmental disasters are depression, prolonged anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated and prolonged grief

Risky health behaviors are maladaptive coping strategies for managing emotions in distress and include increased smoking, alcohol, overindulgence, travel changes, and separation anxiety

Characteristics of climate and eco anxiety

Experiencing climate change can have different effects on psychological functioning in different groups

Among the vulnerable groups are those with a lower socio-economic status, who experience more material losses and find it difficult to recover, but they also experience more consequences for mental health

Women and younger individuals revealed significantly higher climate anxiety

Higher levels of stress and anxiety about climate change are experienced by women, people under the age of 35, individuals with pro-environmental attitudes and orientations, and individuals with high personal anxiety about the future

Characteristics of eco-anxiety

- affective symptoms for eco-anxiety
- rumination induced by eco-anxiety - repetitive thinking on negative feelings and distress and their causes and consequences
- behavioral symptoms and impairment of social functioning
- eco-anxiety caused by the effect of individual behavior /perception of personal responsibility and contribution

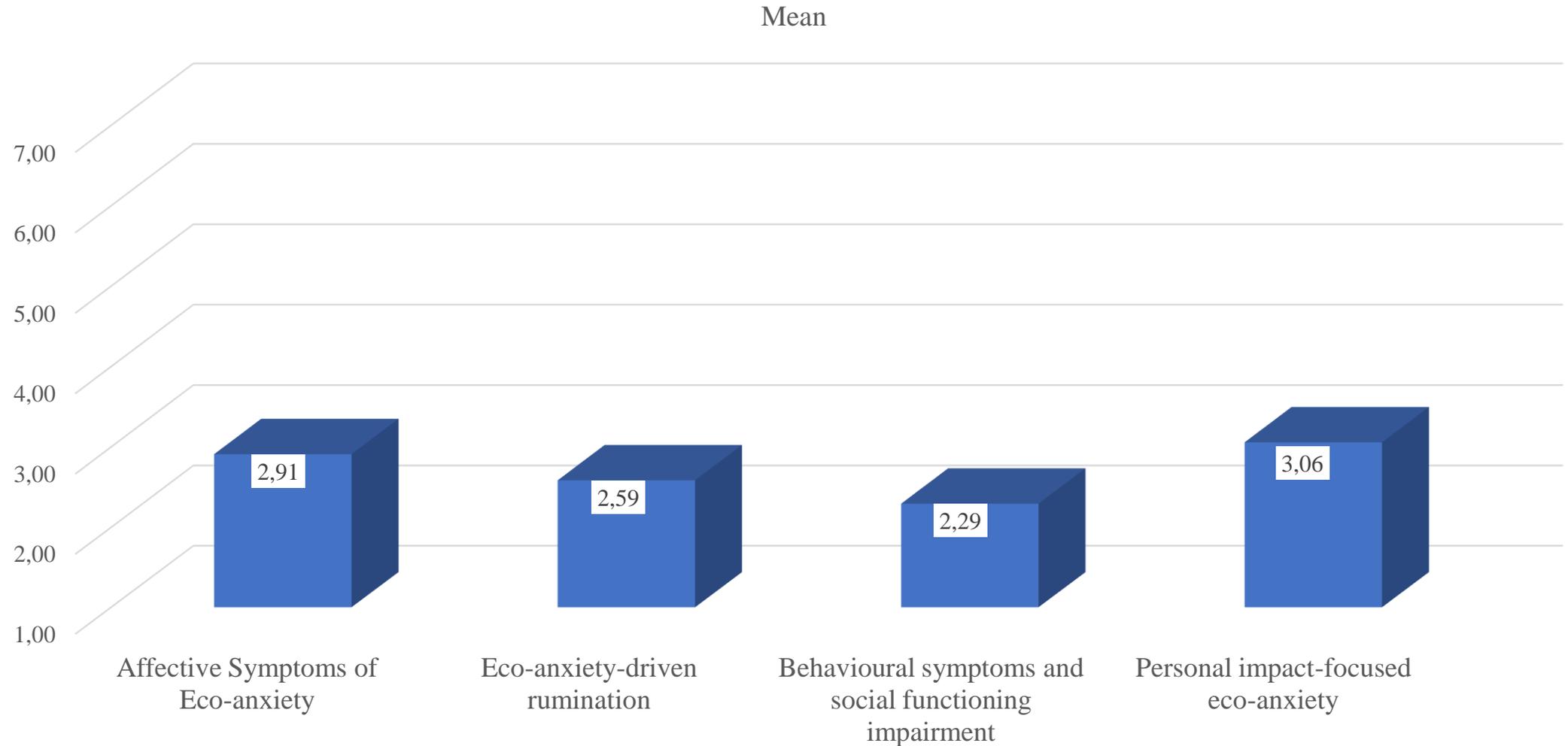
Research study of climate anxiety in Bulgarian sample

RESPONDENTS - 551
people

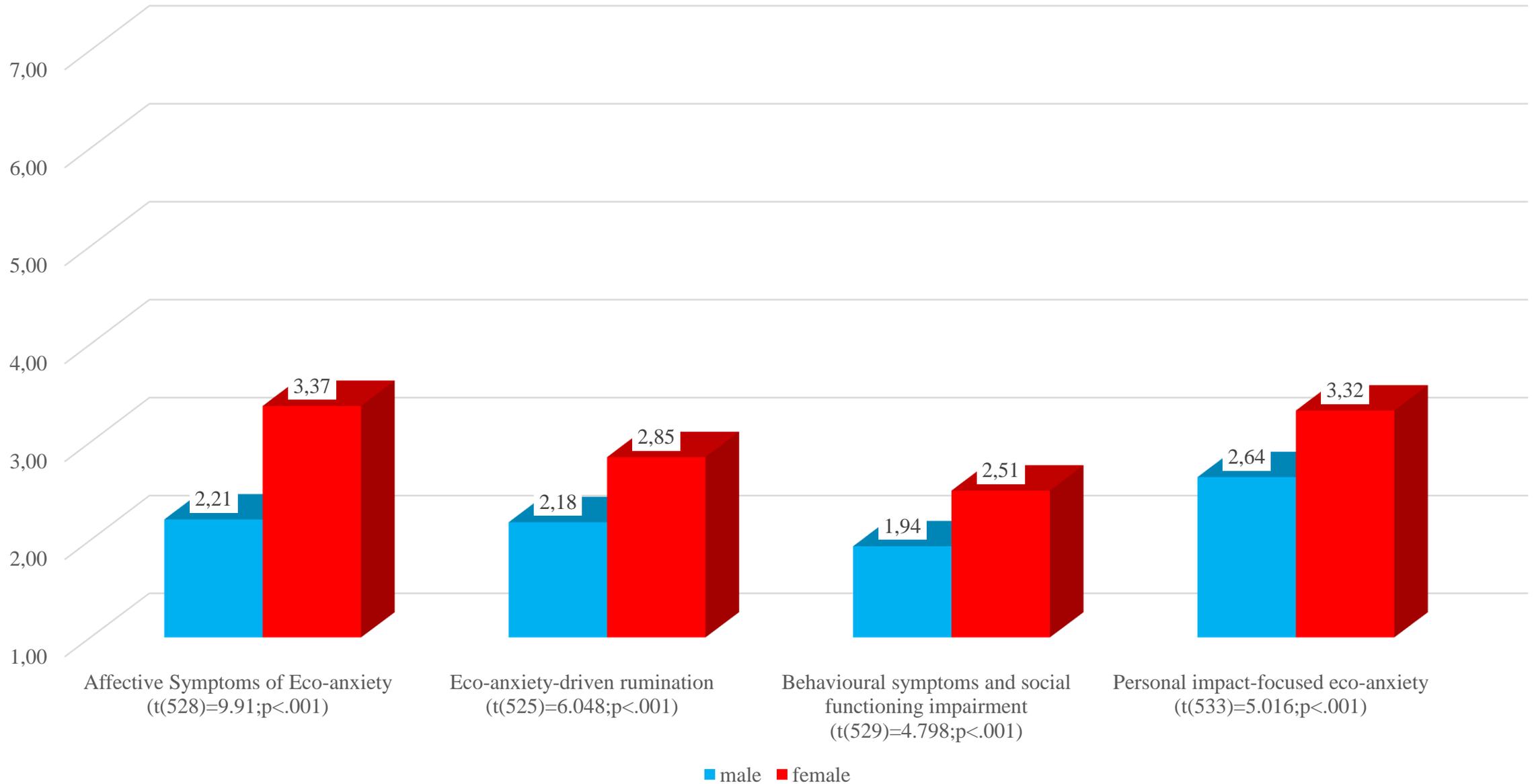
Age – 13-90 (M=27.4;
SD=13.34)

Female: 58.3 %
Male: 41.7%
I don't want to point
out – 2,9%

Results – descriptive statistics



Results – Differences by gender



Implications for forest pedagogy

Focusing on younger people for prevention of destructive consequences of climate anxiety

Using different approach focused on cognitions, emotions and behaviors of young people

Applying educational interventions among concerned groups

Using positive climate anxiety for prevention of forest fires and climate change

Increasing pro-ecological attitudes and behavior

THANK YOU