



PEACE AT WORK
PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT AND CARE ENHANCEMENT

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

UNIT 15

03/2025



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Learning Objectives

Learn about environmental sustainability and its connection to societal and individual wellbeing. By the end of this learning unit, participants will be able to:

- Describe how environmental factors affect personal and social wellbeing.
- Recognize the impact of green spaces, pollution, climate change, and community design on health.
- Reflect on personal lifestyle choices and their environmental implications.
- Explore strategies to enhance wellbeing through environmental awareness and sustainable practices.
- Apply knowledge to community and personal actions that improve quality of life.

Introduction



Our health and wellbeing are deeply connected to the world around us. As highlighted by the [European Environment Agency's Scientific Committee in their work on the "Environment-Health-Wellbeing Nexus", \(EHWB\)](#) the environment influences far more than we often realize. Climate change is a powerful example—its effects ripple through our physical health, mental wellbeing, and social stability in ways that are complex and far-reaching. The traditional idea of environmental problems as simple “cause-and-effect” issues no longer fits our interconnected world. Instead, a holistic, preventative approach is needed—one that helps us build

resilience, protect our wellbeing, and create healthier communities for the future.

Environment, Health & Well-being: An Integrated Perspective

An [Environment-Health-Wellbeing \(EHWB\)](#) perspective highlights that prevention is just as important as treatment: by reducing exposure to pollution, chemicals, and stressors, we can lower risks of chronic diseases and strengthen communities. At the same time, access to natural spaces plays a vital role in healing—green areas reduce stress, encourage active lifestyles,

support childhood development, and improve mental wellbeing for older adults, creating a positive cycle where healthier people are also more likely to protect their environment. Recognizing these links, institutions like the European Union now emphasize integrated policies—such as the [7th Environmental Action Programme](#)—that treat environment, health, and wellbeing not as separate issues, but as inseparable foundations for a healthier future.



An illustrative example of this integrated perspective is presented in the [document “Environment, Health and Wellbeing: A Systemic Approach”](#), which highlights how environmental changes, such as climate-driven shifts in pollen exposure, can directly affect physical health, mental well-being, and societal resilience. The

resource demonstrates why environmental, health, and social policies should not be addressed in isolation but through a systems-based lens that recognises their interdependence.

Environmental Determinants of Wellbeing

Several environmental factors directly influence how long we live and the quality of our daily lives:

Air Quality

- **Allergens:** Climate change has extended the reach of plants like ragweed, making allergies and asthma worse for millions.
- **Pollution:** City air often contains a “cocktail” of chemicals and particles that harm lungs and hearts.
- **Urban Impact:** With nearly 80% of Europe’s population expected to live in cities by 2050, air quality will remain a defining factor for public health, especially for vulnerable groups like the elderly.



Water Quality

Pollution in lakes and rivers is complex, often caused by interactions of multiple chemicals. Just like air, contaminated water can carry harmful substances that affect both ecosystems and human health.

Housing & Urban Design

- **Green Spaces:** Urban trees, gardens, and parks are powerful health boosters, supporting both child development and elderly longevity.
- **Urbanization Challenges:** As urban populations grow, city planning decisions—such as transport systems, building design, and access to green space—will shape how resilient and healthy residents can be in the future.

Social Environment & Community Wellbeing

The social environment and community well-being are profoundly influenced by the quality, accessibility, and design of public spaces within urban areas. These spaces are vital for fostering healthy, inclusive, and resilient communities.

Safe, Inclusive, and Supportive Communities

Safe, inclusive, and supportive communities are foundational for enhancing the health and well-being of urban populations. Public spaces play a crucial role in cultivating such environments by fostering social cohesion and community engagement. They serve as platforms for social interactions, cultural events, and community activities, which in turn strengthen social bonds, reduce social isolation, and improve mental well-being.

The design of public spaces is essential for ensuring inclusivity, catering to diverse needs, and accommodating different age groups and activities through multi-functional designs like playgrounds, open-air gyms, and relaxation areas. Universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces is a key target in global agendas, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities. Well-maintained, accessible public spaces can reduce stress and anxiety, acting as a natural remedy for mental health issues. Furthermore, well-lit, clean, and aesthetically pleasing streets contribute to mental health by providing safe and attractive environments for daily activities. Safety is also enhanced through strategic street design and thoughtful traffic management, which can prevent injuries and accidents.



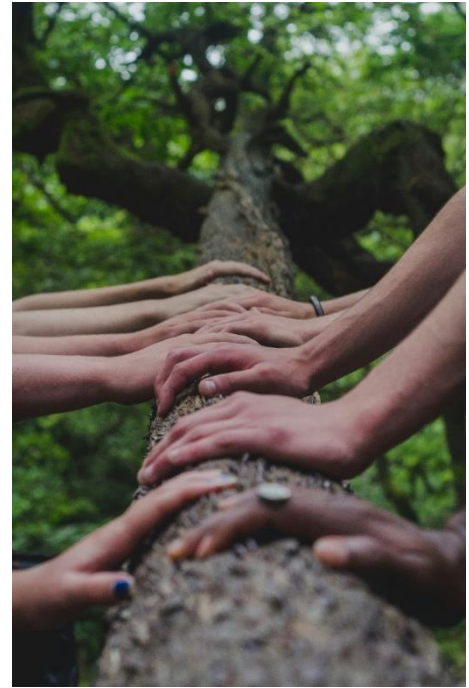
Community engagement is critical in the creation and maintenance of these spaces, ensuring that the needs and aspirations of diverse groups are reflected in their design and management. This participatory approach builds a sense of ownership, trust, and belonging, which is essential for a cohesive urban environment. Public spaces also offer livelihood opportunities, particularly for those facing economic challenges, by supporting informal economic activities, which can alleviate financial stress and its associated psychological distress, contributing to overall mental well-being.

Access to Parks, Public Spaces, and Community Networks

Access to parks, public spaces, and robust community networks is directly linked to better health outcomes and a higher quality of life. Green and open public spaces are crucial for

enhancing urban communities' health and well-being. A well-planned network of public spaces ensures that all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic background, can benefit from these recreational and green areas, which are vital for physical and mental health.

Public spaces encompass a variety of elements, including parks, sidewalks, playgrounds, marketplaces, and streets. Streets, when designed carefully, ensure accessibility and mobility, facilitating access to essential amenities like educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and recreational areas. The global COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical importance of accessible outdoor areas for safe social interaction and physical activity when restrictions were in place.



[UN-Habitat](#) classifies public spaces into streets, open spaces, and public facilities, recommending that 45-50% of urban land use be allocated to streets and open public spaces. These spaces serve as community hubs, bringing people from diverse backgrounds together, fostering social cohesion, inclusivity, and a sense of community belonging through events and gatherings. Investment in public spaces, particularly urban parks, yields significant economic benefits by reducing healthcare costs, promoting healthier lifestyles, and improving air quality. Collaborative efforts among city authorities, residents, and various professional sectors are essential for the provision, maintenance, and upgrading of diverse, enjoyable, clean, and inclusive public spaces throughout the city, which helps to alleviate spatial and environmental inequalities.

Reflection: How does your Community Environment Affect you?

Based on the sources, a community environment significantly affects individuals in multiple ways:

Physical Health:

Access to public spaces like parks, pedestrian paths, cycling lanes, and outdoor exercise facilities encourages physical activity, which helps prevent chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and diabetes. Reduced reliance on motorized transport in well-planned communities improves air quality and respiratory health.

Mental Well-being:

Public spaces provide opportunities for relaxation, stress reduction, and mental wellness through serene environments, green spaces, and community interaction. They mitigate social isolation by fostering social bonds and a sense of belonging. Financial worries, which can be eased by livelihood opportunities in public spaces, are strongly linked to psychological distress, impacting mental health.

Social Connections:

Public spaces facilitate socialisation, community engagement, and intergenerational dialogue, acting as vibrant hubs for events, cultural activities, and gatherings. This strengthens social capital and inclusivity.

Quality of Life:

Overall quality of life is improved through better air quality, access to recreational areas, reduced stress levels, and a stronger sense of community. Well-maintained, multi-functional spaces are crucial for attracting residents and encouraging healthy habits.

Healthy Environments as Foundations for Social Resilience.

A healthy environment, characterized by well-planned, accessible, and inclusive public spaces, significantly strengthens social bonds and community resilience. These spaces act as catalysts for physical activity, mental wellness, social interactions, and community engagement. They



foster a sense of belonging and provide opportunities for diverse communities to come together, share resources, and build stronger ties, as exemplified by community gardening projects. The ability of public spaces to support livelihoods also adds to community resilience by providing economic opportunities and alleviating financial stress. Moreover, well-managed and maintained public spaces contribute to the overall liveability and quality of life, which are essential for long-term community satisfaction and health. Integrating health considerations into urban planning ensures that

the environment supports and enhances the social fabric and adaptive capacity of urban populations.

Eco-Anxiety and Environmental Education

Eco-anxiety is defined as "considerable distress that is caused to a significant degree by the ecological crisis," encompassing a wide range of difficult emotions beyond mere worry. While eco-anxiety can manifest in paralyzing forms, it also possesses an adaptive dimension, referred to as "practical anxiety," which can be a powerful motivator for engagement and action.

The Nature and Forms of Eco-Anxiety

Defining Eco-Anxiety: Eco-anxiety is "considerable distress that is caused to a significant degree by the ecological crisis." This distinguishes it from mild worry. While often used interchangeably with "climate anxiety," the former is a broader term for any "ecological anxiety," with climate anxiety specifically referring to distress from the climate crisis. The [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) defines it as "A chronic fear of environmental doom," though some scholars argue this definition can be too narrow and pathologizing. Many manifestations of eco-anxiety are non-pathological; it is often an adaptive response to the seriousness of the ecological crisis.

Variations and Overlap with Other Emotions: Eco-anxiety is multifaceted and integrally connected with many difficult emotions, psychosocial phenomena, and mental states. These include:

- **Grief/Loss (Ecological Grief, Climate Grief, Solastalgia):** "Grief is used in this literature to mean many kinds of sorrow, sadness, and mourning." Solastalgia specifically refers to "the feeling of homesickness, longing, and sadness that a person may have even though she still lives home, because the home environment is being changed or even destroyed."
- **Guilt and Shame (Eco-guilt):** These are complex emotions, often with societal and cultural dimensions.
- **Anger and Rage (Eco-anger, Climate Rage, Terrafurie):** Often labeled as negative, these can be important for resisting injustice and providing energy for action. "[Albrecht](#) has labored to coin words for ecological emotions, has invented a term called 'terrafurie' to describe anger or rage because of ecological damage."
- **Despair and Helplessness/Powerlessness:** Strong feelings that separate eco-anxiety from milder worry.
- **Depression (Eco-depression):** Persistent low moods and clinically definable depression shaped by the ecological crisis.
- **Trauma (Climate Trauma, Ecological Trauma, Pre-traumatic Stress):** Shock, stupor, and trauma linked to past, present, or anticipated ecological threats. "Scholars have explored the concept of 'pre-traumatic stress' to describe the ways in which the estimated increasing severity of the ecological crisis already now affects people."
- **Overwhelm and Confusion/Absurdity:** Feelings arising from the vastness of global ecological problems.
- **Fear and Worry:** Closely related, with fear typically having a clearer threat.
- **Positivity (Interest, Empowerment, Inspiration, Empathy, Gratitude, Hope):** While eco-anxiety is often associated with negative emotions, it can also connect with positive ones.

Adaptive vs. Paralyzing Dimensions: Anxiety has an "adaptive dimension, which can be called 'practical anxiety'." This is connected with expectation, motivation, and hopes, driving

individuals to seek solutions. However, eco-anxiety can also manifest in paralyzing forms, such as panic attacks, catastrophizing, and strong feelings of helplessness, which hinder functioning.

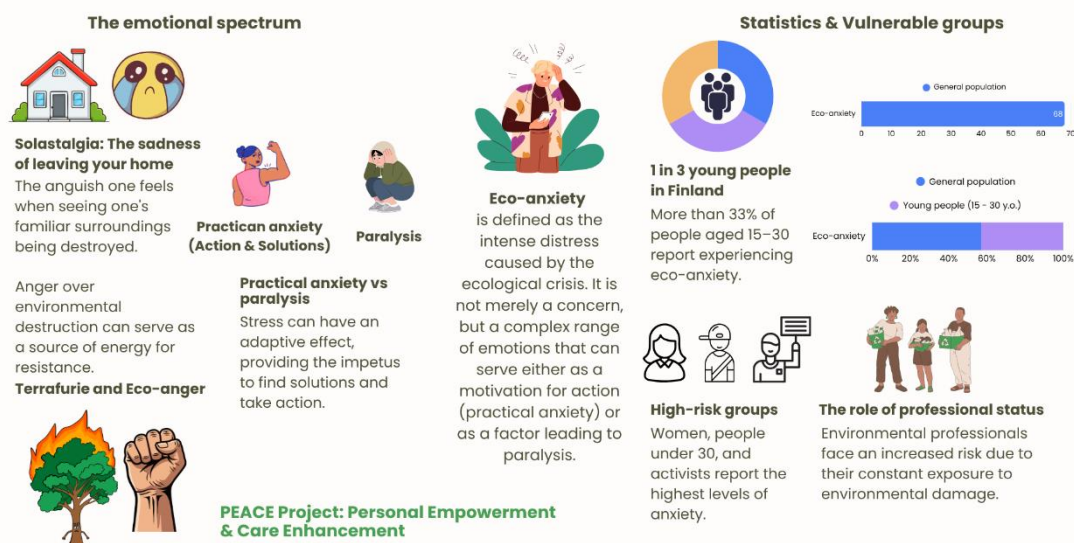
Prevalence and Vulnerabilities

Growing Phenomenon: Eco-anxiety is a "rapidly growing phenomenon" globally, particularly in countries where research has been conducted. Surveys indicate significant prevalence: "[A national survey in Finland in 2019](#)... revealed that 25% of the population recognized some form of climate anxiety in themselves. Of the youngest segment, 15- to 30-year olds, the percentage was over 33%". [In the US in December 2019](#), "68% of the respondents said that they felt at least some eco-anxiety, defined in that survey as climate anxiety, and about 25% said to feel much of that anxiety."

Vulnerable Populations and Factors:

- **Young People and Women:** Surveys indicate that people under 30 years old and women report more eco-anxiety.
- **Climate Activists and Environmental Professionals:** These groups are at increased risk due to constant exposure to ecological damage and underlying environmental values/identities, leading to dangers of burnout.
- **Those Directly Affected by Environmental Changes:** Individuals whose livelihoods depend on the land experience understandable stress when climate change impacts their life.
- **Life Situations:** Having children (or grandchildren) can increase eco-anxiety due to concerns about the future. Choosing a profession or field of study can also be a factor.
- **Socio-economic Status:** Intersectional factors, including socio-economic status, play a role in vulnerability.
- **Unrecognized Eco-Anxiety:** Eco-anxiety can be repressed or remain unrecognized in adults and older people due to socio-political factors and "socially constructed silence.").

Eco-anxiety: Understanding Our Inner Response to the Crisis



The Role of Environmental Education (EE) in Coping with Eco-Anxiety

Current State of EE Research on Emotions: Despite the prevalence of eco-anxiety, there is "relatively little research on them in environmental education." Emotions, especially difficult ones, have been "rather under-researched" in EE. "So-called positive emotions" like hope and empowerment have received more attention than "negative" emotions like grief, anger, and despair.

The Role of Educators:

- **Self-Reflection and Inner Work:** Educators need "organizational and peer support both in relation to their own difficult emotions and in order to develop emotional skills in their work. Educators should first practice self-reflection about eco-anxiety."
- **Emotional Awareness and Sensitivity:** Teachers need to be "sensitive to the emotions among the participants and... aware of their own emotions and reactions."
- **Role Modeling:** Educators serve as living examples of how to cope with eco-anxiety, demonstrating "constructive ways of coping" and even sharing their own "vulnerability, complexity, and ambiguity."

Key Practical Activities for Educators:

Validation of Ecological Emotions:

Publicly confirming the existence and legitimacy of eco-anxiety and related feelings provides relief and creates safe spaces for discussion.



Providing Information about Coping:

Share resources and information on various adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, mindful of the potential for intellectualization as a first step.

Offering Discussion Opportunities:

Create safe spaces for students to discuss their emotions proactively and reactively, potentially using emotion word lists or responding to emotionally charged materials.

Embodied and Creative Activities:

Utilize methods like art-based activities (creative writing, drama, visual arts), place-based education (exploring "dark places"), outdoor/adventure pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy (mindfulness, rituals), and fostering connections with non-human others. "Emotions live in our bodyminds, and embodied activities are especially useful in encountering emotions."

Facilitating Collective Action:

Offer opportunities and information about environmental action, emphasizing collective rather than solely individual efforts to alleviate helplessness and provide a sense of efficacy.

Maintaining Balance and Meaningfulness:

Balance gravity with lightness, remembering joy and gratitude. The educator's role is to "maintain a sense of meaning in life" and demonstrate resilience.

Coping Strategies and Building Emotional Resilience

Key Elements of Coping Strategies:

Alleviating Debilitating Symptoms:

Learning techniques to reduce panic attacks, catastrophizing, and paralyzing anxiety through self-care and support.

Developing Emotional and Mental Health Skills:

This includes "cognitive reframing, critical emotional literacy, learning to both control and to channel emotional energy, and building daily routines that increase well-being for our bodyminds."

Meaning-Focused Coping:

Maintaining a sense of meaning in life, often combining problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. "Ojala's empirical research has shown that those people who practice meaning-focused coping in their environmental action and attitudes are, on average, better able to avoid denial and burnout."

Participation in Problem-Solving:

Engaging in both individual and collective action, with a strong emphasis on collective efforts to counter feelings of helplessness.

Peer Support and Community Building:

Finding support among others.

Nature Connection:

Developing and maintaining a strong connection to nature.

The Role of Hope vs. Meaningfulness:

There is ongoing debate about using "hope" terminology. Some fear it leads to passivity, while others emphasize "good" or "active" hope. A common ground is found in the need to "practice courage and maintain a sense of meaning in life, regardless of whether one uses hope terms or not."

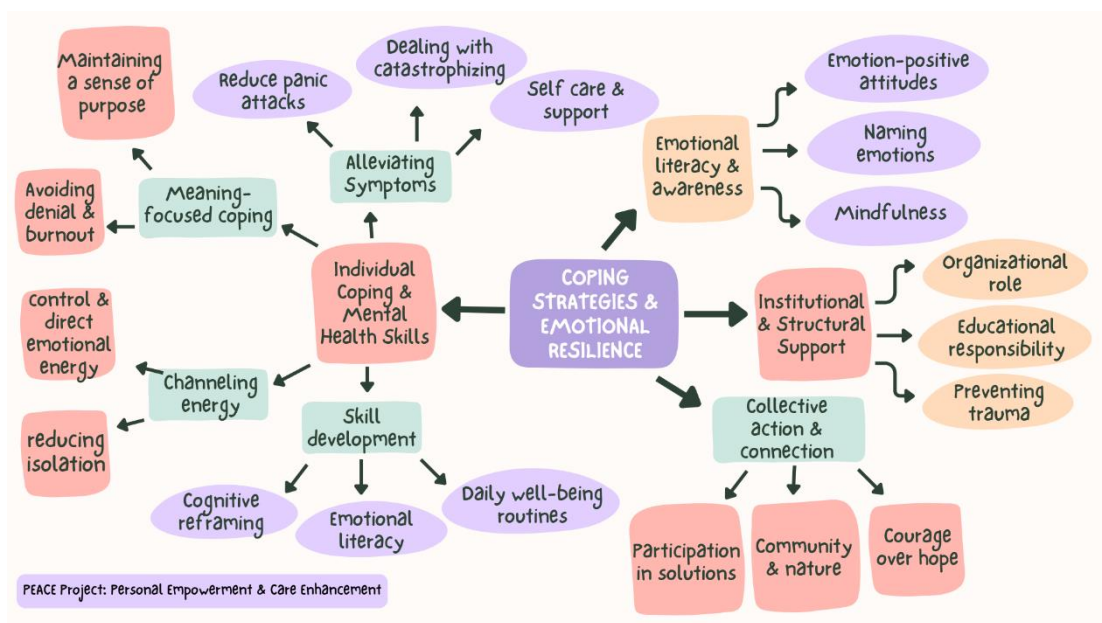
Emotional Skills and Literacy:

- **Emotion-Positive Attitudes:** Understanding that all emotions have "life-serving functions" and challenging the dismissal of "negative" emotions.
- **Emotional Awareness:** Becoming conscious of one's own emotions and the "cultural politics of emotion," often through practices like mindfulness.
- **Naming Emotions:** This helps in channeling emotional energy constructively, though alexithymia (inability to name emotions) is common. Creative and embodied means may be needed first.
- **Channeling and Controlling Emotional Energy:** Developing skills to manage and direct emotional energy through various methods, from sports to rituals.

Institutional and Structural Considerations

Organizational Development: Organizations should create protocols for sharing information, build support structures (e.g., peer support groups), and provide continuing education for educators. Leadership plays a crucial role in encouraging eco-anxiety work, despite potential challenges like leaders grappling with multiple pressures or being out of touch with their own emotions. Collaboration with multi-disciplinary teams (including eco-psychological expertise) is vital for developing emotionally supportive educational practices.

Addressing Systemic Challenges: The "structural challenges posed by eco-anxiety for educational institutions and practices have been explored by several scholars." The focus should be on preventing the "traumas that previous generations have experienced during their studies" and supporting students emotionally. A critical examination of the "plurality of possible aims in education" is needed in times of ecological upheaval.



Take away:

- Eco-anxiety is a growing concern that must be addressed in environmental education.
- It can cause distress but also motivate awareness, resilience, and constructive action.
- Educators, with institutional support, can equip future generations with both knowledge and emotional tools to navigate ecological challenges.

Activities

Individual reflection:

Think about the environment where you live or work (neighbourhood, city, community). Reflect on how environmental conditions influence different aspects of your well-being. Reflection prompts:

- ❖ How does air quality, noise, or access to green spaces affect your physical or mental health?
- ❖ Which environmental factors make daily life easier or more stressful?
- ❖ Are these impacts experienced equally by everyone in your community?

Guided reflection:

Environmental literacy is not only about knowledge, but also about awareness, attitudes, and action. Reflection prompts:

- ❖ What environmental information do you regularly encounter (news, social media, work, education)?
- ❖ How confident do you feel in understanding and evaluating this information?
- ❖ What small actions do you already take that support environmental and social well-being?

Self-awareness exercise:

Read the description of eco-anxiety in this unit and take a moment to reflect on your emotional responses to environmental issues. Reflection prompts:

- ❖ Do environmental concerns ever make you feel anxious, overwhelmed, or powerless?
- ❖ Which emotions arise most often (fear, sadness, guilt, anger, hope)?
- ❖ How do these emotions influence your engagement or avoidance of environmental topics?

Action-oriented reflection:

Choose one environmental issue that concerns you (e.g. climate change, pollution, loss of green spaces). Reflection prompts:

- ❖ What is one realistic action you could take at an individual, community, or workplace level?
- ❖ Who could you collaborate with to make this action more effective?
- ❖ How might taking action support both environmental and personal well-being?

Summary - Key takeaways

Environmental literacy helps us understand how environmental conditions, social structures and individual well-being are deeply interconnected. A healthy environment supports physical health, mental well-being, social cohesion and community resilience, while environmental degradation and climate change can contribute to stress, inequality, and eco-anxiety. By strengthening environmental awareness, emotional literacy, and community-based action,

individuals and societies can transform concern about environmental challenges into meaningful engagement, resilience, and sustainable well-being.

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<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41370-021-00346-0>

Further resources

[Unit 15 - Environment Health and Wellbeing](#) (Retrieved from [here](#))

[TEDx Talks. \(2023\). Eco-anxiety to Climate Optimism | Lyn Stoler | TEDxManhattanBeach](#)

[Podcast with Todd Klawinski. 289-Making Environmental Literacy Part of Public Education. \(2022\).](#)

The Invisible Debt Spiral

Brief Description:

Nick is a 45-year-old office employee in a densely populated neighborhood of the city. His daily routine involves long hours at work, commuting through heavy traffic and limited exposure to natural environments. The area where he lives has few green spaces, high levels of noise and noticeable air pollution.

Over time, Nick began to feel physically tired and drained mentally. He experienced increased stress and found it difficult to relax or disconnect from daily pressures. Although he was aware of environmental issues such as climate change and pollution, he felt that these problems were too large for him to influence. This sense of helplessness led him to disengage from environmental topics altogether.

One day, Nick noticed a local initiative promoting community gardening and urban green spaces. Curious but hesitant, he decided to participate. Through this experience, he began reconnecting with nature and meeting people in his community, gradually improving both his well-being and his sense of agency.

Problem Description:

Nick's main challenge is the negative impact of an urban environment on his physical and mental well-being, combined with feelings of eco-anxiety and lack of personal agency in addressing environmental issues.

Emotional/Physical Effects:

- Chronic stress and mental fatigue
- Reduced motivation and low energy levels
- Feelings of helplessness and disconnection
- Limited social interaction and sense of isolation

Response/Intervention

By participating in a local community gardening initiative, Nick was able to reconnect with nature and develop a sense of contribution. The experience helped him build social connections and engage in meaningful environmental action at a local level.

This environment reduced his stress, improved his mood and increased his awareness of how small actions can make a difference. It also helped him shift from passive concern to active participation, illustrating how environmental literacy and the engagement with the community can enhance both personal well-being and social resilience.

Reflection Questions:

1. How did Nick's environment affect his overall well-being?
2. What role did community engagement play in improving his situation?
3. How can individuals overcome feelings of helplessness related to environmental challenges?

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