skills, learning to problem solve, and turning increasingly to their peers as they establish and test out a set of values (Wong et al., 2021). Contemporary adolescents must contend with complex and unprecedented emotional and environmental stressors as they do this developmental work. In 2021, 29% of adolescents reported experiencing "poor mental health," with 22% claiming to have seriously considered suicide (*YRBS Data Summary & Trends Report*, 2024).

Though more study is needed in this area, early research indicates that climate change is one significant stressor, causing symptoms ranging from stress and feelings of abandonment to clinical diseases such as anxiety, depression, and self-harm tendencies (Cook et al., 2025; Hickman et al., 2021; Mondal et al., 2024). Relational-Cultural Theory suggests that supportive therapeutic relationships forged between counselors and struggling adolescents could buffer these negative developmental impacts (Miller, 1976), while Ecological Systems Theory reminds counselors to attend to the systemwide consequences of climate change on adolescents, from its effects within a teen's immediate environment (their microsystem) all the way to its impact on the socio-historical context in which adolescent development is occurring (their chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Program Abstract

Nowadays, adolescents are growing up amid increasing climate instability, making them particularly vulnerable to the emotional and developmental impacts of the environmental crisis. This session explores how climate anxiety—a chronic fear of environmental catastrophe—and related phenomena like eco-grief and solastalgia affect early adolescent development, particularly in the realms of identity formation, emotional regulation, and future-oriented thinking (Clayton et. al, 2021).

Grounded in developmental theory and evidence-based mental health practices, this forum introduces eco-therapy and related techniques as school-based interventions. We will share practical strategies for school counselors to help students process climate-related distress, strengthen their connection to the natural world and to each other, and transform emotional overwhelm into agency. Emphasis will be placed on culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate approaches, including group-based interventions and nature-anchored coping techniques.

Learning Outcomes

1. Attendees will understand the differences between ecological or climate grief, eco-anxiety, and solastalgia, as well as the ways in which they impact adolescents' development and mental health.

2. Attendees will learn how eco-therapy and related modalities can be applied to promote mental health and well-being in adolescents dealing with climate grief and anxiety.

3. Attendees will learn how school counselors can develop a programmatic toolkit to address the developmental, cultural, and ethical impacts of climate grief and anxiety on adolescents.

Program Synopsis

As science reveals more about the consequences of climate change, anxiety about the planet's future is rising—especially among young people (Clayton et. al, 2021). Research shows that 60% of 16- to 25-year-olds are worried about climate change, with nearly half reporting daily impacts from this anxiety (Schmidt, 2023). In this presentation, we will examine how

climate anxiety and eco-grief disrupt early adolescent development and how school counselors can proactively respond. Drawing from current research on eco-anxiety and climate grief, the presentation highlights how systemic environmental threats create a sense of hopelessness in adolescence (Clayton et. al, 2021). We examine how eco-anxiety and grief can emerge during adolescence—through symptoms like panic attacks, insomnia, and emotional paralysis, as well as anxiety, depression, and self-harm (Mondal et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2023)—and how school counselors can effectively respond in educational settings.

Attendees will gain an understanding of eco-therapy, a nature-based intervention model that helps foster a sense of connection, calm, and agency in adolescents. Therapeutic techniques include action-based group interventions like climate clubs, cognitive reframing, and nature-grounded experiences (Clayton et. al, 2021). This session emphasizes practical strategies for school counselors working with students disproportionately impacted by climate events, while also addressing the cultural impacts on marginalized communities. Given the urgency of the climate crisis and its growing psychological toll on youth, this presentation offers timely, actionable tools for counselors aiming to support resilience, community-building, and hope.

Cultural and Ethical Considerations

Unlike other forms of loss, climate grief often lacks a cultural support system or social acknowledgment, meaning there are few established cultural practices or rituals to help process grief associated with current and anticipated climate-induced losses (Allen, 2020). This gap in support is especially hard on marginalized communities and cultures whose identities are closely tied to the natural environment. These groups are disproportionately affected by climate change,

experiencing forms of cultural destruction such as the loss of language, disruption to traditional livelihoods, destruction of heritage sites, forced migration, and the inability to practice customary traditions (Climate Rights International, 2025). Counselors must acknowledge that climate change is a systemic issue and that expressions of anxiety or grief may manifest differently based on a student's age, culture, and background. Counselors should validate these feelings as natural and understandable responses to an existential threat (Comtesse et al., 2021).

Ethically, school counselors, and by extension, the broader adult and governmental structures, have a responsibility to address the emotional impacts of climate change on adolescents. Teens' feelings of betrayal and abandonment come from adults and governments not taking enough action. This inaction can cause moral injury, making young people feel their future is in danger and a sense of hopelessness for humanity because decision-makers aren't doing what's needed. Adults, including school counselors, must honestly address climate change and its mental health implications for younger generations. (Hickman et al., 2021).