

Tony Bradley

Good afternoon. I'm Tony Bradley. I teach in Liverpool Hope University Business School. I'm an environmental scientist by background.

I'm just going to say a few words. I'll try to limit what I say to about seven or eight minutes to give an opportunity for some Q&A if you have anything you'd like to ask about, talk about, or share in discussion. It's not about me; it's about you.

The key thing is that there is a mental health crisis amongst young people. We know it's deepening all the time. We see this in universities incredibly. It's deepened dramatically since the pandemic.

All sorts of unintended consequences happen in life, and the pandemic created a lot of unintended consequences that we're still trying to understand and fathom. We see this not only with our home students but also with our international students. It seems to be a global phenomenon.

There is a big project, which we haven't won yet, but we may well win it. We're down to the last few teams from the European Union looking at empowering mental health amongst young people. We are part of a consortium of universities, practitioners, mental health bodies, and young people's agencies across Europe working on a project called **Empowering MH**.

One of the things I said when I was asked to think about this was: have you noticed that there's been a climate and biodiversity crisis going on around the globe? This is impacting young people in incredible ways.

I'm going to give you some statistics, but the statistics are not the most important thing. What's important is understanding what's going on in people's hearts, minds, and lives.

Eco-anxiety and anxiety about the future are becoming major issues. Most of you are younger than me. Some of you have a few grey hairs and are in a similar age bracket to me. We may not be as aware of this as my eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old undergraduates and my master's students aged twenty-three to thirty.

Many of them feel this intensely. They are worried, anxious, even frightened about what the future holds because of the constant stream of reporting they receive and because they're not stupid. They can see what's going on.

But it's not all doom and gloom.

Today's topic is **Liverpool Hope University: From Eco-Anxiety to Eco-Action – Addressing Young People's Environmental Mental Health**.

There is an increasing amount of research being done on this. I'm undertaking my own research and have been researching environmental action groups with colleagues for the last forty years.

The British Psychological Society reports that nearly three-quarters of UK youth say the future is frightening. You would hope that young people would say the future is

exciting, full of opportunities and creative possibilities. Yet many say the future is frightening.

Approximately 72% of UK youth say the future is frightening because of the ways in which the climate is changing. We may not all agree exactly about the nature of that change, but it is certainly having an impact, at least perceptually through media reporting and other influences.

Across the world, some young people are deciding not to have children because they don't want to bring children into the world they believe is coming.

A Woodland Trust survey conducted through YouGov found that about a quarter of young people in the UK are considering not having children specifically because of climate fears.

In that same report, around 85% reported that access to nature improves mental health.

My wife and I live in South Cumbria in the Lake District. We have mountains and forests outside our window. I was born in Liverpool 8, in Toxteth. Many young people report that their mental health is improved not necessarily by leaving cities, but by having access to some form of green space.

Only around 16% of young people in Britain have access to green space within 500 metres of their home.

A major cross-national survey across twenty-five European countries, involving more than 50,000 participants, found that just under half felt very or extremely worried about climate change. Eco-anxiety levels were high in countries such as Germany and Spain, though lower in parts of Central and Eastern Europe where there are other immediate concerns.

Research has linked eco-anxiety to poor self-rated health, lower life satisfaction, and increasing psychological distress.

However, it isn't all bad news.

Who am I going to mention in terms of young people's eco-activism? Greta Thunberg.

Whatever you think about Greta Thunberg, she—along with figures such as Malala Yousafzai and many other young leaders—has stimulated a movement that is making a difference.

Our Bright Futures programme found that 86% of participants reported improved mental health, and 95% felt more confident after engaging in some sort of environmental project.

That doesn't necessarily mean attending climate marches. It could be conservation work in a local woodland or another community-based environmental project.

Activism can give young people a sense of control, contribution, and community. These are protective factors against depression and anxiety. Colleagues at the

University of Sheffield found that youth-led climate groups often foster community and inclusive environments that guard against burnout and stress.

Across Europe, youth activism is described as participation in creating a new world—a radical act of hope in the face of systemic failure.

This has educational implications. Eco-anxiety is not going anywhere soon. It's shaping life decisions.

For educators like us, it creates opportunities to integrate climate resilience and emotional literacy into wellbeing curricula, and to use nature-based interventions.

We have a beautiful campus at Liverpool Hope University. Our previous Vice-Chancellor intentionally created a green campus because he understood that if people enjoy the environment in which they live and work, it has many positive impacts on their lives.

Creating safe spaces for climate dialogue, validating students' concerns, and empowering action are all important.

One of our main concerns is helping young people move beyond eco-anxiety through environmental engagement, eco-activism, and participation in the green movement.

We would love to work with people in this room. I'd love us to host a seminar at Hope University and continue the conversation.

That's me. Are there any comments, questions, or thoughts?

Pause.

Stunned silence—my normal response. Go ahead.

Man from the Audience

So obviously we're talking about eco-anxiety. What small changes do you think we can make now as a community?

Tony Bradley

One of the key things is to work with your community leaders and work in community groups.

One project in the city I'd like to mention is the regeneration work at Bowring Park Golf Club. They've done a tremendous job there in Knowsley.

What they've demonstrated is the power of participative working. Work with your community and ask: what can we do about green spaces? How can we improve the local environment?

We don't need to be thinking solely about world-class environmental changes. Small things matter: hedgehog highways, bird boxes, and planting trees—although it's important to plant the right trees, in the right places, at the right time.

The key is collaboration. How can your community come together and improve the local environment?

Liverpool has a remarkable history. It was one of the first cities to create a ring of green spaces around the city during the nineteenth century. Liverpool has a strong pedigree in this area.

Engage with your politicians. Engage with your community. Build collaboration. Build a sense of ownership of your environment.

Only 16% of young people have access to green space within 500 metres of their homes in the UK. That's a shocking statistic.

Thanks for your question.

Woman from the Audience

Are there any more projects that the university is doing?

Tony Bradley

Yes. One significant project is that we've changed our whole curriculum this year.

We've introduced something called **Grand Challenges** for all undergraduate and postgraduate students. One of the key challenges is sustainability.

It doesn't matter whether students are studying business, IT, creative arts, psychology, or another subject. They all work in small groups to address sustainability.

For me, sustainability is about people, purpose, planet, profit, and priorities.

We're using this initiative to embed students within local communities, particularly around our campus areas.

Thank you. It's lovely to be with you. I'm sorry I'm dashing off to another seminar.

If there are any comments, questions, discussions, or opportunities to meet together in a collaborative and participative way, please get in touch.

Thank you so much.

[Applause]