

The link between pollution, depression and anxiety

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The public's outrage to the planned removal of the Mosta trees shows that people value the importance of green open spaces and recognise their importance for their health and well-being, psychiatrists have said.



“In the past we spoke about protecting trees, seas and animal conservation... we are now shifting towards talking about protecting them – not only for their sake, but also because failing to protect them would have a negative impact on us,” said Rachel Taylor-East, president of the Malta Association of Psychiatry (MAP).

A Misco survey published in June showed that 72% of the public are concerned about the general state of the environment. Last year, a study by EY showed that 93% of young people believe the state of Malta's environment is getting worse with overdevelopment cited as the country's biggest challenge.

Psychiatrists said they were seeing environmental concerns reflected in several ways. Young people are increasingly listing the environment as one of their main concerns, while environmental factors like noise pollution, urbanisation and lack of green spaces made people feel more stressed and anxious.

This week the public rallied for the environment after images of 12 heavily pruned mature ficus trees started circulating in the media. The pruning took place before the planned uprooting of the trees from the area, near the Mosta parish church.

The plan was to relocate the trees and replace with others as part of the regeneration project in the area. Action by Moviment Graffiti activists drew widespread support and the council was forced to reverse its decision.

“Clearly we need to safeguard our green spaces if we have our country's mental health at heart,” said Lorraine Azzopardi, a child and adolescent consultant psychiatrist and an MAP committee member.

“It is clear that green spaces have a positive impact on our mental health and there is a link between depression and anxiety and pollution. Internationally, the World Health Organisation is putting an emphasis on addressing mental health in policies related to climate change and the American Psychological Association has also made this its priority,” she said.

For this reason, she said, this year's MAP conference is trying to increase awareness locally on the link between mental health and our environment.

Economist Marie Briguglio, who specialises in behavioural and environmental economics, said: “Well-being in Malta has been in decline in recent years, measured by people’s own life evaluation. It is worth noting that the lowest levels of wellbeing in Malta are recorded in the most congested, highly built up and densely populated areas.”

Titled ‘Our Mental Health and the Environment’, the MAP twoday conference will be held on November 28 and 29 at the Mediterranean Conference

Centre. Bringing together a community of academics, professionals, activists and experts, it seeks to not only share information and create awareness, but also call policy makers to action to invest in prevention strategies and work towards achieving optimal mental health for all.

For more information visit: <https://map.org.mt/map-annual-conference-2023-our-mental-health-the-environment/>