

Climate Change and Mental Health

Lunchtime Seminar, 30 June 2021, Nelson

Mental Health Challenges

Bubble-wrap: denial and dissociation

We all have some kind of 'bubble-wrap' to protect us from being overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. Collectively our defences against facing up to climate crisis resist change and enable us to continue 'business as usual' even though we know this is not working.

- wishful thinking, hope for the best
- focus on small practical things and ignore the big things
- feeling overwhelmed with immediate problems so push climate problems aside
- deny the science, drawn to doubt, cynicism and conspiracy theories
- 'I'm all right', withdraw into personal security
- collective silence: let's not talk about it.

... *'dissociation', 'denial', 'disengagement', 'empathy loss'*

Dread: eco-anxiety and pre-traumatic stress

Eco anxiety is:

- "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (APA)
- "the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse" (Albrecht)
- "difficult feelings because of the ecological crisis" (Pihkala)

Trauma is when our sense of safety is shattered by events that overwhelm our ability to cope. This impacts on daily lives ...

- constantly reliving the event and being 'on edge', feeling that danger may strike
- difficult to think clearly, plan ahead or be proactive
- blocking all feeling and avoiding anything which feels like threat: numb.

Across the world people are already experiencing traumatic climate events (worsened by COVID-19), e.g. climate refugees.

Eco anxiety is a form of *'Pre-Traumatic Stress'*:

- stuck in helplessness anticipation of a future traumatising event
- not able to do anything about it or protect yourself or others.

Symptoms are: "the anger, the panic, the obsessive, intrusive thoughts. ... increasingly evident among those who stare at the problem of climate change head-on: climate scientists, climate journalists and climate activists." (Lisa van Susteren)

Information overload and constant busyness can lead to 'climate burnout'

Unfair: moral injury and injustice

"Eco-anxiety is actually a moral emotion: it is based on an accurate appraisal of the severity of the ecological crisis." (Pihkala)

Climate change highlights and intensifies many aspects of injustice: between nations and between generations.

Moral Injury is a violation of our sense of what is right:

“The helplessness of feeling caught up in a vast machine that prevents one from acting with care and conscience. Feeling one's own experience and sense of reality is brushed aside and does not count. Many people now report feeling this way about the economic and political world in which they live, that inevitably generates a climate crisis. Suffering moral injury is a sign of mental health, not disorder. It means that one's conscience is alive!” (Sally Weintrobe)

Loss: grief and lament

Grief is the process of coming to terms with loss

We have rituals for grieving when a loved one dies, but how do we grieve the destruction of natural places and species? Ecological grief is a painful, but honest response to the loss of forests or species extinction.

Grief, especially ecological grief, can be complicated by shame & guilt, and anger & rage. Like anxiety, grief is multi-layered and interacts with events in our personal lives.

“We are still struggling to acknowledge what we have already lost, and what is too late for us to save. Our failure to acknowledge these things does not make them go away. To lament we first name the damage, give space where this damage can be addressed, then allow grief to be expressed, act out repentance and restitution, and so access restoring forgiveness. Hope, like lament, then becomes a way of being in the world.” (*Hannah Malcolm*)

Resources:

- Climate Psychology Alliance podcast: 13 October 2019, ‘**Eco-anxiety, eco-despair, eco-depression, eco-grief?**’
- Article on Research Gate: ‘**Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety**’, Panu Pihkala, *Sustainability*, September 2020
- TED talk by Per Espen Stoknes, ‘**How to transform apocalypse fatigue into action on global warming**’, September 2017

Discuss in pairs:

- *How have you noticed these challenges affecting you personally? your clients? other people you know?*
- *Is anxiety about the world a bad thing? How might it be helpful or unhelpful?*

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Mental Health Strategies

“A key question seems to be: how to increase the adaptive potential in people’s experiences of eco-anxiety and to alleviate the paralyzing forms of eco-anxiety?” (Pihkala)

Intake: managing the overwhelm

Good information is an essential part of good action. However, too much information can be re-traumatising. Consider intake from social media, news, research, with the goal of engaging constructively and avoiding overload.

Collective action: courage together

Although climate anxiety is painful, “practical eco-anxiety leads people to re-evaluate the situation, search for better information, and to make changes in individual and collective behavior.” (Pihkala)

“Social action serves as the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. It creates an alliance with others, based on cooperation and shared purpose.” (Judith Herman)

Move from paralysis to empowerment through practical action, e.g. environmental education and advocacy, expressing ethics and integrity. Integrate sustainability into your work and home.

Hauora: nurturing wellbeing, connection to place

“Because global ecological problems cannot be solved in the near future, there is a need for skills of living with anxieties and distress.” (Pihkala)

We need skills for managing anxiety, not trying to get completely rid of them.

Nature connection: There’s a wealth of academic research evidence showing that nature has many positive benefits on our health and well-being. Being in a natural environment reduces stress and soothes our body chemistry, affecting not only our mood, but also our endocrine, nervous and immune systems.

Human connection is vital for wellbeing: friendship, whanau.

Place: where feels like home? Which places feed you, practically and imaginatively?

What is the role of spirituality, wairua, mediation, inner peace?

Also strategies for exercise, healthy eating, helpful routines to change our relationship with anxiety and reduce the impact of stress.

Role clarity: what is my mahi to do?

A key strategy is to find a role to play in constructively addressing climate change.

Use my skills, talents, and things I enjoy.

Connect with others in working together.

Discuss in different pairs:

- *What strategies do I use?*
- *What do I need more of?*
- *What could be helpful to my clients?*

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