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A reckoning with climate distress: Restoring hope and igniting meaningful actions

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Climate change affects our emotional wellbeing.[1,2] With increasing exposures to climate-related hazards, dire projections by climate scientists, and the news media highlighting our impending doom in epic proportions, it is no wonder so many of us are feeling worried, anxious and hopeless about climate change. In fact, a recent article on the nature of climate anxiety — authored by one of the foremost leaders in climate change and mental health research — highlights that 'the range of potential sufferers' of climate anxiety includes 'anyone who knows about climate change'.[3] She goes on to say: 'In other words, given the reach of communications technology, almost everyone', regardless of personal susceptibility. 'or relative safety' (p. 2).

While climate change has the potential to affect everyone emotionally, I am not suggesting it necessarily does; however, even if one in every 100 people struggles with climate anxiety, this still amounts to a large number. Noting this enormous range of people who may be experiencing climate anxiety, how do we cope with feelings of distress related to climate change while maintaining hope for our future? Further, how do we cope with this distress and sustain actions to protect planetary health and our own wellbeing?

In this chapter I will discuss how we can maintain our wellbeing while responding to the climate crisis in such a way that averts burnout and apathy by exploring the seminal work of Johanna Macy and Chris Johnstone on Active Hope,[4] and Maria Ojala's exploration of meaning-focused coping to address climate change.[5] I suggest that navigating non-pathological climate distress requires a reckon with the suffering and discomfort we may feel as we face the climate crisis. It is through a reckoning of climate despair that we can unearth the depths of our emotional responses so that we may move forward towards climate actions that cultivate true meaning in our lives and give us renewed hope for the future of the planet.

A reckoning with despair and suffering is not exclusive to addressing climate anxiety, nor has this approach emerged specifically from climate and health research; rather, this approach rests within modern psychology and traditional mindfulness-based practices. This approach, however, appears particularly resonant within the context of adapting to the mental health consequences of climate change.

I take a deep dive into how a reckoning with our emotional responses to climate change also necessitates a reckoning with systemic injustices (social, racial and environmental) that permeate the inequitable health outcomes from the climate crisis. It is well understood that climate-related hazards tend to disproportionately affect those already facing health inequities based on social, biological and environmental determinants of health.[6] I suggest that it is within the act of reckoning that the difficult and timely work takes place to allow us to authentically address climate injustices and act in meaningful ways to

address the climate crisis, while putting wellness — the collective and connected wellness of ourselves, others, and the planet — at the forefront. I explore the key components of Active Hope and meaning-focused coping that set forth an agenda of reckoning with the emotional responses to the climate crisis. Before delving into the substantive topic area, I first differentiate between pathological and non-pathological climate distress, and then contextualise the meaning of hope within the climate crisis.

Unpacking climate distress

There is an important distinction to bring to bear at the fore of any discussion about the impacts of climate change on emotional wellbeing; this distinction is between pathological responses to climate change and non-pathological responses to a climate in crisis. Our emotional and behavioural responses to climate change tend to become pathological when they impact our abilities to maintain our day-to-day livelihoods.[3] One such example is of the first reported cases of 'climate change delusion' documented in Melbourne, Australia, when a man in his late teens with pre-existing mental health needs was admitted to a psychiatric ward because of his refusal to drink water over his concerns for pervasive drought related to climate change.[7] In instances such as this, where day-to-day livelihoods are greatly affected and/or there are behaviours that harm (or have the potential to harm) others or self, formal mental health care from mental health practitioners is needed.

The focus of this chapter is on addressing the non-pathological responses to the climate crisis that affect our mental health and wellbeing. These responses may include emotional

responses such as worry, grief, fear, hopelessness, sadness and general distress related to exposures to climate change hazards and/or knowledge of the climate change problem.

As of late, new terminology has been developed that characterises many of these climate-related emotional responses. These terms include: ecoanxiety, ecogrief, ecoguilt, ecoparalysis, and solastalgia.[8,9,10,11] Briefly, *ecoanxiety* refers to the distress and fear people may experience as they face the climate crisis and resulting ecological degradation.[12] *Ecogrief* refers to experiences of loss, or anticipated losses, related to ecological degradation and climate change.[13] *Ecoguilt* refers to the shame and blame we may feel as contributors to the climate change problem and its inequitable effects, while *ecoparalysis* refers to the immobilising experiences of shame, guilt, and hopelessness of not being able to do anything grand enough to address the climate change problem.[14] *Solastalgia* relates to a lost sense of place, often referred to as feeling homesick in our home environment because of perceived ecological destruction related to climate change.[15] *Climate distress* is the term I will be using throughout to encompass the aforementioned responses of anxiety, grief, guilt, paralysis, and lost sense of place related to our knowledge and experiences with climate change.

In the sections below, I discuss some of the current pathways to navigate this reckoning by relying on the work of leaders in this field, like Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, who highlight the importance of Active Hope — a process of being fully present with our responses to our climate crisis so that we may open ourselves to what we are carrying while

identifying what future direction we would like to move in that protects planetary health and honours our own and others' wellbeing.[16] I also explore how this reckoning can facilitate meaning-focused coping that spurs climate actions by highlighting the work of Maria Ojala, who provides empirical evidence of how meaning-focused coping can result in increased wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviours, particularly among adolescents.[5]

What's hope got to do with it?

Before delving into an overview on reckoning with climate despair, it is prudent to first talk about hope. How does hope hinder or help us navigate complicated emotional responses to climate change? What exactly do we mean by hope? Can hope really help us to weather the emotional storms brought forth by our awareness and understanding of climate change?

First, it is important to define and differentiate between a few different forms of hope. There is the conceptualisation of hope in the climate crisis where we really hope something will get done to address the issue; however, we are co-opting this hope onto others because perhaps we don't feel we have the patience, skills, resources, time, abilities and so on to really address the issues in any meaningful or substantive way that will protect the planet and its inhabitants. This passive hope, or what is sometimes defined as 'false hope', seems to keep us trapped within the status quo and feelings of ecoparalysis.

Derrick Jensen, in his 2006 article titled 'Beyond Hope', exemplifies this by stating: 'Hope is what keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing destruction to the Earth', 'and 'hope is a longing

for a future condition over which you have no agency; it means you are essentially powerless'.[17] In this vein, hope essentially ties us to a sense of disavowal, one of the most dangerous forms of climate denial, which has been described as the simultaneous state of knowing about climate change (seeing with one eye open), and doing nothing about it (one eye closed).[18] What, then, does hope have to do with addressing the emotional complexities of the climate crisis? When we look towards the work of systems thinker and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy and her teachings of the Work that Reconnects, a new vision of hope emerges as does a new way of addressing the emotional consequences of climate change.[19]

The Work that Reconnects is a practice of active hope that begins with gratitude, then honouring our pain for the world, then seeing with new or ancient eyes, and going forth. Active hope offers us the opportunity to bear witness to our climate despair; and instead of numbing the pain or using tactics of distraction or denial, we delve deeper — with curiosity and openness — to allow the depths of our connection to our environment guide our emotional and behavioural responses.

Active hope is eloquently highlighted in Macy and Chris Johnstone's aptly titled book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy*[20] as 'something we *do* rather than have' (p. 3). Active hope is not rooted in disavowal or avoidance, but rather in being fully present with our current experiences with the climate crisis, exploring and confronting the depths of our grief, honouring this pain, seeing the issue with both eyes wide open, and then setting forth towards a path of action rooted in inner growth, compassion (with self

and others), and renewed meaning of our relationship and connectedness to planetary health as well as our own inner growth and wellness.

The reckoning

Many practitioners suggest that the antidote to the (non-pathological) despair brought on by our knowledge and awareness of climate change is action.[21,22] I tend to agree with this line of thinking; however, I suggest that in order to engage in actions in meaningful and sustained ways — that don't result in burnout — a reckoning with climate despair is needed to enhance meaning-focused coping that emboldens our abilities to act. The rationale for this line of thinking is that without a reckoning with our difficult emotional responses, we run the risk of ignoring the depths of our despair and instead chain ourselves to the dis-ease of busyness and distraction that can lead towards burnout and/or apathy. The difficult process of acknowledging and sitting with suffering (our own and that of others and our planet) can seem too overwhelming or intense, and perhaps can be seen as slowing us down when climate actions are so urgently needed. However, in acknowledging and reckoning with this suffering we may lessen its grip and pursue more meaningful climate actions in a sustained way predicated on self-awareness, connectedness to all beings and the environment, and compassion that allows for emotional growth and planetary healing.

In Macy and Johnstone's work on active hope they suggest that an attitude of gratitude is a precursor to honouring our pain for the world (what I refer to as 'the reckoning').[23] These authors suggest that gratitude is an energising alternative to

'guilt or fear as a source of motivation' (p. 56). Gratitude is an attitude of thankful acknowledgment of the environment as the ultimate determinant of our health. We can be grateful for the air we breathe and the natural surroundings upon which we live, work and play. This practice of appreciation ultimately reminds us of the importance the natural environment has to our lives and the duty we all have in protecting, restoring and conserving the natural environment. From a point of gratitude, we can honour the pain we feel for a climate in crisis.

Gratitude provides the openness needed to bear witness to our pain. It is here that many of us prefer to close up, stiffen, and ignore the climate problem or ignore our emotional responses by distracting ourselves with 'doing' rather than being with our difficult emotions. However, it is here in the reckoning where our inner growth can emerge so that meaningful actions can arise and be sustained. It is here where the depths of our despair are acknowledged that we speak the truth of our fear, shame and guilt, and it is also here where we reckon with our privilege that contributes to systemic injustices that place those already facing health inequities at greatest risk to the ill-health effects of climate change. However, this reckoning is uncomfortable, as authors of a recent commentary on a healthy response to climate change acknowledge; exploring our feelings of ecological grief and anxiety may, in fact, be 'the crucible through which humanity must pass to harness the energy and conviction that are needed for the lifesaving changes now required'[24] to address climate change. This reckoning awakens us to the possibility of finding meaning in our actions, actions predicated on a renewed

vision of the future that includes planetary health and emotional wellbeing.

Notably too, bearing witness to our grief and honouring our pain for the world does not need to be an individual practice. Processing collective grief can be 'unifying', a way of 'bringing people together through collective experiences of sharing grief' (p. 142) as Ashlee Cunsolo suggests in *Climate Change as the Work of Mourning.*[257] In recent years, this form of reckoning with collective grief has brought forth a host of new platforms to address climate distress. In particular, the Good Grief network provides a ten-step program for people to come together (in person or virtually) to explore the depths of climate grief while strengthening a sense of community and connectedness to empower climate actions.[26] There is also Eco-Anxious stories, an online, story-sharing platform that was created to address feelings of loneliness and isolation that can occur within our experiences of climate despair. This site offers a space to discuss, explore, and take meaningful action to address the climate crisis.[27] These resources offer us a point of connection to share our collective experiences with the climate crisis and to empower actions rooted in a sense of meaning. In the next section, I will explore how, and what, a sense of meaning can bring to bear within a reckoning with climate distress.

Meaning-focused coping and meaningful actions

In her research on coping with climate change, particularly among adolescents, Maria Ojala finds that meaning-focused coping tends to enhance wellbeing, optimism, and pro-environmental behaviours.[28] Meaning-focused coping occurs

when one finds benefits and/or meaning within a challenging or difficult circumstance and is able to adapt goals and behaviours to address one's reactions and actions towards the circumstance. Problem-focused coping is another form of coping wherein attention is focused on confronting an issue or stressor through adaptive actions. Problem-focused coping can also be positively associated with wellbeing; however, this form of coping is more challenging to implement or engage with when an issue is not easily solvable or controllable — for example, the issue of climate change. Emotions-focused coping is another approach to addressing stressors wherein the focus is on controlling or addressing one's emotional responses (e.g. through cognitive behavioural therapies). When applied to coping with emotional responses to climate change, this approach tends not to lead towards pro-environmental behaviours as the focus is on addressing (or getting rid of) negative emotions by distancing oneself from the emotion or avoiding, denying, or minimising the stressor. Meaning-focused coping, then, appears to be the most effective form of coping with non-pathological climate distress. One must ask, then: what exactly does 'finding meaning' entail?

In his latest book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,* David Kessler builds off of the seminal work of Elizabet Kübler-Ross on the stages of grief, with the proposition that finding meaning is an essential component of the grief process.[29] He describes meaning-making as a way of sustaining love in the face of loss, and he highlights that the process of meaning-making is both relative and personal for each individual. Importantly, meaning-making is relative to each person and

context because each person's experiences with loss and grief are relative. Exemplifying this in the climate change context, Tschakert et al. conducted the first, global systemic comparative analysis of intangible harms related to climate change and found that there are 'one thousand ways to experience loss' (p. 69) because it is based on each lived experience, socio-economic circumstance, and culture.[30] Making sense of loss, then, is highly relative to each person, based on the same factors. It appears that the act of bearing witness to our climate distress gives us the opportunity for the emotional growth needed to allow our climate actions to flourish in meaningful ways that are unique to each of us.

A discussion on finding meaning would not be complete without reference to the foundational work of Victor Frankl in his book, *Man's Search For Meaning* — written after he experienced the horrors of concentration camps in World War II.[31] Frankl suggests that finding meaning can be best understood by reflecting on Nietzsche maxim: 'He who has a Why to live can bear almost any How'. Frankl suggests that the essence of finding meaning is to make the best of any given situation; in so doing, this 'allows for: (1) turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and (3) deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action' (p. 138). In the context of climate distress, finding our 'why' opens the gateway towards action. This gateway towards action does not mean we will no longer feel pain for our climate in crisis, or the palpable grief and guilt of environmental degradation, but rather that we acknowledge our suffering

and guilt as the impetus towards meaningful action. As Kessler notes, finding meaning does not 'mean your grief will get smaller over time. It means that you must get bigger' (p. 15).[32] Macy and Johnston describe this as gaining 'a wider sense of self'.[33] This wider sense of self includes an exploration of our connectedness to one another and our natural world.

Breaking through

It is increasingly apparent that a reckoning with our climate distress and finding meaning in our experiences of grief and loss related to climate change do not come without discomfort or fear. Macy and Johnstone, however, remind us that 'should you fear that with this pain your heart might break, remember that the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe' (p. 74).[34] Breaking through our despair, or perhaps more aptly: breaking open, offers us the emotional expansiveness to hold space for our suffering as well as our wellness and that of the suffering and wellness of the entire ecosystem.

We learn not only to honour the suffering but also to be curious about it so that we may respond to our suffering with courage and compassion. Macy and Johnstone state that: 'You need compassion because it provides the fuel to move you out to where you need to be and to do what you need to do. It means not being afraid of the suffering of your world, and when you're not afraid of the world's pain, then nothing can stop you' (p. 102).[35] Courage and compassion, then, provide the foundations upon which we can act in bold ways to honour our wellbeing and the wellbeing of the planet.

The process of honouring our pain also becomes a process of transformational change. Cunsolo suggests that when we

mourn for our climate and the ecological destruction that ensues from the effects of climate change, 'we not only lose something that we loved, but we also lose our former selves' (p. 145). She goes on to highlight that this loss may feel 'disorienting, surprising, or completely unexpected' and it is 'through this mourning-as–transformation [that] we are open to others — human, animal, vegetable, and mineral' (p. 145).[36] Macy and Johnstone suggest that this type of response, one that 'promotes healing and transformation' is an 'expression of our power' (p. 109). This expression of power is not the power over something but rather an expression of the power of our love and the power of deep connection to self, to others, and the earth, in this way 'we recognise that we're not separate individuals in our own little bubbles but connected parts in a much larger story' (p. 113).[37] This recognition gives us the space to see where and how we connect and what our role is and what we may offer.

Macy and Johnstone suggest that sometimes we may 'play the role of stepping out in front and at other times that of being the ally giving support' (p. 114).[38] The aim is to be fully conscious of how our actions affect the larger story. For example, as a white woman with privilege in society, my role in addressing health inequities of climate change is to make space for those facing these health inequities to speak their truth, my role is not to speak for those facing these climate injustices. My role is to learn from and with those on the front lines of the climate crisis and to use my privilege to make space so that those on the front lines can provide the necessary leadership to ensure just adaptations to the climate crisis.

Breaking through for me means acknowledging my white privilege, unlearning the systemic injustices that I perpetuate, and re-learning from those who have been pushed to the margins for far too long. Breaking through for me means making mistakes and missteps in my pursuit towards climate justice and the openhearted conviction to keep growing and learning so that I may do all that is within my power to promote planetary and human healing.

A reckoning with climate distress and climate injustice requires commitment and openness to being transformed. From this transformation, we may emerge with a renewed sense of hope for the future and an unrelenting pursuit for equity-focused climate actions.

Conclusion

Both meaning-focused coping and Macy and Johnstone's Active Hope (via the Work That Reconnects) allow for, or rather invite, a realistic understanding of the depth of our emotional responses to the climate crisis and an emphasis towards honouring these responses. In so doing, we are better able to take necessary actions to address the climate crisis while maintaining our own wellness. Integral to this is to connect deeply with our difficult emotions, to one another, and to our planet. Cultivating a sense of meaning and gratitude is not easy, and honouring our suffering is not a particularly enjoyable experience; however, reckoning with our climate distress is an opportunity to take care of the planet, one another, and enhance our emotional growth.

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