

Workshop - 'Eco-Anxiety and Sustaining Hope'

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Ecological Anxiety

The term “eco-anxiety” has been gaining traction in the media and amongst experts, but there remains a range of definitions and related terminology. It can be described as, “desolation from loss of home and unknown future,” “feelings of environmental doom,” “fear for the fragile condition of the planet”, or “mental distress associated with worsening environmental conditions”. It can show up in a whole spectrum of ways - from paralysis, to running ourselves into the ground fighting for change.

In short, eco-anxiety is *the physiological toll of the environmental crisis*. It also covers *the distress we feel when people around us don't get it, refuse to take action, or attack, shame or silence us for how we feel*.

<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/eco-anxiety-how-to-find-radical-hope-in-a-climate-crisis/>

Direct Impact. It is worth noting that although eco-anxiety is a term that has emerged recently, it describes what many people *facing the climate crisis first-hand have experienced for many years*. For those living on the frontlines of climate-related disasters, facing extreme floods, wildfires and drought, the distress is magnified. A study of 10,000 people aged 16-25 revealed 92% in the Philippines feel that the future is frightening, compared to 56% in Finland.

Solastalgia describes the negative psychological effect of chronic environmental destruction on an individual's homeland, or the place they call home. The condition is often “exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness or lack of control over the unfolding change process.”

Young People. Climate anxiety is more evident in younger generations who have inherited the planetary crisis. Young people are also vulnerable being at a critical stage in their social and psychological development. Youth non-profit organisation 'Force for Nature' finds that over 70% of young people feel hopeless in the face of the climate crisis, ¾ teachers feel ill-equipped to teach on the subject and as many as 56% believe humanity is doomed; only 26% feel that they know how to contribute to solving the problem.

Climate anxiety is not a weakness nor fault. Feeling anxious in response to pervasive pollution, crises-tipping points, and possible mass extinction, is a perfectly human, natural response!

Anxiety is a natural, physiological response to perceived threat.

Denial and Avoidance

There are lots of different types of denial: “There's no such thing as climate crisis,” “There's always been extreme weather” “It's not my job to fix it,” “Technology/world leaders/business will fix it...” among many more. Denial is usually an effective, subconscious mechanism to avoid uncomfortable feelings (terror, shame, guilt) and the discomfort of change. So, a key question, requiring compassion is: ***how can we tolerate and harness together these feelings and their imperatives .?***

Ecological-Grief

Ecological, eco-, or environmental grief can be defined as "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change." Scientists witnessing the decline of Australia's Great Barrier Reef reported feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and despair. Grief can also be experienced as deep sadness, or rage.

Ecological-grief is perhaps most keenly felt by indigenous communities losing their ancestral homes, cultural identities, and livelihoods.

Sustaining Hope

Anxiety and grief are not things we have to combat, fight, nor beat into submission – it is something we need to learn to ‘dance’ with. Becoming friends with our feelings is essential to navigating these increasingly turbulent, uncertain times. These feelings are far more common than one might think, and when we open up about them, we can find relief in normalising the ebb and flow of distress.

If we get stuck in difficult emotions, we might find it hard to transform that feeling into action. But like all dances, nobody knows the moves straight away. Dancing with these feelings means being okay with not being okay; learning to accept how we feel; and letting the emotions run their course. We come to understand that even though we’ll see them again, they will pass. <https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/eco-anxiety-how-to-find-radical-hope-in-a-climate-crisis/>

When we allow ourselves to experience the depth of our feelings, and see them as a critical part of resilience, we are in a better position to step up, rather than shut down.

“We can gain greater presence, depth, courage and wisdom through our willingness to step through the gateway of anticipated suffering.” Steffi Bednarek, psychotherapist, Brighton UK.

Our ‘anxious concern’ can be a catalyst for action *when navigated and facilitated skilfully with the right mix of community support and empowering stories.*

Revise: Natural Physiology. The sympathetic nervous system is triggered by any perceived threat (this can occur outside of our conscious awareness), it then launches an involuntary rapid response to that perceived danger. Our sympathetic and parasympathetic systems create a balancing act. The sympathetic nervous system activates body processes, and your parasympathetic deactivates or lowers them. That balance is key to your body's well-being and your ongoing survival. Each of us can learn our own affective means to regulate these systems. Universally affective techniques include slow, deep breathing, soft focus, and some form of movement.

Personal Ritual and Restorative Practice

Hold space for uncomfortable feelings – such as anxiety, grief, and rage - with compassion. It is essential that we practice compassion for ourselves and for others - and use this to fuel our desire for climate and social justice.¹ Corinthians 13:4-8 “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

We are very good at internalising feelings, and especially with something like climate change, it can be tempting to bury our feelings. But grief or anxiety should not be kept in the shadows. Writing, drawing, talking, and walking are some of the many ways we can do this. Or getting support from a counsellor or eco-therapist, particularly if eco-anxiety is significantly impacting your life. By choosing to befriend our emotional responses, we can slowly lower our emotional defences and connect with what our feelings are telling us to do.

Community Rituals and Restorative Practice

Attempting to deal with difficult feelings alone can leave you feeling frozen and isolated. Surround yourself with a community of people ... who you can share your feelings with and find motivation in the power of people coming together to face these global issues. <https://www.forceofnature.xyz/>

What can Churches Offer?

Churches have rich resources to draw from. They can provide a space for both lament and hope; a place for people to grieve and express their emotions, but also a place for action – to engage in local wildlife and allotment projects, to offer prayer and counselling services, to provide a safe space for the community to discuss the future it wants, as well as demanding accountability from our institutions and governments on its response to the environmental crisis. <https://www.cytun.co.uk/en/climate-and-pastoral-care-processing-grief-for-the-planet/>

“There are profound gifts to be shared by Christians. I have personal experience of various sessions where people have been given a safe space to encounter their ‘Earth emotions’. In fact, I have led such a session for people from Extinction Rebellion Finland; one of the strengths of XR has been that it has given attention to the need to encounter our dark emotions (see, for example, ‘The Aching Heart Movement’ of XR). The results from such sessions have been deeply moving. Hope has been renewed by re-learning to cry (sometimes), to feel angry, and to feel despair. If Christians, in their communities and alongside their neighbours, can affirm that it is not a failure to feel dark emotions, great sources of energy are released. Instead of feeling guilt, we can even feel a rightful pride in our capacity sometimes to feel despair, because it is compassion which causes the despair. We share the sufferings and joys of a creation in travail, together with a God who truly knows Passion.” Panu Pihkala, <https://blog.arocha.org/en/extinction-rebellion-eco-anxiety-and-christian-faith/>

Concern in the face of this threat to our future is understandable, but when it becomes anxiety or grief with nowhere to go, it can be deeply debilitating.... We therefore need to be more equipped in our churches to acknowledge and face this sense of loss and grief around the environmental crisis, and to offer support to our congregations and communities. Churches can play a vital role in providing pastoral care for climate grief. The Church has much experience of living with suffering, providing compassion and resources for people to face mortality – as well as to persevere in seeking a more just future. So, just as local churches have responded with pastoral care and support for those affected by the covid crisis, so they will increasingly need to respond with pastoral care to those suffering from the environmental crisis. <https://www.cytun.co.uk/en/climate-and-pastoral-care-processing-grief-for-the-planet/>

We can draw on prayer, meditation, ritual, art, music, journaling, storytelling, reflective practice, gardening, forest-bathing, breathing and movement to help cope with overwhelming feelings, heal disconnection, and to sustain hope and resilience in ourselves, our children and communities.

LAMENT TOGETHER

... over the devastation caused by extreme fires, flooding, rising sea levels. The overwhelming scale of the crises. See <https://greenchristian.org.uk/lamentation-prayers/>

MOURN TOGETHER

... for loss of species, loss of biodiversity, loss of homes, even the loss of inanimate environmental features like healthy soil, sea ice, cultural landscapes, and historic heritage.

“Grief is a teacher. It tells us that we are not alone; that we are interconnected; that what connects us also breaks our hearts — which is as it should be.” Miriam Greenspan, psychotherapist, and author.

REPENT TOGETHER

...of our shared responsibility in air, land and water pollution and its impact on health, the accumulation of rubbish in the oceans, the loss of biodiversity, loss of habits, the overexploitation of natural resources and deforestation, the injustices (racism/exploitation/misogyny/imperialism etc) upon those most directly impacted. Our own indifference and apathy.

Host 'climate confessions.' See <https://www.forceofnature.xyz/climateconfessions>

TAKE ACTION TOGETHER

Host a Climate Café. A climate café is a community-organised space for people to have open conversations about the climate crisis (including how it makes us feel). By coming together as a community, we can find comfort in our shared experiences, learn from different perspectives, and model the world we wish to create. Every climate café is different: some might include unstructured discussions, while others could feature events and workshops. No two climate cafés look the same, yet they should all feel safe, open, and accessible. <https://www.forceofnature.xyz/climate-cafe>

Host a Digital Detox Sunday. While digital connectivity is a great tool to stay up to date with developments, constant negativity can start to erode our mental wellbeing. Organise a community break/sabbath.

Support Young People. Respect the fact that young people are the most impacted by the climate crisis and may be more anxious, but unable to name it. Nurture their sense of community and belonging, share positive news and resilience-based storytelling. Enable children and YP to identify issues that they care about most deeply and take the lead.

Become a Positive Storyteller. For example, once upon a time (2002) "On a 2000-acre farm in Southern England, just 20 miles south of Gatwick Airport, [a landowner] decided to abandon industrial farming on his ancestral estate ... He removed all the fences over much of the farm, sold his farm machinery, and introduced ancient breeds of animals on the land. They were, in the main, left to their own devices and included Tamworth pigs, European long-horn cattle, and red deer. In the fifteen years that the animals have established themselves on the land, they have returned to living in a relatively "wild" state, adopting patterns of foraging, interaction, and reproduction which have created significant niches for the abundance of species that are now found on the farm. Without industrial tillage the soils have become much richer, and species such as hawthorn and sedge have re-established themselves, in turn providing protected cover for hardwoods such as English oak to re-establish naturally. The result after just 15 years is that many bird and small mammal species are now present on the farm that are rarely found elsewhere on British farmland. They are attracted by an abundance of insects, and a variety of land types including watering holes, as well as thorn bush and shrub, that are usually levelled out and ploughed up on conventional farms. The biodiversity that now exists at Knepp exceeds in its different kinds of present and visiting species *any other area* of mainland Britain including "protected" conservation areas." https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-46489-9_12

It is also important to share stories from front-line communities - such as activists in the Global South. <https://energyalliance.org/climate-action-in-the-global-south-achievements-and-gaps/>

And access media from a variety of sources and pro-actively seek out the positive news. E.g. <https://www.positive.news/>

Host a Theology Dig Consider, for example, that the stories of the Knepp and others are radically hopeful because, "they indicate in quite striking ways that creaturely life comes back in abundance in particular places where humans exercise appropriate guardianship against destructive human practices and allow other creatures to recover co-agency with humans in managing and tending ecosystems. But neither story indicates that humans, in enabling this to happen, can, or even ought, to get completely out of the way." ... Indicating, "that what works best is not the total absence of humans, but intentional restraint by humans in the management of ecosystems, and a preparedness to give space to other creatures so they recover a measure of agency and formative influence on habitats and places." *Explore: "Are there grounds for including other creatures, and even*

the Earth herself, in this Christian sphere of moral regard for neighbors? Is the Christian hope, in other words, eschatologically oriented towards a conception of a redemptive and transforming union of all beings and not only persons?" https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-46489-9_12

Practice Regenerative/Seasonal Cycles. Sow, nurture, harvest, rest (be fallow). Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. What would it look like to implement these cycles into your personal and church calendars?

Learn and Teach Grounding Practices

Grounding is a practice that can help you soothe and regulate challenging emotions. These techniques connect you with Nature and your body to help you move through distress.

1. Put your feet flat on the ground and feel the solidity of the earth beneath your feet. Contemplate this foundation and the ancient bedrock that is constantly supporting you.
2. Or, put your hands down on the earth, hold a natural object like a pebble, or do some gardening.
3. Or, put your hands in water. Focus on the water's temperature and how it feels. Does it feel the same in each part of your hand? Or hold a piece of ice. How long does it take to start melting? How does the sensation change when the ice begins to melt?
4. Savour a scent or a flavour. This might be a cup of tea, an orange or banana, a piece of chocolate, a mint, an herb, or spice. Try to note its qualities (sweet, spicy, citrusy, and so on).
5. Listen to your surroundings. Take a few moments to listen to the noises around you. Do you hear birds? Dogs barking? Machinery, traffic, or conversation? Or silence?
6. Move your body. Pay attention to how your body feels with each movement and when your hands or feet touch the floor or move through the air.
7. Look at the sky, clouds and if possible, feel or watch the breeze.
8. Find animal company. If they are of the safe furry variety, pet them, focusing on how their fur feels. Consider their markings or unique characteristics. Listen and learn.
9. As often as possible, get in the habit of breathing deeply. Slowly inhale completely, then exhale fully. Feel each breath filling your lungs and note how it feels to push it back out. Along with the CO₂ imagine breathing out any uncomfortable emotions and breathe in oxygen along with what you need in the moment e.g. peace, energy, hope, compassion.
10. Develop a daily practice of embodied prayer.

Suggested Reading

- ADAMS, M. *Coming Back Down to Earth: Exploring Distress, Loss and Grief in the Anthropocene*. Mad in the UK, 2020. (<https://www.madintheuk.com/2020/08/distress-loss-grief-in-the-anthropocene/>)
- ALBRECHT, G. A. *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*.
- ALBRECHT, G. A. *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*
- BARNETT, J.T. *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence*.
- BRUEGGEMANN, W., *Reverberations of the Faith*.
- BUHNER, S.H. *Earth Grief: The Journey into and Through Ecological Grief*.
- BUTLER, J. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*.
- CUNSOLO, A. and LANDMAN, K. *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*.
- CLOUGH, D. L. *On Animals: Volume II: Theological Ethics*.
- CROSBY, A. W. *Ecological imperialism: The biological expansion of Europe 900-1900*.
- DALTON, A. M. & SIMMONS, H. C. *Ecotheology and the practice of hope*.
- DEANE, DRUMMOND & CLOUGH (Eds.), *Creaturely theology: On God, humans and other animals*
- GOODALL, J. *Reason for hope: A spiritual journey*.
- GOODALL, J. *Hope for animals and their world: How endangered species are being rescued from the brink*.
- GREENSPAN, M. *On Moving From Grief To Gratitude*
<https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/385/through-a-glass-darkly>
- HAMILTON-POORE, S. *Earth Gospel: A Guide to Prayer for God's Creation*
- HAYHOE, K. *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*
- HINE, D. *At Work in the Ruins: Finding Our Place in the Time of Science, Climate Change, Pandemics, and All the Other Emergencies*
- INGE, J. *A Christian theology of place*.
- KENNEDY, D. *Elegy*.
- MACHADO DE OLIVEIRA, V., *Hospicing Modernity: Parting with Harmful Ways of Living*
- MALCOLM, H. *Ecology for your Theology Bookshelf*
- MALCOLM, H. *Words for a Dying World: Stories of Grief and Courage from the Global Church*
- MAY, K. *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*
- MCDONALD, C. *Rage and Hope: 75 Prayers for a Better World*
- MCLAUGHLIN, R. P. *Christian theology and the status of animals: The dominant tradition and its alternatives*.
- MILLER, D. *Animal ethics and theology: The lens of the good Samaritan*.
- NORTHCOTT, M. S. *A political theology of climate change*.
- NORTHCOTT, M.S. *Place, ecology and the sacred: The moral geography of sustainable communities*.
- NORTHCOTT, M.S. *Reformed Protestantism and the origins of modern environmentalism*.
- PINCHES & MCDANIEL (Eds.), *Good news for animals? Christian approaches to animal well-being*
- POPE FRANCIS, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*
- RAMAZANI, J. *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*.
- RAY, S. *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*
- SCHMIDT, L. *How to Live in a Chaotic Climate: 10 Steps to Reconnect with Ourselves, Our Communities, and Our Planet*
- TAYLOR, S.M. *Green sisters: A spiritual ecology*.
- TREE, I. *Wilding: How a Farm Returned to Nature*. (i.e. the Sussex Knepp estate)
- Quarterly magazine <https://www.positive.news/>

Watch 'Climate grief and pastoral care' webinar <https://youtu.be/7dDcobTjQv0?si=ge1SbgbI4Uhes3k5>

Watch 'Alone in a World of Wounds: Living with Ecological Grief' <https://youtu.be/k02PMQ1Tt-s?si=IK1Blo2Wpkeb5u2c>