

# Becoming a climate-aware practitioner

The Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA)

by Judith Anderson

As a profession we have sometimes attended to issues outside the consulting room; for example when therapy institutions spoke out to government about the detention of the children of asylum seekers. Other times we have been silent. Psychoanalyst Hanna Segal wrote about the nuclear threat in the 1980s, and the apathy and silence connected to it:

'We should be able to contribute something to overcome apathy and self-deception in ourselves and others. We who believe in the power of words and the therapeutic effect of verbalising truth must not be silent'.

To be a psychologically aware human is to know that with every breath we take we are dependent on the living system of our environment. We cannot separate psychology from ecology – or indeed from science. With notable exceptions, psychological theories have neglected to recognise, respect, theorise and address the clearly implicit intimate relationships we have as individuals, as groups and as a global species with the non-human world.

## THE CLIMATE SCIENCE

Scientists tell us that the world is warming because of fossil fuel use, and this is affecting all our planetary systems: floods, droughts, wildfires, rising sea levels, melting ice. Our actions in next five years are critical to our ability to manage our civilisation and maintain a 'liveable planet'.<sup>1</sup> At this time of writing (2022) there seems to be a never-ending stream of news about climate change. The UN environment agency's report found there was 'no credible pathway to 1.5C in place'<sup>2</sup> and that 'woefully inadequate' progress on cutting carbon emissions means the only way to limit the worst impacts of the climate crisis is a 'rapid transformation of societies'.

## A THREAT TO HEALTH

Medical researchers view climate

change as the greatest global health threat facing the world in the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> They also frame it as the greatest opportunity to redefine the social and environmental determinants of health. We witnessed this in Pakistan in the summer of 2022, where millions were displaced following floods, bringing death, injury, disease and disrupted livelihoods. In Nigeria in October 2022 at least 600 people died across the west African nation, with two-thirds of states affected by the disaster, an estimated 1.3 million people have been displaced, with up to a quarter of a million homes reportedly destroyed. It is hard to think about the sheer scale of such disasters, much easier to 'pass by on the other side' and not see the implications of

- Breakdowns of infrastructure networks and critical services.
- Higher mortality and morbidity

during periods of extreme heat.

- Food insecurity and the breakdown of food systems, particularly for poorer populations.
- Pollution, vector borne disease.
- Ecosystem changes and loss of biodiversity.
- Poverty, migration and conflict.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Within the overall health impacts of climate change are the psychological impacts, namely:

### Effects of increased temperature:

Temperature increase itself has an impact on those with mental illness. This is vital clinical information for practitioners who work in mental health teams. Patients with mental illness showed an overall increase in risk of death of 4.9% (95% CI 2.0–7.8)

per 1° increase in temperature above the 93rd percentile of the annual temperature distribution in any region. Younger patients and those with a primary diagnosis of substance misuse demonstrated greatest mortality risk.<sup>4</sup> In the UK each 1 degree increase in mean temperature C above 18 degrees C, is associated with a 3.8 and 5.0% rise in suicide and violent suicide respectively.<sup>5</sup>

### Traumatic effects of slow events such as repeated droughts/floods and single catastrophe:

Helen Berry's research in Australia on those affected by prolonged repeated droughts showed that those who suffered mental health effects were often those who already had psychological problems and/or were vulnerable psychologically for other reasons.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of climate change floods in UK in 2007 there were increased rates of depression and anxiety with the most vulnerable affected more (that is, those existing psychological problems, poverty, co-morbid physical disabilities).<sup>7</sup>

Research has suggested that in

northern European countries the main **health impact** will be the **mental health impact** of climate change related floods and storms. Experiencing a natural disaster by age five is associated with a 16 percent increase in mental health or substance use disorder by adulthood.

### Eco-anxiety/eco-distress:

Practitioners in climate psychology prefer to use the term 'eco-distress' as the emotions are far more varied than anxiety with grief, frustration, despair, anger, blame and guilt. The American Psychological Association defines eco-anxiety as '*... watching the slow and seemingly irrevocable impacts of climate change unfold, and worrying about the future for oneself, children, and later generations ... some people are deeply affected by feelings of loss, helplessness and frustration due to their inability to feel like they are making a difference in stopping climate change*'. Any individuals or groups facing the reality of climate change such as scientists, NGO workers, activists, teachers may become vulnerable,

and young people particularly so as the impact on their futures is so pressing.

The process of grieving environmental loss is not like navigating the uncomplicated grief of single loss, but more like, say, a family negotiating multiple illnesses and deaths from a genetic cancer or multiple miscarriages, where the task is to get on with life whilst simultaneously navigating and being inhabited by grief. We can also see eco-anxiety, eco-grief coming from eco-empathy, an ability to genuinely feel into the degradation of the planet and its impact on living beings.<sup>8</sup>

The Royal College of Psychiatry in the UK has issued guidelines on Eco-distress in youth that are very much based on a systemic psycho-social understanding.<sup>9</sup>

*Above all it is a response requiring validation, support and community.*

### WHAT PART CAN PASTORAL COUNSELLORS PLAY?

Faith-based charities such as Christian Aid, Tear Fund and



CAFOD all recognise the impact of climate change, which is in some cases reversing the good results of decades-long programmes. When faith groups come together, they focus on climate justice and ethics.<sup>10</sup> Playing our part inevitably begins with practitioners being in relationship with their own eco-emotions, understanding and processing them so that we can hold space for others.

Many individual members of our profession have been working strenuously in recent times to bring these issues to consciousness, placing human psychology in an ecological context.<sup>11</sup> The Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA), a community benefit society with charitable status, was founded over a decade ago and focusses on five different areas. These give clues about the kind of contribution the psychological professions might make.

### 1 Research and reflection:

We provide thinking spaces to understand more deeply climate denial, disavowal, eco-distress, the psychological impact of climate change related disasters, and climate injustice.

George Marshall, founder of climate communication organisation Climate Outreach<sup>12</sup> has an excellent introduction to denial in his book *Don't even think about it: why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*. Paul Hoggett's book *Climate Psychology: On Indifference to Disaster*,<sup>13</sup> with contributions from many CPA authors, investigates the psycho-social phenomenon of society's failure to respond to climate change. It analyses the non-rational dimensions of our collective paralysis and features 11 research projects from four different countries. Psychotherapist Donna Orange<sup>14</sup> argues that our blindness to climate change is because it impacts more peoples to whom we have become enculturated to ignore

through colonialism and slavery. Sally Weintrobe, psychoanalyst, differentiates between *negation* and *disavowal*.<sup>15</sup> She says that denial as negation occurs when we are still in some relationship to what is denied, a death or other loss; in contrast she sees *disavowal* as more pathological – a more fixed state where lies and distortions are present. She says this happens when

- Reality is too obvious to be simply denied by negation.
  - There is anxiety that the damage is already too great to repair.
  - There is felt to be not enough support and help to bear the anxiety and suffering that the knowledge of reality brings. (This final understanding gives us a clue as to part of our role.)
- 2 Work with young people:** CPA is especially concerned with the impact of climate change on young people. We research and provide support to teachers, parents/carers and young people themselves.

In 2021 CPA member Caroline Hickman and colleagues surveyed<sup>16</sup> 10,000 young people in 10 different countries and found high levels of anxiety about the future and many experiences of not being heard. Importantly the experience of governments' failure to act left them feeling uncared about and despairing. Respondents across all countries reported a large amount of worry, with almost 60% saying they felt 'very' or 'extremely' worried about climate change. More than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily lives. Countries in which youth expressed more worry and a greater impact on functioning tended to be poorer, in the Global South, and more directly impacted by climate change. In the Global North, Portugal (which experienced dramatic increases in wildfires since 2017) showed the highest level of worry. Inadequate

governmental responses to climate change were experienced as *betrayal*. The authors conclude that the failure of governments to adequately reduce, prevent, or mitigate climate change is contributing to psychological distress, moral injury, and injustice.

- 3 Support:** CPA provides support to individuals and groups suffering with eco-distress and offer safe spaces to share emotions surrounding the climate crisis.

We do this through having a register of people offering therapeutic support<sup>17</sup>, running climate cafes which are safe informal spaces where feelings can be shared; training so far over 200 people to run climate cafes,<sup>18</sup> and other projects.

- 4 Training and events:** We are engaged in a wide range of outreach programmes, continuing professional development for therapists and educational and community activities.

- 5 Talks and consultancy:** For organisations and businesses, we offer a range of talks, consultancy, workshops and conference presentations in the theory and practice of climate psychology, including resilience.

### RADICAL HOPE

'Meaning making' is part of what we do as therapists and so often this is a painstaking endeavour, especially if it has not happened much before in someone's life. We are also often called to be experts in hope, holding it for clients where all hope has failed. This is important in facing the climate crisis and in CPA we draw on inspiration from ideas of Ethical Hope/Moral Hope (Havel), stubborn optimism (Christiana Figueres) and Lear<sup>19</sup> (radical hope).

### THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS

Many find Joanna Macey's work helpful inviting a journey of experience through gratitude,



grief, seeing with new eyes, and acting with courage.

**GOING FORWARD**

I invite you to keep this on your agenda and include climate awareness in your trainings and CPD events, so that your members can feel supported in making a much-needed contribution in the consulting room and in their communities.

**References**

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Academic perspectives and broader social implications here

17 <https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/support/indsupport>

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**About the author**

Dr Judith Anderson is Jungian psychotherapist, with a background in psychiatry, living in Oxford. In the past she was Chair of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility and she currently chairs The Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA). She is passionate about the role that the psychological professions need to play in relation to the climate, environmental and biodiversity crises, a concern amplified by being a grandmother.

