

Climate Anxiety & Mental Health:

Navigating Difficult Feelings and Finding Practical Ways to Cope

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Land Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge the Lkwungen (Songhees) and Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) peoples on whose traditional, unceded lands I reside.

Today's Outline

- ▶ Climate Anxiety
- ▶ Contributing Factors
- ▶ Coping Strategies
- ▶ How to Navigate this Topic
- ▶ Resources

What is Climate Anxiety?

▶ Climate Anxiety

- ▶ No universal operational definition.
- ▶ Often refers to the experience of unpleasant emotions related to thinking about or experiencing climate change.
- ▶ Does not specifically refer to mental health outcomes.
- ▶ **NOT** a clinical diagnosis.

Climate Emotions

- ▶ Research demonstrates that there is a wide array of identified emotional response to climate change.
 - ▶ *This can range from unpleasant/negative emotions to positive/pleasant emotions.*
- ▶ People can experience these emotional reactions to varying degrees (subjective experiences)
- ▶ While emotional responses are not clinical diagnoses, **people still deserve support navigating these feelings**

Climate Emotions

- ▶ Hickman et al. (2021)
 - ▶ Surveyed 10,000 individuals aged 16-25 among 10 countries
 - ▶ Reports 62% felt anxiety and 60% felt “very” or “extremely” worried about climate change.
 - ▶ Also reports that the sample felt:
 - ▶ Afraid (67%)
 - ▶ Sad (67%)
 - ▶ Powerless (56%)
 - ▶ Helpless (51%)
 - ▶ Grief (42%)
 - ▶ Optimism (31%)

Climate Emotions

- ▶ Galway & Field (2023)
 - ▶ Surveyed 1,000 Canadians aged 16-26
 - ▶ Found similar results to Hickman et al. (2021)
 - ▶ Participants reported feeling:
 - ▶ Afraid (66%)
 - ▶ Sad (65%)
 - ▶ Helpless (58%)
 - ▶ Powerless (56%)
 - ▶ Grief (34%)
 - ▶ Optimism (21%)

Mental Health Outcomes

- ▶ There is SOME research identifying specific mental health outcomes resulting from climate change/climate change awareness
 - ▶ One study found a significant positive correlation between generalized mental distress and climate anxiety (noting an increase in climate anxiety is linked to an increase in mental distress) (Reyes et al., 2021)
 - ▶ Another study found that climate worry was associated with depressive symptoms (Leonhardt et al., 2022).

Contributing Factors

Direct

- Experiencing extreme weather events or climate disasters directly (e.g., 2021 Heat Dome, Sumas Valley Floods, etc.)

Indirect

- Experiencing consequences of extreme weather events or other climate disasters (e.g., food security, impacts on livelihoods, forced migration, etc.)

Overarching

- Emotional responses that stem from an awareness of climate change and the threat it poses to the planet, without necessarily experiencing direct or indirect effects (e.g., worry about future, concern for loved ones in different countries, etc.)

Disproportionate Impacts

- ▶ Direct, indirect, and overarching effects of climate change can disproportionately affect marginalized communities, Indigenous communities, people of lower socioeconomic status, and non-western societies.
 - ▶ Indigenous communities are already experiencing consequences of climate change
 - ▶ Impacts to cultural practices (hunting, healing ceremonies, etc.), loss of or damage to traditional land, etc.
 - ▶ Food security
 - ▶ Directly impacts people of lower socioeconomic status disproportionately
 - ▶ The World Health Organization mentions that despite experiencing disproportionate effects of climate change, the above/mentioned groups are **not the primary contributors to climate change**

Other Impacts

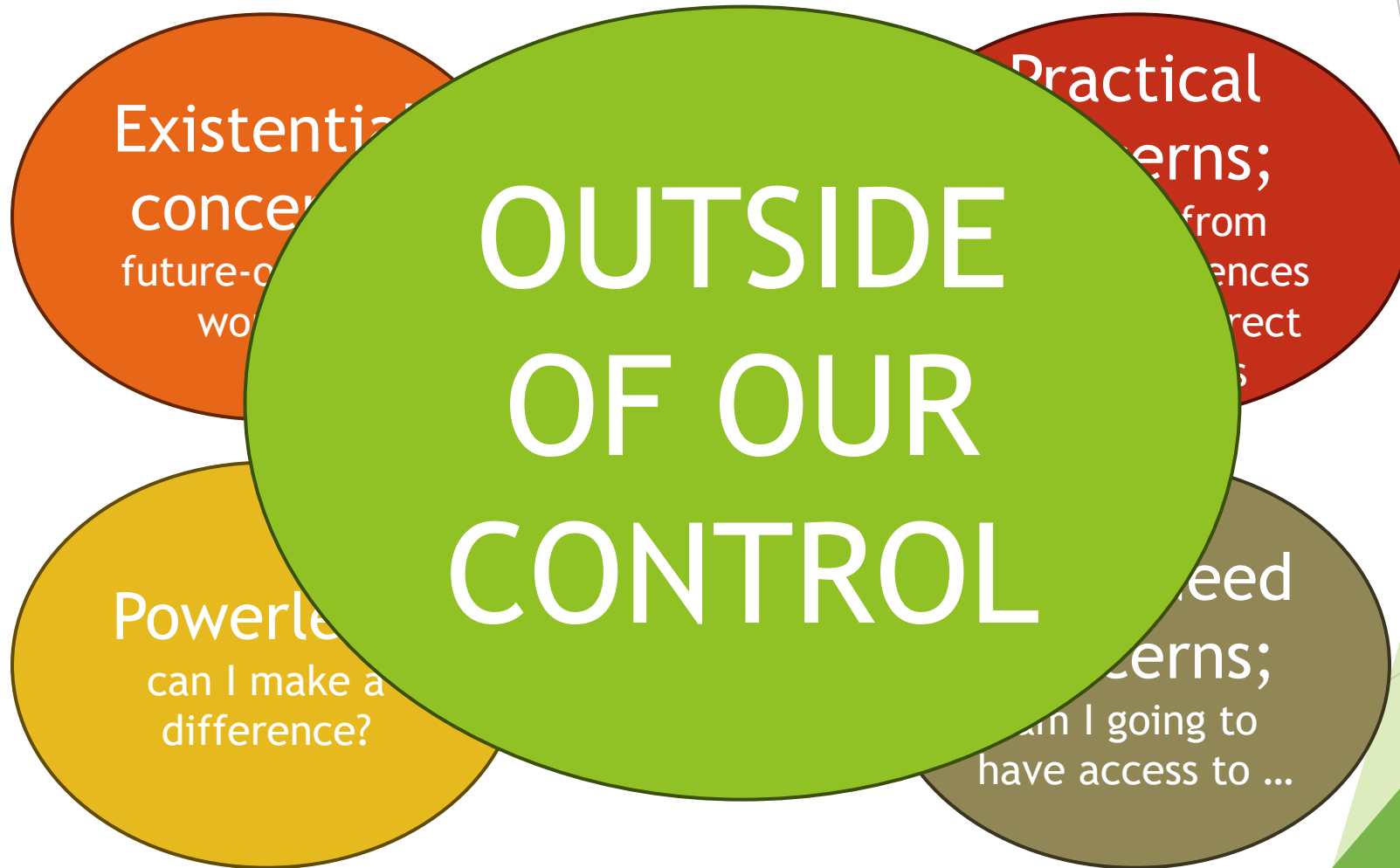
Existential
concerns;
future-oriented
worries

Practical
concerns;
resulting from
direct experiences
or worry of direct
experiences

Powerless;
can I make a
difference?

Basic Need
concerns;
am I going to
have access to ...

Other Impacts



How Are People Coping?

De-emphasizing

- Distancing the self from the issue (e.g., climate change is not a problem that will impact me)

Emotion-focused distractions

- Limiting engagement with information regarding climate change (thus limiting negative emotions)

Problem-focused coping

- Focusing on what individual actions can one take to mitigate climatic impact (e.g., eating less meat)

How Are People Coping?

Meaning-focused coping

- When people utilize their personal values and beliefs to cope with climate anxiety (e.g., collective action, trying to find hope, trusting in authority figures)

Finding Resiliency and Hope

- ▶ Plenty of research and anecdotal evidence supports the idea that contributing to pro-climate efforts (if that aligns with your values) is one of the best ways to experience hope and resiliency amongst the climate crisis.

**Conversation builds hope, action
builds hope.**

Finding Resiliency and Hope

- ▶ Assume positive intent - explore from there
 - ▶ Many people struggle with the idea of climate change. They may come across as “deniers” or otherwise.
 - ▶ You can always frame the issue as a physical/mental health conversation - makes it less political.
- ▶ Find your people!
 - ▶ Finding likeminded individuals helps validate your own thoughts and feelings and can create opportunities for action engagement.

How To Talk About This?

- ▶ Be direct
 - ▶ a significant portion of the anxiety/uncertainty we can feel in relation to this topic can stem from avoidance of the topic all together
- ▶ Be honest
 - ▶ what feelings does this bring up for you?
- ▶ Be reflective
 - ▶ am I able to connect with others about this?

Resources - Emergency Preparedness

- ▶ **CMHA BC Disaster Stress Resource Bank** - Resources on coping and supporting others through disasters.
<https://bcdisasterstress.ca/>
- ▶ **PreparedBC**- Preparedness guides and resources to help assess your readiness for potential emergencies.
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-management/preparedbc/guides-and-resources>
- ▶ **Mental Health First Aid/Psychological First Aid** - Community preparedness to support the mental wellbeing of each other.

Resources - Climate Change & Mental Health

- ▶ **Mental Health and Climate Change Alliance** - a cross-Canada organization specializing in addressing the mental health impacts of climate change through research, intervention, policy ideas, and knowledge exchange.
<https://mhcca.ca/>
- ▶ **Youth Climate Corps** - a program that builds on youth leadership to foster climate resilience and a livable, low-carbon future, while paying young people a living wage in communities across Canada.
<https://www.youthclimatecorps.com/>

Resources - Climate Change & Mental Health

- ▶ **Good Grief Network** - A ten-step, ten-week program that focuses on collective emotional processing, building community, and reinvesting energy into meaningful efforts.
<https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org/>
- ▶ **Climate Awakening** - Psychologist Margaret Klein Salamon created this ongoing series of sharing and listening sessions for folks to join in surrounding climate anxiety and climate emotions.
<https://climateawakening.org/>
- ▶ **BCACC “Find a Counsellor”** - use the search tool for “climate” and see counsellors who identify specialty in supporting people experiencing climate anxiety.
<https://bcacc.ca/counsellors/>



Thank You!

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