

Climate Change and Mental Health

Webinar for Mental Health Awareness Week, 29 September 2021. Grow

Introduction

Ka mihi atu ahau ki a koutou e huihui mai nei, Tena koutou, tena koutou
Honore ki te Atua kaha rawa, ki te Tama, ki te Wairua tapu. Ko koe te Kaihanga, te
Timatanga me te Mutunga, te Kaikaranga, te Kaiwhakaoranga o te Ao katoa.

Welcome and thank you for joining this seminar on mental health and climate change. Ko
Silvia Purdie taku ingoa. No Ingarani oku tipuna. Presbyterian te haahi. Ngati
Tumatauenga te iwi – my husband is an Army chaplain. Kaitiakitanga te mahi – I work in
environmental sustainability. Manaakitanga te kaupapa – I also work as a counsellor,
supervisor, author, trainer and church minister.

It is my honour to present to you today on a topic which connects the massive
environmental issues we face in our time with the personal, the emotional and the
relational.

My starting point is that climate change is happening and will only impact us more and
more through the years ahead. I am not going into climate science in this seminar. I won't
be showing you photos of polar bears on floating ice, or graphs. I don't have the kind of
brain that remembers facts and figures.

I do have a powerpoint so let's start on that.

Slide 1

Stand with me at dawn on Paraparaumu beach, looking out to Kapiti.

This seminar is in two halves, nice and simple, with two questions.

Slide 2: outline

First, what are the mental health challenges of climate change? and second, how do we
manage those constructively? So, challenges and strategies. Each half has 4 key ideas.
Easy. After each section I will give you a couple of minutes to reflect, and there will be
time for questions at the end. Please post your questions in the Chat box and Feona will
keep an eye on them for me. Apologies, but you will be kept on mute the whole seminar. I
would love to continue the conversation with you; my email address and phone number
will be emailed to you after the seminar, together with links to resources that I refer to.

I make no claim to be an expert in the field of environmental psychology or climate
science or mental health. This talk has emerged from my work with community
organisations over the last few years, as I have pursued the mahi of resourcing the
community sector in climate change and sustainability - all a steep learning curve for me.
I am passionate about helping ordinary people engage creatively with these huge
problems we face.

I begin with challenges.

slide 3: bubble wrap

The first mental health challenge of climate change is that most of us a lot of the time are
actually quite good at NOT being challenged by climate change. I call this Bubble wrap.
We all have some kind of insulation to protect us from being overwhelmed by fear and
anxiety. Collectively our defences against facing up to climate crisis resist change and
enable to us to continue 'business as usual' even through we know this is not working.
There are little every-day bits of bubble wrap that enable us to fill up the car with petrol or
buy a takeaway coffee cup. We tell ourselves that it is a problem but it is not my problem

right now. And there are the massive rolls of bubble wrap that make people reject climate science completely.

Psychology has two labels for this: **denial and dissociation**

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One of the best TED talks about this is by the Norwegian, Per Espen Stoknes. He describes bubble wrap as **apocalypse fatigue**. I encourage you to watch this - We'll email you the link. He draws a series of walls that people put up to protect themselves from the bad news of climate change.

What do you notice in yourself that insulates you from the terrifying warnings of climate disaster?

I am not saying that bubble wrap is necessarily a bad thing, well managed, but collectively it is a terrible thing because it stops us doing what must be done to protect the earth, and the future, from more and more global warming. We must change, and to change we must face the facts.

Disconnecting is a bad thing because when we split off part of ourselves we whittle away our humanity. If we cannot face our fears and grief and guilt about climate change we become less able to feel joy, or hope, or peace. Dissociation numbs us, and depression is a result.

slide 5

What does climate crisis bubble wrap look like?

- "Let's not talk about it" - collective silence
- "I'll just look after my own family" - individual security
- "I can't care any more" – empathy loss
- "It's fake news" – conspiracy theories
- "We have more important things to worry about" – capacity overload
- "Bring it on!" –

I work a lot in the Christian community in Aotearoa, and see the influence of end times thinking. If climate crisis is part of the coming apocalypse, then why try to prevent it?

And you can no doubt think of other forms of denial and dissonance ... it is much easier to blame other people, whether that is the government or the farmers or the greenies or whoever, than to seriously grapple with the implications of global warming.

slide 6: Dread: eco-anxiety and pre-traumatic stress

Once the bad news of climate crisis gets through our defences we hit the second big challenge: anxiety. I call this Dread. Psychologists call it Eco Anxiety, and there is now a diagnosis for that!

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The American Psychological Association defines Eco Anxiety as

- "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (APA)
- Glenn Albrecht defines it as "the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse"
- My colleague in Finland, Panu Pihkala, names it more simply as "difficult feelings because of the ecological crisis"

What are your difficult feelings?

It might be standing in a supermarket feeling hungry but not being able to choose any food to eat because plastic is bad and food miles are bad and using animals is bad and chemicals are bad and the prices are bad and there is nothing good to eat.

It might be the cold pressure of guilt. I used to treasure my memory of my wonderful trip to Italy but now it is infected with the guilt of all those carbon emissions.

It might be kids shutting themselves in their rooms all day because if the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse then what is the point of going to school?

slide 8

In terms of what we know about our brains, these are 'flight' and 'freeze' responses as the brain soaks in a constant soup of stress response hormones.

Eco anxiety is a trauma response. What do you know about trauma?

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.

Many people around the world are already experiencing traumatic climate events (worsened by COVID-19). However, few of us here in Aotearoa have experienced traumatic climate crisis effects directly. So why are we so traumatised?

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The answer in psychological terms is that 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' and exhaustion.

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Chat question:

- *Is anxiety about the world a bad thing? How might it be helpful or unhelpful?*

slide 11

Any anxiety can be a very unpleasant experience, however Panu Pihkala argues that "Eco-anxiety is actually a moral emotion: it is based on an accurate appraisal of the severity of the ecological crisis." Eco-anxiety can be positive when it "leads people to re-evaluate the situation, search for better information, and to make changes in individual and collective behavior." (Panu Pihkala)

slide 12: **Unfair: moral injury and injustice**

Climate change highlights and intensifies many aspects of injustice: between nations and between generations. The injustice of climate change is not an individual problem. It is massive social problem. Those with the least resources will be hit hardest. This places climate crisis squarely in the middle of any organisation seeking to address inequality, both here in Aotearoa and anywhere in the world.

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I recommend reading the Ministry for the Environment's Climate Change Risk Assessment for NZ. The Snapshot document is an easy read with wide coverage. Under the heading of

human, or social, impacts, the top climate change risk is displacement from storms and rising seas, and number 2 is identified as:

“Risks of exacerbating existing inequities and creating new inequities due to differential distribution of climate change impacts”

This is huge for the social and health services in Aotearoa, for anyone who realises how damaging social inequality is.

At a personal emotional level, one important response to this is anger. It's not fair. We are seeing this in our young people. They are pissed off that they get to inherit a bunch of massive problems.

slide 14

My friend Michael Apathy is a psychotherapist here in Christchurch and a climate activist. He spoke last week, and encouraged us to feel our anger.

“The climate crisis is just one symptom of massive injustice and inequality and oppression. If you feel a surge of anger powering you up, if you feel clear and decisive in your thinking and solid within yourself, that is the emotion of anger bringing you its gifts. Anger strengthens us to recognize and to deal with injustice.” (Michael Apathy)

How do we hold our angry, frustration and disappointment in emotionally healthy ways so that they don't turn inward in shame or outward in blame or hurting those closest to us?

slide 15 - **LOSS: grief and lament**

My 4th challenge is loss. We know, because the climate scientists tell us, that global warming will lead to the destruction of natural habitats and the loss of species. The more warming, the more habitat and species loss, including potentially our own species, and the end of civilization as we know it.

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To stay with what is highly probable and probably inevitable, I'll to return to New Zealand's Climate Risk Snapshot, to the top 2 risks to our natural environment: coastal erosion and storms, and even more pests.

		Consequence
Natural environment	Risks to coastal ecosystems, including the intertidal zone, estuaries, dunes, coastal lakes and wetlands, due to ongoing sea-level rise and extreme weather events.	Major
	Risks to indigenous ecosystems and species from the enhanced spread, survival and establishment of invasive species due to climate change.	Major

I am rather fond of our bird life in Aotearoa. I read this and it tells me that birds who live and nest on the coast will be smashed by sea level rise and storms, and birds who live and nest in the forest will be smashed by predators. And I feel really sad about that.

Do you feel grief for what may be lost in the future?

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Personality comes into this. My husband responds to what he senses through his senses. He is an in-the-present kind of guy. Me, I am highly intuitive. I can clearly see things that

don't exist yet or have not happened yet. That is fabulous for creative thinking, but it's downside with climate change is that I can picture in my mind's eye this beach stripped of its soft golden sand, the Council desperately trying to hold back the tide with rock and concrete.

There is a beautiful piece of regenerating forest on Bank's Peninsular that I help out with, and I can picture the kanuka trees burning and black when the fierce droughts come.

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This is a mental health challenge, and we call it Anticipatory Grief.

Grief is the process of coming to terms with loss. To be human in this time is to live with massive ongoing loss, to care about that, and to grieve.

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

Grief is both a challenge and a strategy for mental health. To grieve well requires honesty and courage. One word for this is lament.

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Hannah Malcolm writes:

"We are 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 must name the damage, express grief, act out restitution, and so access restoring forgiveness. Hope, like lament, becomes a way of being in the world." (*Hannah Malcolm*)

slide 20

So these are my four mental health challenges of climate change:

bubble-wrap, dread, injustice and loss

I'm going to stop talking now for 2 minutes to give you space to catch up with your own responses to all this. These are big, and they hook onto other sources of defences, fear, anger and grief in our own stories. I honour your courage in facing these square on.

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If you're OK with this, here is a question for reflection:

well, actually it is 2 questions. How do you notice these challenges affecting you personally,

and how you notice these in the people you work with, your clients, patients and service users? maybe also your colleagues?

Reflect

Mental Health Strategies

Invite people back

slide 22

Reflect on the Chat answers: Is eco-anxiety a bad thing? ... Feona to read some out

...

It is good when it motivates us and it is bad when it disables us.

Guilt can motivate change or send us down spirals of self-loathing

Fear can push us into action or trap us in our bedrooms

Grief can soften our hearts in gratitude for what we love or it can flat-line into depression

It's what we are talking about all week - What promotes mental health?

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My friend Panu puts it this way:

"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?" (Panu Pihkala)

How indeed? I have four principles for mental health in climate crisis.

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Intake: managing the overwhelm

Here's the thing. Every day for the rest of my life, and my kids lives, there will be climate disasters happening somewhere in the world. We call this climate emergency and we are in it. But the human brain cannot stay permanently in a state of emergency. We are not designed to function in a constant state of shock. Which is a problem because our news media and our social media feed on shock.

Good information is an essential part of good action. But information about the climate is depressing, if not terrifying, and it overloads our mental and emotional processing capacity, and it bombards us from every side.

The answer is not, I would argue, to block out all information about climate change. I have claimed already that to do so is to fall into mentally unhealthy traps of denial and dissociation. But we do all need proactive strategies to manage our intake of information.

slide 25: Manage Intake

I have 4 strategies for you.

1. Be aware of how information affects you. Self-awareness is the start. Notice what you hear and see and read, and notice how you feel and think.

2. Read reports not news feed. Be proactive about your climate crisis intake. Personally, I recommend not overloading your mental capacity with other people's reactions. Go to the source material, which has the best chance of being well researched and reviewed. If you hear about some new report, find that and read that, not just what other people say about it. Be brave in absorbing accurate information.

3. Give yourself a break. A core strategy for dealing with anxiety is to give the brain down time. You know this. Let the stress hormones drain away, breathe, feel safe, rest. It is vital to feel calm even just occasionally. So, at least some days, don't watch the news.

Don't listen to the latest on the wild fires or the storm damage or the species extinction figures. Let others deal with it today. You don't carry it all on your shoulders.

4. Search out good news. I am not at all polyannaish about climate crisis. But there are awesome people out there doing awesome things. There genuinely is hope for positive change, and new visions of sustainable futures being lived out. We just don't hear about them on the news or our facebook feeds, because bad news gets attention, drama drama gets clicks.

In the follow-up email there will be links to some websites and podcasts to encourage you with hope.

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Collective action: courage together

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Judith Herman has been a leader in the field of trauma recovery. She writes "Social action serves as the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. It creates an alliance with others, based on cooperation and shared purpose." (Judith Herman)

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I strongly believe that Climate change is a shared crisis, so needs shared solutions. Individual actions are great, but leave us vulnerable to despair.

They can also feed anxiety and obsessive rule-based living.

Working together as community organisations de-toxes the bad news with positive progress. We can encourage each other and celebrate.

We can tackle really big problems in creative ways.

I have two recommendations for you. The first is to join a sustainability organisation.

slide 29– climate organisations

Aotearoa has many wonderful sustainability centres and climate justice advocacy groups with strong global connections. There is 350.org and their wonderful Pacific Climate Warriors movement. I highly recommend Ora Taiao for anyone working in health. Don't be afraid to connect with Extinction Rebellion. Then there's Gen Z, Forest & Bird, Coal Action Network, Climate Justice Aotearoa. Don't join all of them or your Inbox will crash, but pick one or two.

slide 30 – A Rocha

I am part of the faith-based conservation organisation, A Rocha. I am not personally out there on Karioi maunga at Raglan trapping stoats but I love knowing that we are protecting sea bird chicks, and inspiring Creation Care groups in churches all around the motu. This is my best insulation from eco anxiety, that together we are making a positive difference.

slide 31 – What might this look like in your organisation?

It is great to individually support climate action organisations, but you can have a far bigger impact in your own organisation. So this is my second recommendation, and the space I have thrown myself into with Place Consultancy, to build environmental sustainability into our community sector.

Aotearoa has thousands and thousands of community agencies and charitable trusts.

Which are you part of? All dedicated to looking after people. What if they also found ways to look after the environment?

Human health, including mental health, is inextricably bound up with environmental health. We can no longer take our natural support systems for granted. Collective action as social services, as community trusts, as health providers, inspires our team mates, and resources the whanau we connect with.

What if every youth work organisation addressed young people's fears for the earth by practical action to nurture the earth?

What if every agency had plans in place to reduce their carbon emissions and landfill waste?

slide 32 – Sustainability Map

This is my spot for shameless self promotion ... a little taste of my approach at Place Consultancy. This is the model I work from, a Sustainability Map for community organisations. A brief summary here, showing a range of ways that you can grow your sustainability strategy.

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And this slide shows where that can take you in terms of questions to address and ways to engage. You can find it on the Place website, or I can email it to you.

You don't necessarily need a consultant, but in my experience having someone come in from outside brings a fresh perspective and enables an organisation to shift from being bogged down in problems to sparking creative potential that can actually be fun and energizing for you and your colleagues.

slide 34 **Hauora: nurturing wellbeing, connection to place**

The third mental health strategy is actually a whole lot of strategies lumped together in wonderful word 'Hauora'. This is about wellbeing, looking after ourselves.

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"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 eco anxiety, not trying to get rid of it completely.

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1. Live with it: How can I have a healthy relationship with anxiety?

What enables you to live with distress and emotional discomfort?

Climate crisis challenges us to **change our relationship with anxiety** and reduce the impact of stress on our hearts and mind. This definitely includes accepting that, bummer, I am going to get down sometimes, I am going to get worried, but I can still function despite it.

A big part of that is **physical**. It is exercise, healthy eating, sleep routines. Yoga works for me. My teacher describes yoga as being "strong and steady under stress". I need that!

Emotional maturity looks like not taking our stress out on other people. We find ways to live with emotional discomfort that enable us to keep on loving and serving and caring. I'm not saying it is easy, hence the need to -

slide 37

2. Be kind to yourself: What do I need today?

Know what you need, and look after yourself.

Make your own **Hauora plan** including exercise and rest, relationships and space, mahi and wairua. Play, chill out, have fun, do something frivolous. Nurture **spirituality**. Lower your expectations of yourself.

In the church we have a word for this – **grace**. We aren't very good at doing it but we do talk about it. Grace is a beautiful thing. It means gift, it means gratitude, it means generosity and kindness. Be gracious with yourself and with others.

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3. Connect with nature: Which places sustain me?

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 eases our thinking, lowers our stress and soothes our body chemistry, affecting not only our mood, but also our endocrine, nervous and immune systems.

Some places we connect with more strongly than others. where feels like home? Which places feed you, whether you go there physically or in your imagination?

Mindfulness: One of the most powerful mental health strategies is to notice details of the natural world, preferably slowly. Deliberately using all our senses to be fully aware of one small thing for a moment. The smell of blossom, the feel of sunshine, a colour, a sensation. This interrupts the spinning loops of anxiety in our head. These days we call it mindfulness. In my tradition we call it practicing the presence of God in creation. Anyone can do it any time, just look out the window, go for a walk, appreciate your potplant.

- *Book: **Nature & Wellbeing** by Catherine Knight*

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Last on my list:

Role clarity: what is mine to do?

A key strategy is to find your own role to play in constructively addressing climate change. Climate crisis plus eco anxiety can lead to a whole lot of messages about what you 'should' do. I am less interested in what other people tell me I ought to do, and I am most interested in what I feel is mine to do.

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How can I use my skills, talents, and things I enjoy to express my values? In my faith tradition we call this 'calling', and it is the point of power at the intersection between who I am, what is happening around me, and a higher purpose and vision for it all.

Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu.

Whether our contribution is small or big, it will be enough. Do what you can do, not what you can't.

I am all about people in every walk of life and field of work taking hold of their own responsibility, finding energy, and discovering creative constructive ways to be part of the solution to climate crisis, instead of part of the problem.

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So, for social workers, how does climate crisis inform your practice as a social worker?

Green Social Work is an emerging field of practice, a lens through which to work.

For youth workers, connect with young people around climate action and hear what they have to say.

For counsellors or mental health nurses, learn about environmentally aware approaches such as 'The Work that Reconnects' and its beautiful focus on gratitude.

Ecotherapy partners with Papatuanuku in the therapeutic process. It includes the natural world through internal frame of reference and attachment, through tangible objects in the

counselling room, and through taking therapy outside, walk and talk, eco retreats, prayer and meditation.

slide 42 - Conclusion

So here are my mental health strategies for the climate crisis:

- be proactive about the information you are receiving,
- find ways to work together with others in climate action
- Look after yourself and your own wellbeing
- and do the work that is yours to do.

There is plenty more that could be said, but we have covered a lot of ground, a lot of it quite challenging emotionally and practically, in an hour. I hope it was helpful.

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I would like to finish with the wise and thoughtful words of Michael Apathy:

“Every time we have empathy and allow emotional space for ourselves and each other in connection to the climate crisis we contribute to healing both ourselves and our planet. Dealing with the climate crisis effectively and in a mentally healthy way requires two things. It requires inner psychological or spiritual work and it requires the outer work of activism and making real systemic changes in the world.”

Now you get another couple of minutes to reflect.

Stick around for questions and discussions after that.

No reira, tena tatou katoa,
awhi mai, awhi atu.
E tu tahi tatou -
He waka eke noa.

slide 44

2 minutes space to reflect

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

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