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Building Climate Resilience: How Climate Groups Can Channel Anxiety and Grief into Action

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Abstract

As the impacts of climate change increasingly stress the ecological and social systems of the planet there is also a greater incidence of psychological struggles related to climate instability. Climate change is a significant source of psychological distress for many individuals, often manifesting as climate anxiety and grief. This thesis explores research and therapeutic experience that has been generated as the discipline of psychology seeks to meet this rising challenge. In particular, the fields of ecopsychology, psychodynamic therapy, existential psychology and Indigenous knowledge contributed the majority of the insight to the conclusions drawn along with contributions from potentially applicable emotions research outside of the climate field. A synthesis of best practices is proposed to support the creation of peer based climate groups. By addressing the emotional, psychological, and ecological dimensions of climate distress, the aim is to empower individuals to move beyond anxiety and grief towards values-driven action and a sense of agency despite deep environmental uncertainty.

Keywords: Eco-Anxiety, Climate Grief, Climate Despair, Climate Resilience, Climate Support Group, Climate-Aware, Climate Circle

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The majority of the last 100,000 years of Homo sapiens existence has occurred within a relatively cool and highly glaciated period in Earth's history (McNeill & Mauldin, 2012). This creature of a cool planet, suddenly confronted by an average global temperature rise at a rate unprecedented in human history, is living through more frequent extreme climate events, a loss of biodiversity, and rising ocean levels, all contributing to an uncertain future for humanity (Pörtner et al., 2022). Two in three Americans (66%) report some worry about global warming; three in ten (30%) are "very worried" about it, and more than four in ten Americans (43%) expect to sustain harm from global warming according to the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Rosenthal, S., Kotcher, J., Bergquist, P., Ballew, M., Goldberg, M., & Gustafson, A., 2019). In a broader study that included participants (ages 16-25) from 10 countries, youth around the world reported high levels of anxiety (61.8%), sadness (66.7%), and fear (67.3%) in the context of their feelings about their future climate (Hickman et al., 2021).

There is a tide of concern about a changing climate that is rising along with the sea levels, which is referred to as climate change anxiety, climate anxiety, or broadened to exo-anxiety to encompass fear of a broader ecological crisis (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). There is a full spectrum of emotions being felt in humanity's relationship with a changing climate; grief, shame, anger, and hopelessness; as well as hope, reverence, and awe in the context of connection with the natural world (Pihkala, 2022). Because Climate change is human caused and perception is mediated by personal views and social mores, it is partially a phenomenon of interior experience at the individual and social level (Reser & Swim, 2011). The urgent need for new diagnoses, theoretical frameworks, professional organizations, competencies, and

multi-scale interventions by the field of psychology is clear given the growing climate impacts, emerging mental health challenges, accelerated migrations, and increasing climate distress among youth. (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Lawrance et al., 2022; Lustgarten, 2020; Pörtner et al., 2022; Swim et al., 2011).

As such, the field of psychology is well suited to engage with these emerging challenges. Psychology is particularly challenged to grow beyond past conceptions, develop new competencies, and learn to work in a widely interdisciplinary fashion (Swim et al., 2011). The discipline of climate psychology has emerged to meet some of this need. The fields of environmental psychology, which emerged in the 1970s, and ecopsychology, which emerged in the 1990s, are precursors that have contributed to the current climate psychology discourse (Doherty, 2016). By 2010, a group of researchers led a concerted effort to anticipate the needs of a changing planet and called for the institutional adaptation of psychology as a discipline to meet those needs (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Reser & Swim, 2011; Swim et al., 2011). Large systemic challenges are of utmost importance, and the field of psychology will have the opportunity and duty to contribute in concert with other disciplines. However, in the interest of scope and clarity, this thesis will examine the potential of small group therapeutic interventions for individuals experiencing climate distress; a term encompassing the range of emotional hardships arising from the climate crisis.

The fact that the phenomena of climate change encompass psychodynamic and sociological features does not negate the predictive warnings that a vast consensus of scientists has agreed upon (Pörtner et al., 2022). Although the last 100 millenia have been a predominantly glacial period, during the three hundred thousand year lifespan of the human species, the climate of the earth has gone through periods of glaciation and warming; at times rapidly within the context of the geologic time scale (McNeill & Mauldin, 2012). Approximately 11,700 years ago, the planet completed a six thousand year warming period culminating in the great glacial melting that initiated what is known as the Holocene epoch (McNeill & Mauldin,

2012). This epoch has been a period of relative stability during which the human species has developed into a complex, global civilization (McNeill & Mauldin, 2012). According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change(IPCC), the climate is moving beyond these predictable ranges, at rates not seen outside of global cataclysm, largely due to the impacts of industrial society's energy consumption and destruction of ecosystems (Pörtner et al., 2022). These human-driven changes are impacting ocean acidity, weather patterns, and biodiversity. If high-end global temperature predictions are reached, mean temperature range will be pushed to a level not known for one million years (Fletcher et al., 2024).

A significant portion of the population experiences climate distress in reaction to such a threat (Hickman et al., 2021; Tam et al., 2023). Strong emotions are natural when elicited from an accurate perception of threat. It cannot be emphasized enough that the fact of a shifting climate is settled science, but the severity of that shift is yet to be determined (Pörtner et al., 2022). Humans alive today will make choices that will impact conditions on earth for the next decades and even centuries (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Lawrance et al., 2022; Lustgarten, 2020; Pörtner et al., 2022; Swim et al., 2011). Humanity's relationship with nature, our ability to communicate values, success making decisions across cultures, and capacity for resilience and change, are all arenas in which psychology is particularly well situated to engage; along with mental health, as we collectively contend with critical climate challenges (Swim et al., 2011). Climate change is by its nature global and so will intersect with an incredible variance of people and cultures. There will be a wide variety of impacts and responses based on an individual's environmental identity, proximity to natural disasters, occupation, gender, class, nationality, worldview, as well as many other demographic factors (Fletcher et al., 2024; Schell et al., 2020; Steffen et al., 2015). As a result, there is no 'one size fits all' intervention. This paper proposes an intervention intended for people from industrialized cultures who self-identify as struggling with climate distress and are actively seeking support

This thesis offers a broad outline of a practical framework for groups of approximately four to twelve people to address psychological challenges they endure from feelings toward climate change and work to increase their capacity for emotional resilience which can contribute to improved psychological outcomes. The following sections provide context and an evidence based foundation for the proposed intervention. It will be useful to explore current understandings of what are often called climate emotions, theoretical constructs of climate psychology, practitioner insights from current therapeutic practices, and other models of group interventions presently in use. The emotional terrain on which our experience of living in an era of ecological reckoning plays out is the basis of most people's interaction with climate change, and so is the subject of initial review.

Qualitative Review of Selected Climate Psychology Research

Climate Emotions

Across various fields, human inner experience is characterized by terms such as emotions, moods, feelings, and affects; each with specific meanings that are continually being discussed and refined (Pihkala, 2022). Climate psychology researchers commonly use 'emotion' as a general term for these affective states, and this practice will be adopted in this work and used interchangeably with the term "feelings". (Gonzáles-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2020; Landmann, 2020; Neckel and Hasenfratz, 2021, as cited in (Pihkala, 2022)). Exploring the emotional dimensions of climate change is crucial for individuals interested in improving their mental health and empowering themselves to make proactive choices aligned with their values.

Research supports that the ability to understand one's own emotional state with a degree of specificity is linked to improved emotional regulation, which is defined as the effective management and response to negative emotions (Kalokerinos et al., 2019; Kashdan et al., 2015). Emotional granularity (or differentiation) are the terms used to specify the capacity to perceive and articulate subtle differences between emotions that are alike (Kashdan et al.,

2015). The ability to differentiate emotions is a stronger predictor of successful emotional

regulation than the choice of strategies used to do so, therefore encouraging the improvement

of this skill is a tool to address undesired emotions (Kalokerinos et al., 2019). The potential

benefit of gaining a stronger understanding of this emotional terrain is stifled by a mismatch

between the level of people's concern of the extent of public discourse; "almost six in ten

Americans (59%) say they "rarely" or "never" discuss global warming with family and friends", as

compared with the two-thirds who report at least some worry (Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E.,

Rosenthal, S., Kotcher, J., Bergquist, P., Ballew, M., Goldberg, M., & Gustafson, A., 2019).

　　As researchers build conceptual frameworks to understand these emotions, the creation

of a shared vocabulary allows clear communication, but also the opportunity for people to

engage with concepts that support them in an exploration of the subtlety of their own experience

(Pihkala, 2022). Emotional states that do not receive public validation can become more

challenging to work through; ecological mourners have often felt belittled and isolated,

exemplifying a climate influenced disenfranchised grief (Kretz, 2017 as cited in (Pihkala, 2024).

The role of social support is to provide emotional resources so that people exercise the capacity

to feel deep emotions to encourage emotional growth, reorganization of the sense of self and

their priorities for future action (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017; Ojala et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2022).

　　The frameworks of climate anxiety and grief are not entirely settled territories but are

seen as emotional states that are combinations of varied emotions and cognitions that interact

with worldviews and often have a moral component (Pihkala, 2022). For instance, climate

anxiety may have emotions of fear, grief, and guilt alongside an uncertainty about the future

(Pihkala, 2022). There are many ways to react to the climate crisis, but climate anxiety and grief

are currently covered by the strongest body of research, so these emotions will serve as focal

points for this discussion (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Crownshaw, 2020; Ojala et al., 2021;

Pihkala, 2020, 2024). There are two important distinctions. Perceiving climate change as a

threat is a scientifically and often observationally backed assessment, so ecological grief and

anxiety are reasonable and functional responses to climate change. (Cunsolo et al., 2020).

These emotions can be a catalyst for positive change and action if individuals are provided with

adequate support and resources (Cunsolo et al., 2020). It is valuable to recognize the distinction

between emotional states that qualify as diagnosable conditions, under DSM-V guidelines, for

example, and less severe states in which people report the ability to attend to basic life

functions, but feel an inability to regulate these emotions (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Stein &

Nesse, 2015).

Climate Anxiety

Climate anxiety can manifest as a chronic fear of environmental doom, including worry

about the potential for apocalyptic outcomes (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). This is a complex

emotional state that is future focused and can include obsessive worry or rumination that may

debilitate functioning. (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020) This can be from the experience of physical

symptoms such as panic attacks, poor sleep, and difficulty concentrating (Soutar & Wand,

2022). Given the established link between stressors and adverse health outcomes, reports of

escalating anxiety resulting from exposure to the climate crisis raise significant concerns for

public health (Thoits, 2010). The study of climate anxiety is complicated by research

demonstrating that non-clinical anxiety can be a predictor of pro-environmental behaviors

(Stollberg & Jonas, 2021). Further nuance is brought to this discussion by other findings

showing that an experience of anxiety will support taking action to address an environmental

stressor; provided the circumstances are perceived as manageable (Ojala et al., 2021).

What emerges is first a distinction between a clinically diagnosable threshold largely

determined by general functionality, i.e. many are able to maintain basic life goals while also

holding deep worry about the ecological future (Soutar & Wand, 2022). Secondly, there is a

spectrum in which the likelihood of taking proactive action is mediated by an individual's sense

of control and belief that one's actions can make a difference, often defined as a sense of

agency (Ojala et al., 2021). This align's with Alfred Bandura's theory of self-efficacy in which a

person's belief in their ability to execute goals(self-efficacy) is highly supportive to the capability

to shape one's life(agency) (Bandura, 2000). The global scale of the climate crisis presents a

challenge when trying to believe in one's agency. A discussion of potential engagement with that

issue will appear in a later section.

Climate Grief

Climate grief is a similarly complex lattice of emotions, self-perception, worldview, and

social interrelationships (Pihkala, 2024). Climate grief can exist at an immensity of scale and be

shared across a culture, as in the case of many Indigenous peoples who have suffered deep

ecological grief over the centuries of destruction and dispossession of the lands they inhabited

(Markkula et al., 2024). A current example is the climate driven changes to Arctic ecologies

resulting in Inuit elders reporting feelings of grief at the loss of an identity associated with

'knowing the land' and the cultural role of passing on relevant land-based knowledge (Cunsolo

& Ellis, 2018). Most cultures do not have an identity so deeply connected to the place they live,

but the response to the destruction of natural environments with grief is common and can

encompass more than what might be generally considered environmental constituents (Pihkala,

2024). In addition to tangible losses, climate grief can be experienced as sorrow over intangible

losses like a loss of a sense of self, a connection to others, or meaning in life, or hope for the

future (Pihkala, 2024).

To gain a deeper understanding of the manifestations of climate grief, it is important to

upend common assumptions about the nature of time and grief. Anxiety is commonly

understood to be a 'forward looking' emotion; a concern about something that could occur at a

later time. Grief is often understood to be a 'backward looking' emotion reckoning with a loss,

generally of another human being, that occurred in the past. The DSM-V diagnoses grief as

pathological when it meets the criteria of Prolonged Grief Disorder, in which a major factor is the

persistence of grief one year after a loss (Bonanno & Malgaroli, 2020). Within climate grief

research, there have been experiences of anticipatory grief at the assumed loss of ecosystem

or species (Pihkala, 2024). There are also objects of grief that are neither human nor a one time event as in grief at the degradation of an ecosystem, termed solastalgia, as its healthy state has been lost (Albrecht et al., 2007), a feeling of loss of a hoped for future (Ojala et al., 2021), or an inability to resolve grieving because it is ongoing (Pihkala, 2024).

Grief is a universal human experience, so there is a large body of existing grief research that can support efforts to find analogous experiences and perhaps treatments for climate grief. (Dahl & Boss, 2020; Pihkala, 2024). Climate grief, which is felt at losses attributed to climate change, can be mutually felt with could be called ecological grief, which may occur in light of the destruction of the environment by toxins, overexploitation, or industrial disasters not directly caused by climate change, but driven by the industrial society that causes it (Bednarek, 2021).

There are three important features to understand within the field of climate or ecological grief. First, there is an open-endedness and lack of precise definition because what is being grieved is ongoing and spans species and ecosystems, much less individuals. This may be akin to concepts coming from established grief research of ambiguous grief, nonfinite loss, or even shattered assumptions(which are losses and grief that are so powerful that fundamental beliefs about the world may be destroyed) (Pihkala, 2024). Secondly, ecological grief can be anticipatory in that people feel pain in the present toward losses that are predicted to occur in the future (Pihkala, 2024). These may be losses of environments or a species, but there could also be the experience of a loss of a dream of the future that one has assumed for themselves or someone close to them. A parallel here may be a parent of a child who sustains an injury or developmental interruption that will make it unlikely that they can participate in societally valued life milestones of going off on their own and/or starting a family (Dahl & Boss, 2020). Lastly, disenfranchised grief, is a grief that is not acknowledged societally. A non-climate example would be the loss of a partner from a relationship that was not approved of by society and kept secret (Doka, 2020, as cited in Pihkala, 2024). There is an authentic feeling of grief but no public mourning or social validation of the cause or possibly existence of this grief (Pihkala,

2024). This can be the experience of those in deep grief over the loss of species and environments (Pihkala, 2024).

The parallels between the main body of grief research and climate grief are currently speculative, but they seem to be a strong starting point to craft treatment strategies for forms of grief different from the experience of the known death of a loved one. There are research-supported strategies for coping with ambiguous loss, including the pursuit of finding meaning, adjusting mastery, normalizing ambivalence, reconstructing identity, and discovering new hope and purpose in life (Boss, 2017). Grief researchers Schultz and Harris have developed strategies for coping with non-finite loss, including "naming and validating what is lost, recognizing the ongoing nature of the loss, acknowledging what is not lost, allowing the possibility of meaning making and growth, and initiating rituals where none exist" (Schultz & Harris, 2011). These are a wealth of strategies that may well serve people who are struggling to reconcile feelings of climate or ecological grief if the form looks similar to a category previously described. Grief stems from a sense of loss, but it is important to note that all of the aforementioned challenges occur because, on some level, there is a sense of loving care, and this relationship of care to distress is vital to bring into the healing process (Crownshaw, 2020). Climate psychology is an emerging field with a theoretical basis still in development. However, theory can serve to provide a framework for understanding phenomena and guidance for interventions. Therefore, multiple approaches to the area of climate distress will be discussed below in hopes of designing a framework to support the proposed intervention.

Theoretical Constructs

As Climate psychology forms as a discipline, it will not be necessary to have one distinct body of theory that guides action. Many schools of thought will be marshaled to serve the struggle of health of the human psyche under adverse climate conditions. This thesis draws mainly from researchers with experience as practitioners within the schools of ecopsychology, psychoanalysis, and existential psychology. A brief exploration of the theoretical frameworks

that support diagnoses, treatments, and deeper study of climate distress will be valuable.

Climate change is a wide array of phenomena that can be understood to challenge certainty of

the future and clarity of what moral action constitutes and these schools of thought tend to

engage with questions of that nature (Pomerantz, 2024). Also, there is a deep tradition of

Indigenous thought that has been concerned with human consciousness, ecological health, and

the moral value of being an active contributor to the health of a place as a method of serving the

health of all species (June, 2022; Kimmerer, 2018; Tynan, 2021). Psychological practitioners are

usually strict adherents to one mode of thought, but the four subjects of ecopsychology,

psychodynamic therapy, existential psychology, and Indigenous knowledge will serve as

organizing principles to ground this inquiry.

Ecopsychology

Ecopsychology emerged in the late 20th century as a field in reaction to the perception

that the reductionism and conceptions of humanity as separate from the earth were damaging to

both the planet and the people living on it (Doherty, 2009). It emphasizes the

interconnectedness between human and ecological well-being and is deeply concerned with the

psychological roots of the ecological crisis, which makes it particularly salient to this endeavor

(Conn, 1998; Davis, J. V., & Canty, J. M., 2013; Doherty, 2009, 2016). There has been a

growing amount of work that has focused on how to support people in a time of changing

climate over nearly three decades (Conn, 1998; Koziol, 2023; Pienaar, 2011; Thomashow,

1998). Within ecopsychology, there is a foundational assertion that human psychology arises

out of the natural world because it is a precondition of our existence (Doherty, 2009). The

human species is one of many interconnected species, all of whom are related within a web of

living systems (Doherty, 2016). As a result, we experience great pain at the destruction of the

biosphere that is often not acknowledged because the pain can be overwhelming (Macy, 1995).

Within this understanding, every effort is made to support the reconnection of the

relationship with the natural world through more time in nature, a reconsideration of identity as

separate from the natural world, and practice in observing the qualitative experience of these

shifts in mentality and place (Davis, J. V., & Canty, J. M., 2013; Doherty, 2016). It is possible that

accepting the extent of one's feelings about ecological destruction may reveal great anguish,

and through fostering engagement with supportive relationships, environment, and sense of

identity, ecopsychological therapy can help individuals develop the capacity to sustain that

awareness without paralyzing fear or grief (Davis, J. V., & Canty, J. M., 2013). This work can be

difficult, but ecopsychology shares the philosophy with transpersonal psychology that the

spectrum of mental health spans more widely than unwell to normal and that experiences of

flourishing are possible (Doherty, 2018). As one spends less time enacting denial and

disconnection and more time living from a biocentric worldview greater inner resources are

available to support this flourishing (Macy, 1995).

A shared theme that this thesis will continually explore is the relationship between a

sense of purpose and mental health. An ecopsychologically informed practice is to align action

with values of environmental restoration, as that is often a value of those suffering from climate

distress, it is important to the creation of value and meaning (Doherty, 2018). Because there is a

stated goal to support human psychological flourishing, emotional experiences that are an

obstacle to experiencing a fuller experience of mental health are seen as worthy of tending to in

therapeutic work, even if a client can function normally (Doherty, 2018).

The promising contributions to an intervention design from this body of work would

encourage participants to focus outside of themselves, especially by literally going outside and

participating in a relationship with the natural environment. In addition, there should be an ethic

of emotional resilience, which in this context is the ability to adapt and thrive through braving

environmental challenges. An effective approach extends this ethic of resilience to community

and ecosystems with the intention of engaging in value-guided action that helps individuals

envision a life of flourishing and meaning, while also encouraging an understanding that

maintaining a full consciousness of climate change and its complexity is healthy (Doherty, 2018).

Psychodynamic Psychology

Psychodynamic therapy emerged in the late 19th century and is centrally concerned with the effects of the unconscious mind on human feeling and action (Pomerantz, 2024). This field is heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Sigmund Freud, but it also includes developments from later theorists who expanded and modified Freud's original ideas, such as Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Melanie Klein, and others (Pomerantz, 2024). With the rise of cognitive, behavioral, and pharmaceutical treatments, it is no longer the predominant practice of psychological therapy, but it remains substantially practiced (Pomerantz, 2024).

In contrast to ecopsychology, the perception of the human mind is often the focus of analysis and so the way previous experiences shape perception of the outside world is given importance (Santostefano, 2008). For example, the sense that global leadership is not adequately addressing rising temperatures could be felt as a lack of care or nurturance not provided by a parental figure (Weintrobe, 2013). According to the theory, we often are not aware of the unconscious drives informing our views, as in the case of our own destructive urges being projected onto the natural world, thus perceiving all of it as dangerous and suggesting destruction being a protective measure (Weintrobe, 2012). An enduring contribution to the field of psychology is the concept of defense mechanisms, which are strategies, i.e. denial, that are usually unconscious, and help to reduce anxiety caused by internal conflicts (Pomerantz, 2024).

As we explore the modern human relationship with nature, some writers posit an environmental neuroticism that can arise because our culture and the individuals within it are fundamentally uncomfortable with our dependence on the earth itself for survival, as it pierces the illusion of our own autonomy (Lehtonen & Valimaki, 2013). Psychological defenses are then created to separate us from these feelings of anxiety (Lehtonen & Valimaki, 2013). Renee Lertzman (2013) has challenged the perception of apathy within people or populations and

explored the inaction that arises from a feelings of the loss of emotional bonds to natural habitats formed in childhood, a concern for the future and an inability to grieve fully (i.e., arrested mourning) all of which have no outlet within a culture of disavowal. These powerful, complex emotions can support inaction not because of a lack of care, but because of too many unresolved feelings (Lertzman, 2013).

Within the framework of psychoanalytic climate psychology, communicating large amounts of scientific information to most people will cause their psychological defenses to be raised to protect from a threat rather than create a change of mind or behavior, because there is still no cultural or personal container to experience and coherent understanding of these emotions (Weintrobe, 2012). An important insight to incorporate into interventions with climate distress is the assertion that Individuals require authentic emotional support to hold their anxieties in their conscious experience without utilizing defense mechanisms because this practice leads to the opportunity to change their behavior and worldview (Weintrobe, 2012).

Existential Psychology

Existential psychology emerged in Europe in the middle of the 20th century and is centrally concerned with the individual understanding and confronting the fundamental questions of human existence (Mendelowitz & Schneider, 2008). Within existential psychology the damage and threat to ecosystems pushes the understanding of our own mortality into the conscious mind and the fears that accompany it (Guthrie, 2023). The climate crisis can be seen as a death sentence or as creating a moral imperative against reproduction, which brings these fundamental questions into conscious consideration (Pihkala, 2020). Existential psychology would argue that when people can face the understanding of their own death, they are able to access benefits such as meaningfulness, authenticity, and pro-sociality (Guthrie, 2023)). Guthrie asserts that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy would be of great use for those struggling with climate anxiety and grief because it is well suited toward supporting people to feel emotions, connect with their values, and then engage in productive action while accepting

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conditions that they would prefer not exist (Guthrie, 2023). In the conception of Viktor Frankl's

Logotherapy, a form of existential therapy, the ability to find and create meaning was central to

the human ability to experience fulfillment (Frankl, 1985). That capacity to find meaning despite

uncertain or even tragic circumstances is very useful when confronting degradation of

environmental conditions and the rate of change that they will spur.

Indigenous Traditional Ecological and Cultural Knowledge

Indigenous thinkers have offered significant contributions to the question of how

humanity will interact with the natural world in modern times, and contributed to public dialogue

concerning human wellness, environmental sustainability and a changing climate (McGregor,

2004; Tynan, 2021; Whyte, 2017). The entire spectrum of Indigenous thought emanates from

many nations and cultures worldwide, so it cannot be treated as a defined school of thought in

the same way as the above approaches are. There are concepts and views of the human/nature

relationship that can support mental health within the climate change era.

Within Indigenous science experiential local knowledge is prized over general theory.

(Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000). Although individual distinction is deeply respected, human psychology

is not abstracted and separated from the natural environment (Littletree et al., 2020). This can

be difficult to integrate into traditional western scientific models, in which generalizable

knowledge is valued. The life systems that support us are viewed as inherently sacred which is

an important difference from western science and most interpretations of mainstream religion

(Hall, 2008). Animals, plants, and the land exist on their own terms and have the same essential

worth that all humans hold, and so human action is guided by a responsibility that extends

beyond humanity (Kimmerer, 2018; Tynan, 2021). Finally, the care for the biosphere should be

expressed and explored through action by tending to and seeking to more deeply understand all

beings with whom we are in relation (Kealiikanakaoleohaililani & Giardina, 2016).

The climate crisis is generally considered to be caused by or an extension of colonialism

and temperature rise is one of many interlocking crises along with biodiversity loss, freshwater

depletion, lack of sovereignty of the longest term inhabitants of lands, and disconnection from

the responsibilities humans have toward the planet (Jimenez & Kabachnik, 2023). When

situating the idea of climate psychology in relation to Indigenous thought it should be

understood that a reconnection to natural systems is not put forth as a treatment for climate

distress, but as integral to a good life (Hall, 2008). There is agreement with ecopsychology that

the imbalance of the human relationship to the natural world is responsible for much of the

environmental destruction and human misery that we face (Tynan, 2021). A view of the world as

a place of vastly interconnected relations calls to mind something similar to the Deep Ecology

that Joanna Macy is inspired by (Macy & Brown, 2014). In this view, interrelationship is core to

understanding human psychology; and these relationships are tended by holding up

longstanding agreements with other species that share the earth as a way to take responsibility

for the support of life as a whole (Tynan, 2021).

Although potentially unfamiliar, this base of knowledge can offer guidance to perceive

the climate crisis as an imperative to relate more closely with the biological world through direct

relationship that engages in pragmatic action to tend to the health of the environment. There is

also a clarity of connection between social and environmental justice that can support the value

structure of people for whom both are important.

All of these contributions give valuable insight into the inner struggle of living on a planet

in perilous times. Some that stand out are existential therapy's understanding that undertaking

the understanding of the death of a healthy ecosystem will trigger feelings around our own

death and thus engender strong emotions and defense mechanisms; Psychodynamic therapy's

insight that it is necessary to support the person in being able to feel these emotions without

raising reactive defenses, and the agreement of ecopsychology and Indigenous knowledge that

a healthy human relationship to the natural world is crucial for happiness. Although the

preceding discussion has used a framework of individual disciplines, often pragmatic

practitioners draw from multiple bases of knowledge when developing interventions for the complex phenomena of climate psychology.

Therapy Across Disciplines

Individual

Baudon & Jachens (2021) contributed a useful scoping review of recommended interventions used by therapists across a variety of disciplines. It is useful to explore specific emphases of action that arise across disciplines. A comprehensive analysis of therapists' experiences addressing climate change in their practice revealed five themes commonly shared across interventions for both individual and group therapy for climate anxiety is represented in Table 1 (Baudon & Jachens, 2021).

Table 1

Frequency of Themes in Climate Anxiety Interventions

Theme	Frequency (n =34)
Fostering clients' inner resilience	31
Emotional support by joining groups	21
Encouraging clients to take action	15
Practitioners' inner work and education	13
Connecting clients with nature	9

Note. The total number of responses exceeds the number of participants (n=34) as individuals could mention multiple themes.

All interventions listed have been shown support within sources discussed in this text, but encouraging resilience was the most highly practiced intervention among practitioners involved in the study (Baudon & Jachens, 2021). A standard definition for resilience in a psychological context is:"the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (American Psychological Association, 2018). Albert Bandura, the developer of social cognitive theory, asserted that resilience stems from personal resources by which people shape their emotional and external environments with an emphasis on proactive empowerment (Bandura, 2008). There has been an upswing of climate group models created, so it seems to be seen as a beneficial strategy to intervene with climate change anxiety, and there are many emerging models that are useful to explore.

Group Models

The value of group work is a supportive environment for emotional processing, recognizing one's inner experience of eco-anxiety in others and connecting experience to broader social issues (Baudon & Jachens, 2021). There are publicly-available models of group discourse around climate distress that have differing areas of emphasis.

Rosemary Randall and Andy Brown created Climate Conversations with an emphasis on behavior change techniques grounded in psychological research and focus on enabling pro environmental action (Carbon Conversations Toronto, 2024). The Pacific Northwest chapter of the Alliance for Climate therapy created a Toolkit for Climate Resilience with the goal of supporting the facilitation of group work suitable for all ages. The practices themselves span from creating open conversation, building resilience, building group cohesion, and enacting self-care (Climate Therapy Alliance-Pacific Northwest., 2019). The Good Grief Network has developed a 10 step program influenced by the Alcoholics anonymous program for adult children of alcoholics. It is a peer-to-peer 10-week intervention that focuses on accepting

severity, uncertainty, mortality, self-care, responsibility and ultimately aims to lead toward a sense of meaning in life stemming from the ethic that feeling authentic grief is key to healing (https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org/). The intervention with the longest track record comes from the Work That Reconnects by Molly Brown and Joanna Macy. There are a wealth of practices built up over decades that are often a longer time commitment and interact with emotions at a deep level (Macy & Brown, 2014).

The Climate Psychology Alliance created group work for therapists, Through the Door, that prioritizes creating a group dynamic in which the feelings that the practitioners do not know what to do with have a place to be shared. The importance is placed on finding new responses rather than controlling climate emotions to apply a set of skills to a problem (Robertson, 2024). The importance of practitioner self care is emphasized across the literature (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Heiman, 2024; Seaman, 2016). It is important for the practitioner to understand their own defense mechanisms, so they can engage with their client's climate distress (Heiman, 2024). Many practitioners report feeling their own reactions rise as they work with clients in session (Seaman, 2016). The climate crisis is not something that professionals can step outside of, they must take on the responsibility of encountering their own climate emotions and cultivate their own supportive resources, so that they can be authentic when offering support to others.

Synthesis of Research

Tools for the Journey

The emerging nature of climate psychology creates a challenge when seeking assuredness in understanding the emotional challenges people are facing, the climate conditions they are reacting to, and the best practices for treatment. Drawing on empirical support literature and Indigenous knowledge that inform best practices has provided salient perspectives that might be thought of as a toolbox useful for building climate support groups. In general, consensus within and especially across disciplines was favored alongside specific insights from established theories.

Working in Groups

Climate change is of a scale that the reactions to this phenomenon take place at cultural or other group levels and this challenges the traditional one-on-one model of therapy. Perhaps a collective effort toward healing will be necessary to address a social wound, as climate anxiety would not be effectively treated as solely an individual challenge (Bednarek, 2019). A very direct use of a group model is the correction of pluralistic ignorance, the mistaken belief that one's own views are not in the majority (Geiger & Swim, 2016). Many people underestimate the proportion of Americans who worry about climate change, as well as support for policies to address it (Geiger & Swim, 2016; Sparkman et al., 2022). This can stifle social-emotional discourse, as people assume their fears are not shared, which supports that mistaken idea (Geiger & Swim, 2016). Meeting in groups can naturally encourage an understanding that these climate emotions are more widely shared than assumed which can also address potential feelings of isolation. Many therapists are reporting that feelings of isolation drive some of their clients' struggles (Bioneers, 2024). Psychology as a discipline will be challenged when operating within individualistic cultures because the field of therapy may individualize clients' struggles instead of taking the state of the world into account (Bednarek, 2019).

Emotional Granularity

Working in a group can also address the lack of frameworks and nuance for these emotional experiences so that they can be normalized and emotional granularity can be developed by participants which has been shown to be a resource for emotional regulation (Smidt & Suvak, 2015). It will be important to cultivate a practice of participants to learn to understand the subtler differences in their emotional states and be able to communicate them, because that skill supports the ability to relate to those emotions in a healthier way (Kalokerinos et al., 2019). As an example, someone may feel grief in the face of species loss, both guilt and excitement at planning a trip to bring children to see a glacier, anger at large corporations,and hope when understanding the progress that is being made. Taking time and space with others to

explore some of these intertwined states can shed light onto what were unknown inner states. This focus begins to fill in some of the gaps in vocabulary to describe climate emotions expanding the capacity to communicate as well as cultivating the use of emotional differentiation which can be improved like any skill (Barrett et al., 2001).

No Need to Pathologize

A shared therapeutic vocabulary to describe climate anxiety and grief can aid understanding and expression, but avoidance of inadvertently medicalizing these natural human responses to environmental threats, suggesting the need for clinical intervention is warranted (Bednarek, 2019). For many people the phenomena explored in this paper are not a medical issue, but they are a challenge to emotional health, a settled sense of identity and vitally important in the context of long term decision making (Ojala et al., 2021). There will be times that individual professional help will best serve, but people organizing themselves to support one another would not require a professional clinician.

Often, climate anxiety arises from a reasonable evaluation of current research and personal observation, so it is not a pathology and could, in fact, be understood as the presence of sanity. Many practitioners assert that experiencing these emotions is a healthy sign that people are not using psychological defenses (Doherty, 2018; Hasbach, 2015). By fostering a deeper ability to acknowledge and engage with the realities of life, these symptoms can be the gateway through which we pass and step into meaningful action (Bednarek, 2019). The goal is to encourage enough social and emotional support to allow people to relax their defenses and relate to these sometimes distressing feelings as an initial guiding force towards a value-laden life guided by ethical decisions (Doherty, 2018).

Address Values to Inform Meaningful Action

The pain that arises from the understanding of a species being destroyed, inhabitants of another country facing environmental degradation that they did not cause, or the pollution of a beloved childhood natural place all arise from feelings of love and value of those things.

Defining a strong connection to values and then enacting them by addressing climate change can strengthen one's identity as someone who is supporting a healthy ecology (Doherty, 2018). Encouraging action implies the question, 'What can one person do?', which speaks to the scale of the problem, but also to the lack of clarity around taking action that can assure a preferred future.

The research around ambiguous loss suggests that in a situation in which losses are ongoing and there is not a discrete end point, defining an experience as meaningful may serve those suffering the grief (Dahl & Boss, 2020). It is important to name the ambiguity and lack of closure as something open ended in which meaning can be derived (Dahl & Boss, 2020). The struggle with this ambiguity, even as it is painful, begins a process of making meaning and there is a potential to restructure identity and discover new hope (Dahl & Boss, 2020). As opposed to the urge to remove ambiguity, which may be impossible, there can be support to accept it and derive a greater understanding of what is meaningful and act according to those values as a way of practicing certainty during uncertain times.

Climate Agency

Alfred Bandura found that self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task, was a key component of agency, which is a more generalized belief that one can shape one's life (Bandura, 2008). Bandura found that the pursuit of mastery of a skill could establish feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2008). The grief researchers Dahl and Boss (2008), suggest that by developing skills, a sense of inner mastery may be cultivated which can address feelings of helplessness (Dahl & Boss, 2020). By setting goals that are achievable and incorporate skill building there is an opportunity to see measurable outcomes and an increased competence (Doherty, 2018). The connective route that is shown here is building skill and mastery as a way to increase self-efficacy and then agency which Bandura saw as a great support for resilience (Bandura, 2008). The IPCC report (2022), notes that resilience can be understood as not the ability to return to a previous state after a

challenge, but the capability to gain capacity because of experiencing the challenge. It is impossible to control the fate of the world, but we can encourage cultivation skills and abilities to address climate change as a way of increasing self-efficacy and the benefits of agency and resilience that can come from that.

Work at a human scale

The study of climate change requires scientists from many disciplines and a significant amount of resources to create adequate models and explanations (Pörtner et al., 2022). The challenge of properly scaling action is related to the challenge of relating to a global problem as an individual. Sometimes, how a problem is conceived informs the conception of its solutions. In the case of climate distress it can be argued that climate change is in fact too narrow a view of what we face (Fletcher et al., 2024). There has been a push to consider the systems of the earth in terms of planetary boundaries, or tolerable thresholds for humans within the earth system, in which climate change is joined by biodiversity loss and freshwater supplies among other factors that merit concern and are threat to a healthy planet (Steffen et al., 2015).

 This can be a useful framework, because if we allow ourselves to conceive of environmental peril in terms of access to clean water and air, biodiversity and flourishing ecosystems rather than parts per million of carbon we are now working in terms that the average person actually experiences and understands. By looking to create actions that address the environments that people live in from a wider context there are more potential actions to take and the outcomes of hands-on work will be more directly measurable.

Go Outside

The goal of this project is to shift the relationship with the natural world and thus participants will be best served by being in the natural world. If climate change is real, and it is, then we want to support people to move past abstract ideas of nature. There is now a significant amount of research that links time in nature to various measures of well being including increased attention and vitality (Cahn & Duvall, 2023), decreased rumination (Bratman et al.,

2015), decreased stress and increase in positive affect (Bratman et al., 2021). If the group works on a project that they deem meaningful, requires skill building, and brings them into connection with nature this will give an opportunity to address a spectrum of challenges and possibilities to create an integrated healing intervention.

Reciprocal Responsibility

Reciprocal responsibility is interwoven within Indigenous philosophies, and so informs much of the ethic stated here (Kimmerer, 2018; Nelson, 2008; Tynan, 2021). The act of contributing to the health of land, water, or species that support one's health is understood to be fulfillment of responsibility rather than an act of generosity (Littletree et al., 2020). The right of all beings to flourish is recognized within other worldviews, as in deep ecology, and also in Buddhist thought, so the practice should be available to many (Macy & Brown, 2014)Hanh 2021(Macy & Brown, 2014). An important insight that many Indigenous authors bring is that because these relationships are responsibilities they would be upheld whether or not the climate was reaching dangerous thresholds and this is very freeing to move away from focusing on potential doom and toward expressing contribution rooted in care. One does not open oneself to life (the biosphere) so that one can save it, one does so because it is one's loving responsibility and is one's natural way of being healthy(Kealiikanakaoleohaililani & Giardina, 2016; Kimmerer, 2018; Tynan, 2021).

Working within an interrelationship model is another way to engage with climate anxiety and grief at a human scale of experience. The ambiguous loss model makes the assumption that most people have a psychological family that may not be the same as their legal family (Dahl & Boss, 2020). There is no particular reason that one's psychological family need only contain humans.

If we harness a responsibility to plants and animals, future generations, human communities facing climate danger, and Indigenous wisdom carriers who have been advocating for this as a worldview often at great cost, we can partake in the work of discovering and

creating meaning. Interrelationality invites humans to conceive our contribution to others

(including the more than human world) in service of the greater good through pragmatic actions.

This thesis assumes that the core obstacle to altering the current climate path of the

globe is a system of values and the conception of human responsibilities. By working to give

people the opportunity to explore and enact their values at a human scale the hope is that a

group intervention can be coherent and accessible while having the capacity to create impactful

change in the emotional affect of participants. The difficult emotions around climate change can

be an invitation to recalibrate values. Social acknowledgement of challenging climate emotions

and supporting resilience within the experience of climate distress are important factors to

provide resources for those who feel unable to act. With support the challenges of living in a

time of climate crisis can be used to build connection to place, find meaning and hope, increase

self-efficacy in regards to climate change, and create sustained action toward mitigation and

adaptation strategies in service of experiencing a sense of flourishing despite challenging times.

Table 2 summarizes these tools below:

Table 2

General Recommendations for a Collaborative Peer Group

Component	Description
Group Size	4-12: This is a typical size for support groups.
Group Formation	Voluntary: This is not appropriate work for those in a pre-contemplative stage of climate action (i.e., those who deny climate change).
Emotional Definition and Expression	It is necessary to release underexpressed emotions and cultivate emotional granularity to gain a subtle understanding.
Acknowledge Ambiguity	Ambiguity, contradiction, and lack of a defined end point are inherent to climate distress and can be part of meaning making.
Social Acknowledgement	Normalizing concern, addressing isolation, building shared vocabulary, and empowering action.
Work at a Human Scale	Move away from abstraction and data and focus on what is experiential with an emphasis on exploring and deepening relationships.
Relationship with Nature	Direct interaction with living beings and systems is prioritized with the focus on support for the whole system.
Skill Building	Increase sense of efficacy in the group.
Reciprocal Responsibility	Engage in actions that connect with responsibility toward the living systems that support our life, rather than our rights over them.
Place Based	Choose a specific place in which to practice Reciprocal Responsibility.
Meaningful Action	Value-laden action supports the growth of a sense of purpose and contribution toward solutions.

A structured overview of the key components critical to forming and maintaining a climate peer group.

Contours of a Climate Support Group

The creation of a peer support group for climate anxiety, grief, and distress more generally can take into account the promising approaches discussed here. Intervention with climate distress should be social, engage emotional exploration to gain knowledge of the specificity of feeling as well as the common experience of others, engage directly with the outdoors, connect to specific place, emphasize relationship with the natural world, and practice regenerative restoration as a way to connect with nature and practice agency. What might that look like in practice?

Participation would be voluntary and recruit people who self identify as struggling with non-clinical climate distress. A twelve week program would span about one season and would allow participants to witness change within their local environment. The initial meetings would be focused on participants building trust, establishing confidentiality, and expressing current feelings toward climate change. It will be important to have focused facilitation to emphasize compassionate and courageous communication, although that need not rest on one person. When discussing the Through the Door Workshops, Chris Robertson suggests that the urge to channel anxiety into action be restrained so that the ability to stay with the feelings of anxiety are strengthened (Robertson, 2024). The goals for public dialogue will be to identify and name emotional states, work against isolation, and create social support that encourages participants to forgo defense mechanisms. Creating emotional focal points for meetings will allow a structured process of first opening space for a public exploration of climate distress, moving toward accepting and valuing these feelings, and then creating a group container for meaning to inform deeper values that can be carried forth after the group work is done.

Roughly two meetings a week will create a schedule in which one meeting is focused on inner work of emotional exploration, expression, resilience building, and self and group nurturance. The other meeting will be focused on outdoor restorative work. This will give the opportunity to relate with a specific place, take time outside, and allow the group to partake in

active restoration that is meaningful to them. This will take some creativity and could be served by creating partnerships with civic, governmental, or tribal organizations. The group will explicitly intend that this regenerative work will be intended to help restoration of an ecosystem and the restoration of relationships between humans and the plant and animal species that share the ecosystem. Gaining and celebrating the development of proficiency and completion of tasks may support a sense of self and group efficacy. Researching and understanding the history of the particular piece of land and the current stakeholders would be another example of actions that can be taken to deepen the relationship.

Some of the choices around this structure mean that it will not be suitable for everyone. The issue of the climate crisis is very diverse and shifting, so there will never be a one-size-fits-all solution. This is not a substitution or even necessarily prioritized over political, financial, or industrial actions. It is non-clinical and so will not be suitable treatment for diagnosed mental health challenges, although those for whom that is their experience would not be excluded from participation. The hope is that feelings of possibility toward future action can grow stronger than feelings of anticipatory grief or anxiety. The intention is to build resilience that will support participants' mental health and can be accessed in the event of; disaster, experience of injustice, or the ongoing challenges of a changing world.

Conclusion

With every reason to think that the climate crisis will grow both in terms of the scale of ecological damage and the proportion of the population that will grapple with the psychological toll required to be impacted on a personal and communal level, it is imperative to develop proficiency in supporting people to experience health and have a capacity for responsive action. By drawing from research investigating the emerging emotional terrain of climate distress alongside established ways of interacting with the natural world in a way that supports health of the ecosystem and humanity(particularly Indigenous knowledge), we can engage with climate change using truth and resilience in service of adapting to a new climate era.

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