



ECO-ANXIETY, ECO-GRIEF, AND SOLASTALGIA: APPROACHES FOR ACTIVISTS

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Emotion Management and Activist Spaces

Naming what we are feeling is key to developing a social justice lens in our spaces.

When we know our feelings and allow ourselves to **experience** our feelings and **transform** them, we build the **resilience** and **confidence** we need to:

confront uncomfortable truths

know ourselves, our histories, and understand our place in the movement

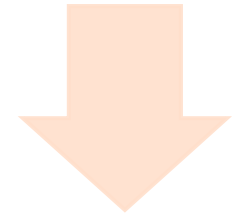
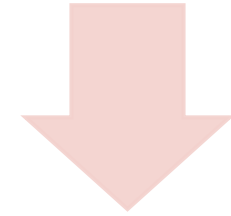
generate the generosity we need to look after each other.

Outline

1: Naming Some Responses to Climate Crisis: Eco-Anxiety, Eco-Grief, Solastalgia, and Critical Hope

2: Tools for Slowing Down to Speed Things Up – Managing Our Emotions for Organizing and Community Building, Some examples

3: Reaching Beyond Ourselves: How Uncomfortable Self-Knowledge Can Become a Tool for Transformation



Background on Climate-Related Emotional Responses

Philosopher Glenn Albrecht has coined them **psychoterratic** for psychological stress related to climate change because they specifically arise from external stimulation, namely, from our relationship with the natural world.

These conditions disproportionately affect communities that are more affected by climate change, such as Indigenous communities who are experiencing the degradation of traditional territories

Important note: these conditions are **not normally considered pathologies**. Fears about climate change are a **normal response to abnormal conditions**. But they do need to be managed so they don't start to affect our ability to function.

Some Common Psychoterratic Responses to Climate Crisis

Eco-Anxiety

Named by psychologists as early as 2007 to describe the sharp increase in people coming to therapy to express fears for the environment

Described as an anxiety that relates both to the present, ie. "I am worried about endangered right whale populations" and the future, ie. "What will the world look like if this mass extinction event continues?"



Eco-Grief

Coined by Dr. Ashlee Consolo in her work with the Innu in Inuktitut as the feeling of grief that comes with the profound loss of the natural systems that sustain a way of life and/or identity (ie. she first used the term while working with Inuit villages in Labrador, who knew themselves as “the people of the sea ice” struggling with loss of sea ice due to climate change)



Rooted Words IX

“Solastalgia”



Solastalgia

- ▶ More complicated and more alienating than either eco-anxiety or eco-grief, **solastalgia** is the sudden defamiliarization of something that was once comfortable, and not noteworthy.
- ▶ Solastalgia was coined by Dr. Glenn Albrecht as the feeling of a familiar environment having suddenly changed and no longer offering the same comforts it once did. It is a kind of nostalgia that one can experience at home – a sense that things have suddenly and permanently changed, a deep existential dread comes from loss that is difficult to put into words

...e contemplate the particular grief of environmen
...sistent band of writers, farmers, scientists, hu
...rs. Bring a short piece of your own writing to re
...k or determined hope to share. All genres
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...den@stanford.edu. We huddle for literary c
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Common cultural manifestations of Psychoterratic Conditions

Denialism

- At this stage, people who have denied the existence of climate change are now making arguments that climate change exists but that it is not caused by human activity, and therefore is and was inevitable. I.e. “the climate has always been changing,” “there has always been weather,” etc.

Eco-Paralysis

- For some people, the intensity of their anxiety, fear, grief, or dread has become so strong that they shut down. Overwhelmed by the complexity of the problem, some people feel unable to take any action at all to reduce the effects of climate change or to increase resilience to the effects of climate change.

Eco-Nihilism (or “Doomism”)

- Closely related to eco-paralysis but can translate instead into a “going out of business sale” mentality about the environment (Climate Change is real but it is impossible to do anything about, so we should continue business as usual/increase resource extraction/grab what we can/live like there’s no tomorrow).

Blind Hope

- Blind hope can be seen as a kind of denial because it can become a way of coercing people into a single perspective.
- “Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor” – Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (quoted in Rebecca Solnit’s *Hope in the Dark*, p. 19)
- “toxic positivity” that refuses to name negative emotion “passive abdication that says everything is okay, our consciences are assuaged, there’s no need to think about responsibility, someone else has it covered” (Thom Van Dooren).
- Can manifest in belief that there is one solution to climate change, or that climate change can be resolved or mitigated while preserving the status quo
- Sometimes used to defer meaningful climate action in favour of technological solutions that are not yet scalable

Eco-Fascism

- Fear of precarity leads to desire for tighter control & belief in a “strong man” impulse
- Upscaling of border control
- Population control
- Abandonment of collective values & mutual care
- Eugenics (abandonment of vulnerable people)
- Coercive conservation (the idea that land should be conserved by removing human activity altogether – used to occupy traditional lands of Indigenous nations, force Indigenous peoples further off traditional lands and off reserves and into the city to preserve a “pristine wilderness”)

Critical Hope:

- Hope that is grounded in care for others – other people, other species, and thoughtfulness about ethics and values regarding others and ourselves.
- Arriving at Critical Hope means being honest with ourselves about our negative and difficult emotions toward ourselves and others, exploring our beliefs and our reactions in relation to those emotions, and aligning our actions with our moral and ethical values to support other activists.
- Some good guiding questions:
 - What do these narratives of climate change and apocalypse make us feel?
 - How do those feelings affect our ability to act, connect, and empathize?
 - Why is it easier for us to imagine apocalypse than it is for us to imagine society transitioning away from carbon?



- Revolutionary change is neither instant nor straightforward, and it is never simple
- We need to commit to constructive critique of our movements to align them with our shared values
- Critique is an act of optimistic caring, “the assertion that things might have been, and so still might be, otherwise.” A careful hope is understood as “a practice of ‘care for the future.’”
- Timothy Morton similarly argues for the ecological value of critical engagement because it shows us our networks of obligation: “deconstruction is the cure for postmodern cynicism” and results in “a painful awareness of our intimacy with others.” Students can really get in touch with the earth, not by “rubbing their noses in the soil” but by “rubbing their noses in their minds.”

Managing the Interpersonal: Internally-Generated Emotions

- Some (by no means exhaustive) emotions we might understand as negative arising from interpersonal and intrapersonal encounters:
 - **Defensiveness:** We might feel defensive if someone points to some actions, or beliefs as destructive that we recognize as our own.
 - **Guilt/shame:** some people, when they realize that they are complicit in environmental destruction, socio-economic injustice, or racial injustice, feel guilt just for being here (“save the planet, kill yourselves!” “The world will be better without us!” “I feel ashamed because settlers were so hateful and destructive to indigenous people”) Guilt and shame are truly unpleasant emotions but working through them is critically important to being able to be open to listening to other perspectives and people.
 - **Frustration:** we might feel like our voice isn’t being heard, we might feel in conflict with people, etc. We might wish people would behave differently
 - **Discomfort:** We might feel discomfort when we are challenged about our place in the environmental movement, about our deeply held beliefs, or about assumptions that we didn’t even know we were making.

The Power of Discomfort

We can reframe our relationship to discomfort and use these uncomfortable or “negative” emotions to help guide our actions in building relationships with other people and organizations who are fighting for social, political, and environmental change.

But reframing our relationship to these emotions is a practice that requires cultivating a sense of curiosity about our emotions, which in turn requires creating enough distance to be able to name those emotions and decide what we wish to do with them.

Now that we can name our emotions, we can cultivate a practice of awareness of our emotions that gives us the distance to thoughtfully choose our actions. |

SO HOW DO WE COPE?



Mindfulness & Visualization Exercises

A practice of noticing that you can work into your daily life to keep you grounded

Focus on your breathing – guided meditations can also help increase your focus on the present, but it always comes back to noticing the sensations in your body

Body scan meditation

Cultivating curiosity about and attention to the physical sensations of feelings: what does anxiety feel like? Solastalgia? Grief? Concentrate on the physical sensations helps us not get pulled into the feelings themselves – they will pass and transform into something else

Visualization: take the anxious thoughts to their conclusion: what are you really afraid of? If that happens, what will you do? Sometimes trying to answer that question shows us that underneath the anxiety is eco-grief.

Read ... a lot, and widely

- One of the best ways to gain perspective and situate yourself among others
- Read research and non-fiction in a wide variety of disciplines
- Read about eco-anxiety, eco-grief, solastalgia and mental health
- Read **eco-fiction** and **eco-poetry** from a variety of **diverse** authors – **this may not seem important, but this is how we can connect, experientially on some level, with the experiences of others, especially if they are different from our own**
 - It can also help us imagine a world, a system, that might be different & better

Action

- Turn your anxiety, grief, and discomfort into action – do what you can (join an organization, write your MPs and demand concrete and swift action, start a movement in your community, start a green team in your workplace, demand divestment from fossil fuels in your financial portfolio, etc.)
 - Connect with others – you are not alone in doing this work
 - Learn from others in the environmental movement – many Indigenous people and people of colour have lived with eco-anxiety for hundreds of years, and we have a lot to learn from their leadership
 - Talk about your anxiety, grief, and/or feelings of solastalgia with others

Connection

- Spend time in nature
 - Re-establish your connections with the ecosystems in which you live
 - Try to put your existence among non-human life into perspective
 - Forest bathing/Sound mapping/mindfulness
 - Revisit assumptions about “nature” itself – a space of precarity, contains both intense beauty & sometimes fear
 - The things that frighten us, disgust us, or that are not by our definition beautiful, are still an important part of these systems & you’re fighting for them, too

Do the work

- **You are allowed to have fun and to feel joy. It is possible to acknowledge a crisis, work toward its revolution, and feel joy and enjoy yourself.**
 - The pressure to perform, constantly, the severity of crisis secretly undermines our work toward a better world: it burns us out, depletes our resources, and fractures our movements. Other people are working too – we all need to rest sometimes, and should have faith in each other that we can sub in for each other once in awhile
- **You are allowed to be quiet**
 - It is still important to take the time for careful consideration, for relaxation, and for restoration
 - You may not feel you can engage in “big climate actions” because you’re a quiet person. Being a quiet person is okay! There is always some way to engage, even if it means writing letters, showing up, talking to people one-on-one. Rivers don’t seem like they’re making much change, but they make canyons, too.

Set boundaries when you need them (and allow the space for others)

Take care of the animal.

- **Make time to eat mindfully** – if you can, and if you have access to fresh food, cook your own meals
- **Mutual aid** – look out for your neighbours. Do what you can, share what you can. Pay attention to those most vulnerable in your community
- **Exercise** – in a group, or by yourself, move your body any way you can, appreciate what it does for you.

THANK YOU FOR THE WORK THAT YOU DO

Remember to take care of yourselves 

