

And now...

... for something completely different

How our Minds process Climate Crisis

Impacts on Mental Health and Resilience Building



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What's your experience?

Who's in constant contact with climate crisis data?

Who's ever been frustrated by people's lack of awareness?

Who's ever been confused by the gap between access to information and understanding or action?

Who's experienced or witnessed someone burning out from it?



Context: Climate Crisis from mind's perspective

Climate change and the ensuing crisis is a difficult concept for our minds

- It's complex,
- Has many variables,
- There's a long period between cause and effect,
- It's continuous,
- Strong emotional impact: it's scary and overwhelming,
- It allows for diffuse responsibility ,
- Creates cognitive dissonance (conflicting realities) and conflict of interests (change vs comfort).
- Distance from impact: depending on one's context we may be more or less exposed to it (although this is changing too – with increase of extreme wheater events in number and distribution and media exposure)

Requires change and that's both inevitable and incredibly difficult for humans

Individuals respond differently to this depending on their knowledge, context, internal coping resources , perception of agency and self-efficacy, empathy.



Understanding Climate Crisis from mind's perspective: Why it's hard to face it?



- We tend to think of ourselves as rational creatures but our decision-making has a very significant emotional component. We hesitate on the cost.
- It's easier to hold positive information in our attention span
Vs.
- It's hard to address content that creates discomfort :
humans tend to feel discomfort with the unfamiliar, unpredictable, threatening, what
creates a sense of shame or dissonance with one's identity or habits.
- It often triggers **defense mechanisms** like:
 - **denial** "it's not happening" "not that bad"
 - **Exceptionalism** "People shouldn't buy, but it doesn't have impact if I do"
 - **blame** "being more focused on finding culprits than solutions" , which enables...
 - **aggression** (namely to protect resources)

Understanding Climate Crisis from mind's perspective: What's the point?

The Climate change asks for change but...

**Most people don't change from a position of comfort,
so discomfort is actually necessary for change.**

**To understand that it's not about IQ, but also EQ
our brain's defense mechanism often work against us
working around it requires intentionality and resilience
Increasing empathy for ourselves and our inconsistencies
Increasing empathy for others with different views, which...
... reduces polarization,
...increases the possibility of mutual understanding and cooperation**



Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Mental Health



2022 – For the first time Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report addressed the mental health impact of climate change. Before the emphasis was on physical health impacts.



Direct impacts:

- direct exposure to extreme natural events (heat waves, fires, cyclones, floods, water scarcity, or vector-borne diseases, etc), which increases the risk of adverse mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, trauma, post-traumatic stress – IPCC, ...).

Indirect impacts:

- amplification effects generated by climate change in adverse climate conditions (e.g., increase in poverty, displacement, social conflicts, food and water insecurity) ,
- second hand exposure (news and social media) that increase the risk of developing mental health problems.

(Clayton et al., 2017, 2021)

Groups Whose Mental Health is Particularly Impacted by the Climate Crisis



- **People with previous vulnerabilities:** preexisting mental health challenges, impoverished communities, people living in disaster prone areas.
- **Young people:** more time ahead to face the impacts, hindered dreams for their future; feeling betrayed, abandoned, and dismissed by the people in power and governments who they expected to protect them (Hickman et al. Citation2021; UNICEF Citation2021).
- **Front liners:** climate activists, **climate scientists**, journalists, policy makers, first responders for climate catastrophes (firefighters, medical personnel, police officers,...)
- **Farmers:** as the weather has a direct impact in their livelihood (and our food supply)
- **Indigenous people:** cultural inheritance, close nature connection.

(Clayton et al., 2017, 2021; Hickman, 2021)

Some Data



- In an APA – American Psychologists Association survey in 2020:
 - 68% adults said they had “at least a little ‘eco-anxiety,’” or anxiety or worry about climate change and its effects.
 - 48% of young adults ages 18 to 34 said they felt stress over climate change in their daily lives.
- Clayton e Karazsia (2020), sample: 18-75 years
 - 1 in 5 experiences eco anxiety
 - 1 in 4 feels this anxiety interferes negatively with their daily functioning,
- Hickman (2021) children and youth reported climate change impacts on going to school, spending time with friends
 - 26% in the UK, 31% in Finland, 35% in France vs
 - 74% in the Philippines and India
 - 75% worldwide thinks the future is frightening

Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Mental Health

Potential impacts:

Anxiety disorders:

- **Physical signs**

fast heart rate, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, stomach issues, and fatigue, headaches

- **Mental/emotional signs**

intense worry, restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, a sense of impending doom, and trouble sleeping, often accompanied by behavioral avoidance of triggers



Ecoanxiety is the most visible effect.

What's Ecoanxiety?

- A chronic fear, worry, or distress about climate change and its environmental impacts
- Includes feelings like helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, shame, sadness, grief and anger about the future, often manifesting as significant mental or emotional strain that can affect daily life.

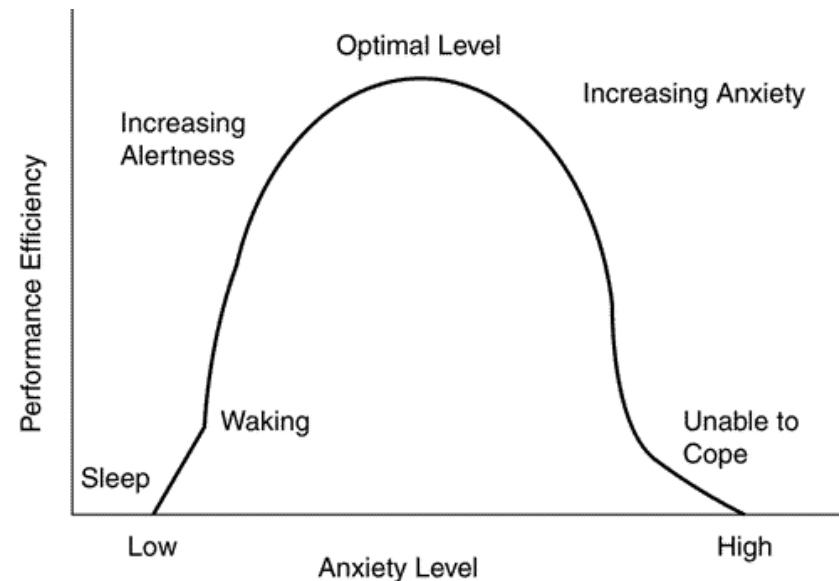
And

- **it's a rational e constructive response to the seriousness of climate crisis**



Adequate activation:

You...
care about what's
happening.
Pay attention.
Are engaged and
empathetic



Excessive activation:

You fall to...
maladaptative coping
mechanisms
Denial, paralysis

**Can you tell when it
happens to you?**

Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Mental Health

Potential impacts:

Ecoanxiety, especially for those more exposed, like Climate Scientists, it may lead to **Burnout**

Which is characterized by:

- **Emotional exhaustion** (feeling drained, overwhelmed, hopeless),
- **Cynicism and detachment** (negativity, irritability, withdrawal), and
- **Reduced effectiveness** (self-doubt, poor concentration, decreased performance),
- often accompanied by **physical issues** like fatigue, headaches, sleep problems, and muscle pain.

And if you let yourself get to that point it takes quite a while to recover.



Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Mental Health

Potential impacts:

- **Depressive symptoms**
persistent sadness, loss of interest, fatigue, sleep/appetite changes, difficulty concentrating, feelings of worthlessness/guilt, and sometimes suicidal thoughts
 - **Post-traumatic stress**
 - **Loss of places of belonging**
 - **Loss of identity**
 - **Anticipation of future losses**
 - **Higher competitiveness and aggression**
-
- **Temperature rise »** is accompanied by a rise in aggressivity and interpersonal violence
Higher irritability, reduction in attention span and emotional regulation and in cognitive skills associated with non violent conflict resolution
(estimated to lead to increase in violent crime)



My Experience

Clinical practice:

- Young adults questioning the point of studying or making other future plans if there won't be a planet ,
- Parents worry about how to talk to their kids about climate change,
- couples arguing about different views on family consumption patterns, holiday plans, having children or not
- Climate activists dealing with burnout from over exposure to multiple layers of stressful information local and international
 - + precarity/volunteer work
 - + public criticism + lack of political dialog
 - + personal risks from civil disobedience actions



Are you stressed yet?



How can we cope in a healthy resilient way?

Promoting Sustainable Mental health, Prevent Burnout and Increase Resilience

Adopting adaptative **contermeasures to Anxiety:**
Threat vs. Safety

A **sense of safety** that can be fed by:

- Taking action
- A sense of competence
- Connection: Colective engagement
- Laughter and sense of humor
- Immersion in nature
- Sense of awe (like in the face of nature or art)
- Playfulness and being absolutely ridiculous (karaoke night!)



Promoting Sustainable Mental health, Prevent Burnout and Increase Resilience

Mandatory:

- Keep regular cycles of effort and recovery, namely protecting **sleep**



Recommended:

- Self-regulation: learning stress coping skills, learn about emotions, Regulate access to stress inducing information (ex: news)
- Exercise, meditation, yoga...
- Hobbies (lego?),
- Journaling, gratitude lists (<https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>), etc.
- Seek professional help if needed

Promoting Sustainable Mental health, Prevent Burnout and Increase Resilience : Gratitude



- At a neurobiological level, gratitude regulates the sympathetic nervous system that activates our anxiety responses, and at the psychological level, it conditions the brain to filter the negative ruminations and focus on positive thoughts (Wong et al., 2018).
- centers on present blessings/resources, acting as a powerful antidote by shifting focus to the positive, activating pleasure/calm centers in the brain (like dopamine/serotonin pathways), and reducing stress hormones (cortisol).
- Anxiety is “what if”, Gratitude is “what is”
- It’s an incompatible response: it cannot co-exist with anxiety

<https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>

Promoting Sustainable Mental health, Prevent Burnout and Increase Resilience

Recommended:

- Taking action individually: make our personal choices consistent with our values
- **Taking action collectively:** seeking groups who share our values and beliefs to work together towards a goal and mutual support (it may be what we already do within our organizations)
- Feed our social support groups (family, friends, etc.) – don't leave it for "later"
- Promoting flexibility: having various tools, no one strategy fits all

**These are not temporary measures, but a system of life skills
needed to navigate the modern world challenges on our Mental Health**



Promoting Sustainable Mental health, Prevent Burnout and Increase Resilience : On an Community/Organizational level

- information to promote reframing and contextualization,
- workshops to capacitate in coping skills and
- favor group settings to promote adaptation, empowerment and well-being
- Example setting by leadership
- Understanding that information alone does not bring about change or additional well-being, addressing emotions and collective engagement is essential
- Humans seek connection, belonging, recognition

COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT are powerful tools to promote a sustainable system, that reinforces itself and lasts over time.



Promoting Sustainable Mental health, Prevent Burnout and Increase Resilience : Radical Hope



- Radical hope is a choice
- It means believing that it can get better no matter what
- It's realistic as it doesn't deny the immediate challenges, dangers or the urgency, but...
- It keeps us focused on what can be done, instead of what not, therefore increases our chances of getting to a more positive outcome.
- It also makes the way there a lot more pleasant!

Further Reading for the curious minds

- “Thinking Fast and Slow” Daniel Kahneman (2011)
- “Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change” George Marshall (2014)
- “Feeling and Knowing” António Damásio (2021)

Movies:

- “Don't look up” (2021)

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- <https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>

I'll be around...
feel free to come share your challenges!



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