

ADJ. PROF. PANU PIHKALA, UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
CJC WEBINAR, 24 APRIL 2026

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# **CLIMATE EMOTIONS AND COUNSELING**



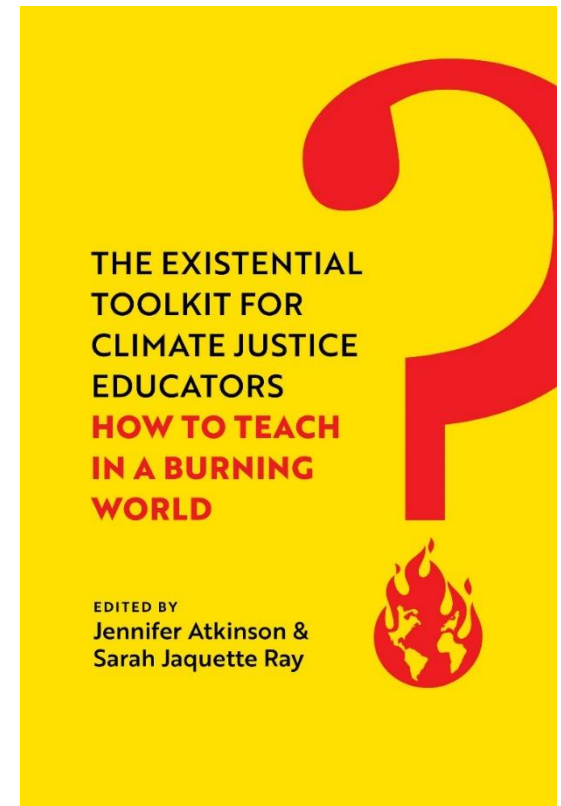
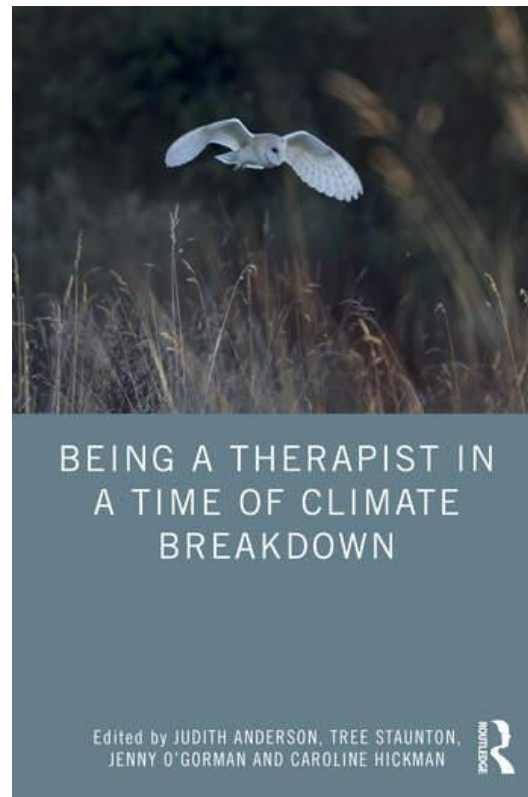
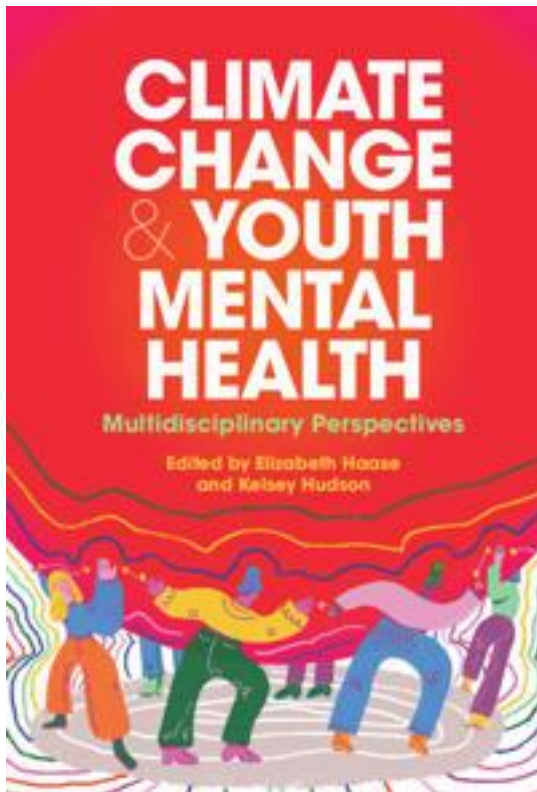
# Grounding





*“Here’s your problem—it looks like you’re paying attention to what’s going on.”*

# Recent books (2024)



# Major questions

- How is the state of the world affecting people psychologically (and spiritually)?
- How can this be engaged with constructively in counseling?
- How can future counselors be equipped with skills for this? (Counseling education)
- How can counseling professionals – and educators – engage with the topic themselves?

# Climate Emotions

# Climate Emotions Wheel



Climate Emotions Wheel © 2024



ClimateMentalHealth.Net



# Pihkala (2022)

frontiersin.org/journals/climate/articles/10.3389/fclim.2021.738154/full



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## Published in



Frontiers in Climate  
Climate Risk  
Management

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## Part of a Research Topic

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH article

Front. Clim., 14 January 2022

Sec. Climate Risk Management

Volume 3 - 2021 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2021.738154>

# Toward a Taxonomy of Climate Emotions



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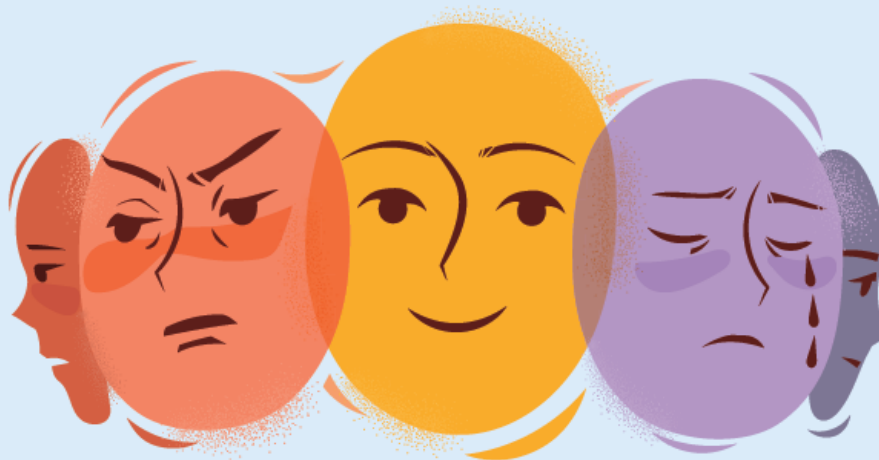




Climate  
Mental Health  
Network

# A Guide To Climate Emotions

Panu Pihkala  
with Anya Kamenetz



Acknowledgements:

Inspiration from **Karla McLaren**'s work on emotions  
and **The Atlas Of The Heart** by Brené Brown (2021);  
gratitude to comments by Sarah Newman



Climate Emotions Wheel © 2024

# Empirical research

# Hickman, Marks, Pihkala et al. 2021

thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext

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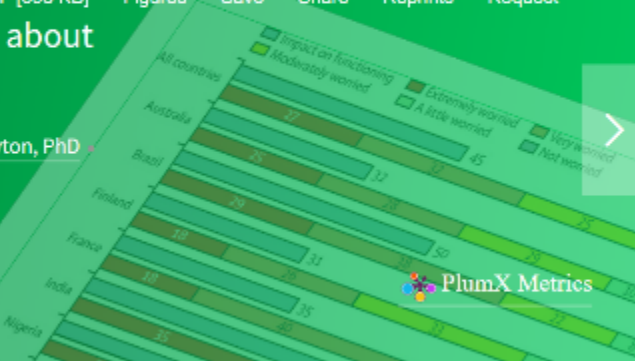
## Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey

Caroline Hickman, MSc Elizabeth Marks, ClinPsyD Panu Pihkala, PhD Prof Susan Clayton, PhD

R Eric Lewandowski, PhD Elouise E Mayall, BSc et al. [Show all authors](#) [Show footnotes](#)

Open Access • Published: December, 2021 • DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)

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Summary

Introduction

Methods

## Summary

### Background

Climate change has important implications for the health and

# Hickman, Marks, Pihkala et al. 2021

10,000 children and young people  
(16-25 years)

+

•

Ten diverse countries and inclusive  
representation

○

Online survey in March 2021

Developed by the international Eco-  
anxiety and climate emotions research  
group (ECERG).

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Australia

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Brazil

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Finland

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France

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India

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Nigeria

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Philippines

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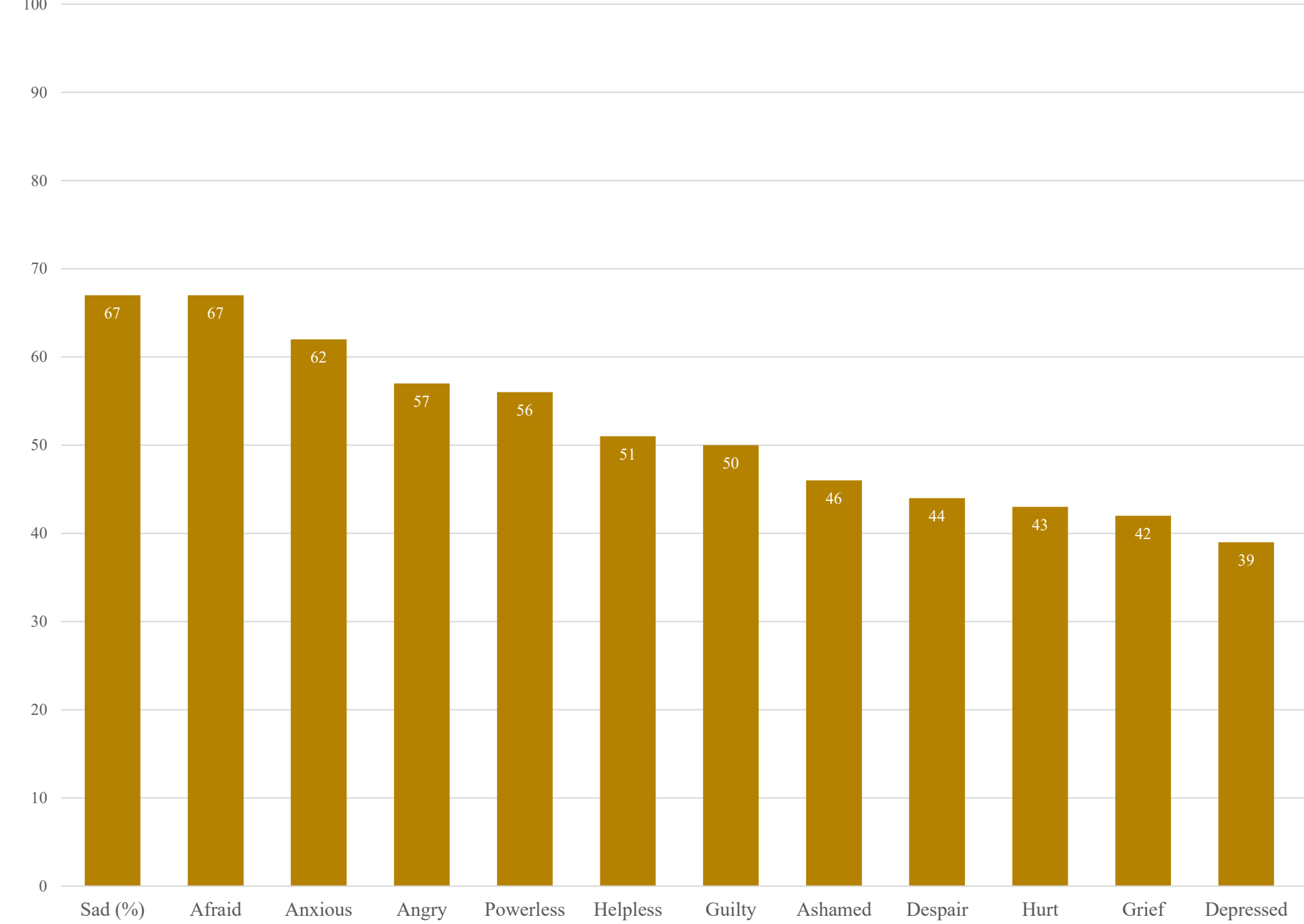
Portugal

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UK

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USA



# Some results (10 000 youth, aged 16-25, from 10 countries)

- Three quarters (75%) thought that the **future is frightening**
- Nearly half reported **negative impact on daily functioning** (eating, concentrating, work, school, sleeping, spending time in nature, playing, having fun, relationships)
- Four out of ten (39%) are **hesitant to have children** because of climate change
- Many felt that adults don't listen to them

# Anxiety / distress / x

- Continuum
- Fluctuation
- “Weltschmerz”
- Terminology and contexts
  - Pihkala P. Definitions and Conceptualizations of Climate Distress: An International Perspective. In: Haase E, Hudson K, eds. *Climate Change and Youth Mental Health: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press; 2024:21-39.

# Deep existential questions

- How to live in a world where the future is so uncertain?
- How do I balance personal responsibility (and freedom) with duty and collective dimensions?
  - Possible "guilt anxiety" (and shame)
- Where and how to find meaning?
- Evocations of anxiety around death, mortality, and finitude
- How to feel, and accept, joy?

# Recommended reading (books)

- Andrew Boyd: *I want a better catastrophe: Navigating the climate crisis with grief, hope, and gallows humor* (2023)
- Joanna Macy & Molly Young Brown: *Coming Back to Life* (2014)
- Thomas Doherty: *Surviving Climate Anxiety* (2025)
- Miriam Greenspan (2004): *Healing through the Dark Emotions*

- Bill Plotkin
- Trebbe Johnson

# Ecological grief

# ECOLOGICAL SORROW: TYPES OF GRIEF AND LOSS IN ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

## Forms of loss

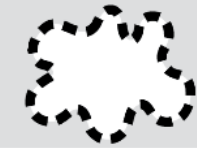
### TANGIBLE / INTANGIBLE LOSS

This distinction can help to discern various forms of ecological loss. Intangible losses can be difficult to notice and are often disenfranchised. A single loss can include both tangible and intangible elements (e.g. loss of identity because of ecological loss).



### AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Losses which have uncertainty and ambivalence, such as grieving soldiers missing in action. Many ecological losses have ambiguous elements: either psychological presence but psychological absence, or vice versa (e.g. snowy winters partly lost).



### NONFINITE LOSS

This scholarship about ongoing losses can help to make sense of ecological losses. Nonfinite losses easily generate anxiety and there is social tension around them, often resulting in disenfranchisement.



### SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS

Some losses are so profound that they impact basic assumptions about the world and self. People then have to engage in meaning reconstruction. The ecological crisis can profoundly challenge people's meaning systems and cause spiritual grief.



## Forms of grief

### DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Grief which is not given validation and/or public recognition. Ecological grief has often been disenfranchised, and grief theory helps to see various forms of this: 1) the loss is not acknowledged, 2) the griever is excluded, or 3) the relationship or kinship is not recognized.



### CHRONIC SORROW

Non-pathological but persistent form of grief (not the same as "chronic grief"! ). Its descriptions fit ecological grief very precisely: e.g. "constant reminders or triggers" and "unavoidable, periodic resurgences of intensity".



### ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

Some scholars define this as mourning in advance, before the losses have happened, but anticipatory grief can also be seen as part of grieving ongoing changes which are estimated to gain stronger forms in the future. A major aspect of ecological grief and related to continuing emotional bonds.



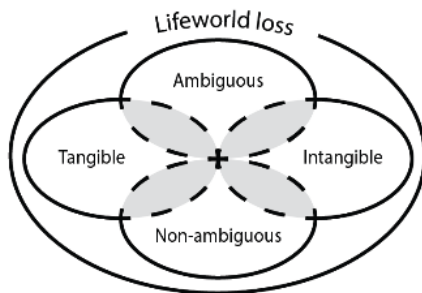
### COMPLICATED GRIEF

As applied to ecological grief:

- Clearly prolonged and very intense grief reactions to a particular ecological loss.
- Long-standing and debilitating grief reactions to global ecological loss.
- Overly strong forms of anticipatory grief/mourning.
- Cases where inhibited ecological grief can clearly be noticed.



ECOLOGICAL LOSS



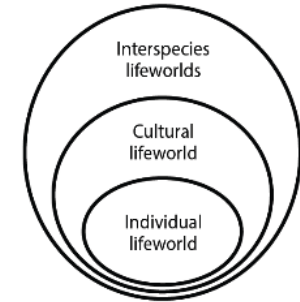
## SPECIAL FORMS OF ECOLOGICAL LOSS AND GRIEF

**Transitional loss and grief:** ongoing ecological changes evoke these, and temporalities are complex.

**Lifeworld loss:** some losses are so holistic that they affect whole lifeworlds (see figure on the right).

**Shattered dreams:** ecological destruction produces shattered dreams, which are significant intangible losses.

LIFEWORLD LOSS



# ECOLOGICAL SORROW:

Types of grief and loss in ecological grief

## DISENFRACTHISED GRIEF



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- 1) the loss is not acknowledged,
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- 3) the relationship or kinship is not recognized.

Author: Panu Pihkala

*Sustainability 2024*

Graphic design:  
Santtu Oja

**ECOLOGICAL SORROW:**  
Types of grief and loss in ecological grief

**SHATTERED  
ASSUMPTIONS**



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Some losses are so profound that they impact basic assumptions about the world and self. People then have to engage in meaning reconstruction. The ecological crisis can profoundly challenge people's meaning systems and cause spiritual grief.

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Author: Panu Pihkala

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Graphic design:  
Santtu Oja

# Hvitträsk, Finland, 2015



# ENGAGING WITH CLIMATE GRIEF, GUILT, AND ANGER IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

## MAIN POINTS

- Guilt, grief, and anger are all major climate emotions
- All these have profound connections with climate anxiety/distress
- Many religious communities have certain special resources for engaging with guilt and grief
- However, some religious communities (e.g., Christian, Buddhist) have historical difficulties in working with constructive anger
- Fundamentally, all these three emotions are based on caring, and developing empathy is a major aim

## FOUR TASKS

- The article applies a paradigm of four tasks and possibilities for religious leaders to engage with climate emotions:

### TASKS

1. Working with one's own emotions
2. Exploring the various forms and dynamics of climate emotions
3. Contextualizing climate emotions in the community
4. Supporting constructive engagement with climate emotions via various methods (e.g. action, rituals, spiritual practices)

- The paradigm draws especially from psychologists Miriam Greenspan and Tara Brach



## GUILT

- Becoming aware of problematic dynamics around climate guilt, such as denial of responsibility, overly strong individualization, “hypocrite’s trap”, and scapegoat dynamics
- Helping people both to acknowledge responsibility and to do something constructive with climate guilt
- Working with the possible interconnections of guilt and grief (and shame)



## GRIEF

- Learning about various forms of ecological loss and grief, and validating them
- Offering peer support: religious communities have many grief resources
- Addressing various temporalities of grief in rituals
- Channeling grief to action with the help of anger



## ANGER

- Learning about the various forms of climate anger (e.g. constructive vs. toxic anger)
- Working with the religious community's tradition in relation to anger, trying to give room for constructive engagement
- Experimenting with various methods, such as climate lament which includes both anger and grief

# Pihkala (2025)

- 'Ecological Grief, Religious Coping, and Spiritual Crises: Exploring Eco-Spiritual Grief', *Pastoral Psychology*.

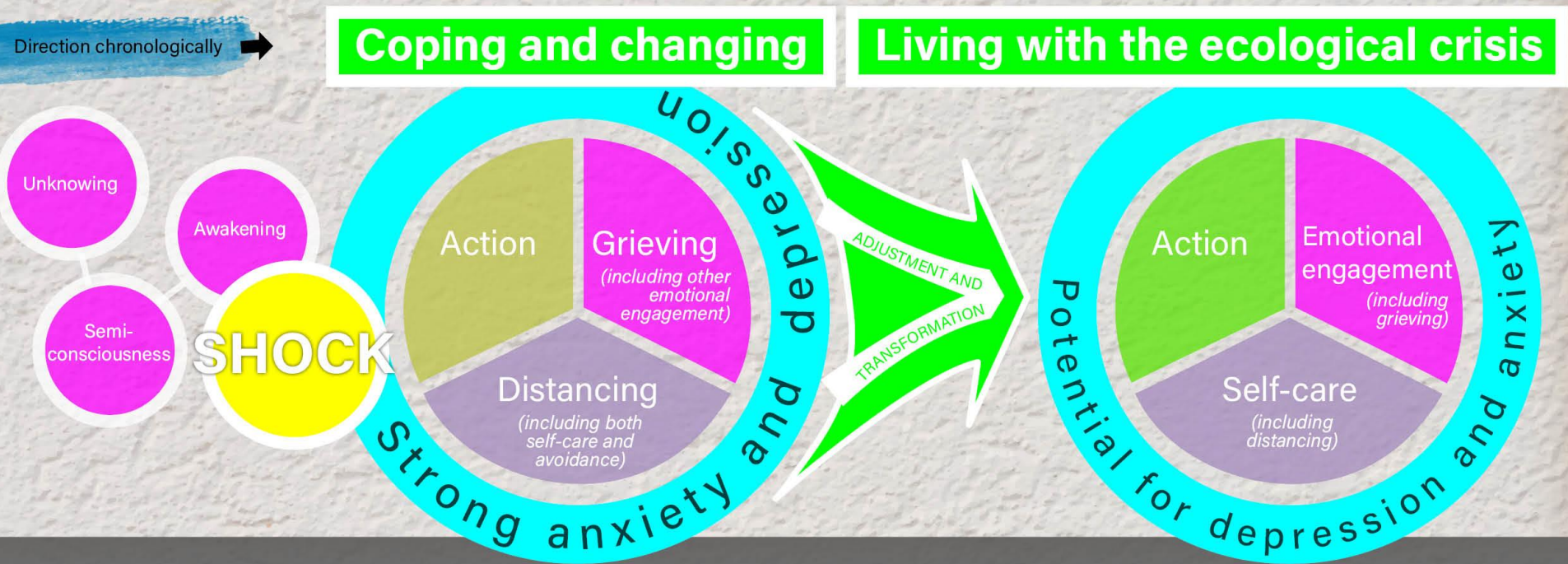
Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-024-01158-3>.

# Process Model

(Pihkala 2022)

# Process model (Pihkala 2022)



## Process Model of Eco-anxiety and Ecological Grief

Panu Pihkala  
*Sustainability 2022*

**Semiconsciousness** refers to a complex phase of both knowing and not knowing about the severity of the ecological crisis.

**Awakening** refers to a realization of the severity of the crisis. Sometimes people try to repress this Awakening and return to Semiconsciousness, but that is not completely possible and causes dissonance.

**Shock** and trauma may result in various ways from Awakening.

**Coping and Changing:** For healthy adjustment and necessary transformation, all three dimensions are needed (see also Figure 2).

\* **Action** refers to doing something constructive in relation to the ecological crisis. Example: joining climate demonstrations.

\* **Grieving** refers to encountering explicitly the various loss-related emotions engendered by the ecological crisis.

Example: talking about ecological grief at a safe discussion group.

\* **Distancing** refers to various means of taking distance from the ecological crisis. Example: staying away from environmental news on Sunday (self-care) or denial of outcome severity for oneself (disavowal/denial).

\* **Strong Anxiety and/or Depression** refers to various possible manifestations of strong and difficult mental states which are significantly impacted by the ecological crisis. These include anxiety states and increased anxiety tendencies, varieties of depressed moods, burnout, longer states of resignation, and "eco-paralysis".

**Adjustment and Transformation** refers to a long-term process where all three dimensions are engaged with and people find ways to both adapt and change.

When enough Adjustment and Transformation has happened, people enter this phase where there is more awareness and control about the three dimensions. For various dynamics and terms related to these dynamics, such as "acceptance" and "meaning", see section 4.2.4. in the article.

All three dimensions still need engagement with, and they still include scale in them (there are various intensities).

The titles and subtitles of two dimensions have switched places, reflecting changes due to Adjustment and Transformation. While Grieving still continues, major aspects of it have been engaged with, and there is more room for encountering other emotions. Distancing has become more conscious and more balanced, and thus Self-care is the ruling form, although there may still be moments of stronger and more unconscious disavowal.

Potential for depression and stronger anxiety still exists, and it is possible that in the long run, various depressive moods are a major threat as many aspects of the ecological crisis become more difficult in the coming decades.

# A new website

ecoanxietyprocess.com



## THE **PROCESS** OF **ECO-ANXIETY**

HOW TO COPE WITH ECO-  
ANXIETY  
AND OTHER DIFFICULT ECO-  
EMOTIONS?

In December 2022, Dr. Panu Pihkala from University of Helsinki published a Process

Our goal is to use the power of film to increase the reach and accessibility of The

The films we collectively created explore The Process Model in three very different and

# Videos

- Short animation:  
"The Dance: Living with Eco-anxiety"
  - [https://youtu.be/\\_Jexuu4DWao?si=Ordn5MogV6SSwHG3](https://youtu.be/_Jexuu4DWao?si=Ordn5MogV6SSwHG3)
- QueerBrownVegan:  
"Teaching Climate Together, Climate Emotions with Dr. Panu Pihkala"
- Forthcoming: "How are you, really?"
  - a document of young adults and coping with the ecological crisis

**For the future**

# Tasks and possibilities

- Committing ourselves, individually and collectively, to learning about eco-emotions / climate emotions / polycrisis emotions.
  - How are we coping? What psychological defences are we using?
  - How does the situation feel for people from different backgrounds?
    - Age
    - Social context
    - Ethnic background etc.
  - Validation, recognition

- Offering an array of various methods
  - Discussions
  - Art-based methods
  - Outdoors
  - Somatic methods
    - Pihkala P. Using the process model of eco-anxiety in group work. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 2025;1548(1):218-232. doi:[10.1111/nyas.15344](https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.15344)

- Staying with the tension
- Exploring sources of meaning
- DBT, Meaning-focused therapy (and existential therapy), Emotion-focused therapy, ACT, CBT...
- Silva JFB, Coburn J. Therapists' experience of climate change: A dialectic between personal and professional. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. Published online 2022. doi:[10.1002/capr.12515](https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12515)

- Lewis J, Haase E, Trope A. Climate Dialectics in Psychotherapy: Holding Open the Space Between Abyss and Advance. *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*. 2020;48(3):271-294.
- Caroline Hickman's work

# Vaclav Havel on hope (1990)

- *"Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed."*

# Kiitos!

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