

What psychotherapy can do for the climate and biodiversity crises

June 10 2019, by Caroline Hickman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Apologies in advance, but I'm hoping that reading this will help you feel depressed—about biodiversity loss and our lack of progress over the climate crisis. The thing is, in these extreme circumstances, a bit of depression about the environment could be precisely what we need—it's the only sane response.

That humans are having an unsustainable impact on Earth may have a become a familiar message—but it is still a difficult message to hear. It presents us with a complex challenge given our reluctance to face change.

Environmental campaigner [Gus Speth once said](#) he used to think the biggest problems facing the planet were [biodiversity loss](#), ecosystem collapse and [climate](#) change. He believed that within 30 years, good science could address these problems. But, he continued: "I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."

So who does know how to do that? Politicians? Economists? The problem with their solutions is the same problem that scientists face—they assume rational action from reasonable humans.

But humans can be largely irrational. When it comes to the environment, we often function like well-meaning addicts, earnestly promising to quit polluting the seas, poisoning the air, exploiting the [natural world](#)—and then continuing to do exactly that.

A psychotherapeutic approach

So if we continue to look outwards for practical solutions, we will continue to fail. We also need to look inwards, at ourselves. And this is the job of psychotherapy—providing the emotional and relational maps to take us from catastrophe to transformation.

As a member of the [Climate Psychology Alliance](#) (a group of academics, therapists, writers and artists) I believe that psychological understanding can help with the wide range of complex individual and cultural responses to the environmental crisis.

Feelings such as anger, guilt, grief, terror, shame, anxiety, despair and helplessness are all appropriate reactions. But defenses against these feelings—denial and [disavowal](#) – mean we have avoided taking the necessary action to address their cause.

"Climate psychology" is a different kind of psychology. Rather than see these feelings as something to be "fixed" or "cured," we see them as healthy understandable responses—human reactions that empathize directly with the planet.

There is also value in understanding how grief, loss and mourning can [shape our responses to climate change](#). For if we block out our emotions, then we are [unable to connect](#) with the urgency of the crisis—which may be one reason why we have so far failed to act sufficiently quickly.



Surfacing, by Sonia Shomalzadeh. Credit: Sonia Shomalzadeh, Author provided (No reuse)

A different picture

In practice, what we do in climate psychology may not look that different from other psychological approaches on the surface. What is different is what lies underneath—how we think, see, reflect and respond.

This includes exploring the unconscious dynamics that get in the way of us facing climate change reality, and [confronting our denial](#) and [apathy](#).

By using our understanding of psychic pain to help people face ecological loss that is already happening, we legitimize their grief. And by adopting a "[climate change lens](#)" through which we can see how the crisis is increasingly shaping the world, and which can bring people to therapy, we help people understand their distress.

The result, if we are willing to engage, is what sustainability expert [Jem Bendell calls](#) "deep adaptation." We can change the way we feel about the crises, bring about a new connection—and then act.

In our work we are increasingly seeing relationship fractures and personal distress stemming directly from the environmental crisis. Teenagers, for example, who feel alienated from their parents because they don't share the [same concerns about biodiversity loss](#).

I have talked with children who say they feel unable to trust their parents because of the older generation's lack of action. I hear couples talk of marriages unable to bear the strain of one partner living in fear of the future, whilst the other places their faith in technology.

Using a climate psychology lens builds dialogue between these different

positions. And through understanding and empathizing with each position, people can begin to understand each other. After a climate psychology talk I gave recently, a woman who attended with her teenage daughter contacted me afterwards to say that on the way home they had their best conversation in years.

The parent had talked about her grief, guilt and fears that she could not protect her children. The daughter replied that she needed her mother's support to participate in the school climate strikes. They found common ground and a new relationship based on their fears and their need to take action together.

In cases of people [suffering from eco-anxiety](#) and similar issues, the hope is to find paths towards a new world shaped by a deepening understanding of our relationship with the planet and how our future is ultimately entwined with the survival of other creatures.

Then by using this understanding we can help navigate confusing, strange and frightening territories. Through acknowledging painful feelings, we can start to see them as holding transformational potential. It is this emotional growth that could save us. Depression is actually a step on the path that could lead back up to the surface.

As the American psychologist James Hillman said more than two decades ago: "Psychology, so dedicated to awakening the human consciousness, needs to wake itself up to one of the most ancient human truths: We cannot be studied or cured apart from the planet."

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