

A Brief Guide to Individual Therapy for Climate-Related Mental Distress

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Climate change is becoming one of the most significant psychosocial stresses of the 21st century. As the Covid crisis wanes, global warming is likely to become the single greatest existential threat to most people on Earth. Increased awareness of this issue brings with it many distressing mental experiences, including anxiety, panic, hopelessness, and depression. Mental health practitioners will increasingly be sought by people to help them deal with these feelings. This guide is meant to serve as a brief overview for mental health clinicians to assist them in treating their clients with climate-related concerns.

The techniques presented in this guide represent an overview of the types of therapy that have been discussed in published and lecture format as of 2022. So far there have been few, if any, controlled clinical trials of these techniques. However, they have been reported to be beneficial by many practitioners and clients. The interventions discussed here are intended for adults and adolescents; resources for working with younger children are given in the reference list.

Identify Climate Related Feelings as Normal

Anxiety, dread, discouragement, and feelings of hopelessness in relation to the climate crisis are normal responses. It is important to identify this for clients and not make them feel that their reactions are abnormal or pathological. They should be reassured that their feelings are not unique or irrational. If eco-anxiety is treated as an illness, the forces of climate denial will have won. Clients should be provided a safe, culturally appropriate containing space in which distressing emotions can be discussed and processed. After this, they can be helped with cognitive restructuring of the thoughts that led to these feelings, and finally guided into constructive actions.

Clients should be empathically assisted to process grief associated with climate change. They should also be helped to see that current anxiety and grief may be an anticipation of future losses.

Attention should be paid to climate justice issues. Members of socially marginalized groups (particularly racial minorities and the poor) should be supported in acknowledging that they are often the most affected by, and least responsible for, climate change.

The stress of climate change may, in certain vulnerable individuals, actually lead to the development of a full-blown clinical illness (e.g. Generalized Anxiety Disorder or Major Depression). In such cases the clinical illness should be stabilized before beginning the climate-oriented therapy described here.

Cognitive Restructuring

Clients should be helped to shift away from catastrophizing and seeing the climate situation in black and white terms. They should be enabled to see that while there is a crisis, positive things are happening at the same time. They should be reassured that any guilt they have about contributing to global warming is universal, and that this guilt is carried by everyone, not just them.

Clients should be helped to feel hopeful about the future. They should be allowed to believe that what we can do today is necessary, even though we may not know how, when, or to whom it will matter, and that the future is open, uncertain,

and influenceable. They should be educated about the “butterfly effect” - the idea from chaos theory that small actions can sometimes have profound effects in complex systems. They should be assisted in seeing that it is possible for them to have a significant impact on climate change, in that no one can accurately predict all the consequences of one’s actions. Clients should simultaneously be helped to see that in complex systems no one person can figure things out; we must accept uncertainty and work with others to create change.

Clients should be instructed about how stress and trauma can affect the mind and body. Education should be given about how anxiety can lead to neural and hormonal changes that affect the entire body, including muscles, sensation, the cardiovascular system, the gut, the reproductive system, and immunity. Clients should be cautioned about substance use and other maladaptive behaviors that can worsen their negative feelings. The need to defend against this by developing effective coping strategies in the face of stress, and the importance of self-care, should then be emphasized.

Building Emotional Resilience

Clients should be instructed in how to self-soothe and gain control of their emotions. Deep breathing, progressive muscular relaxation, and transcendental meditation are all useful tools. Mindfulness techniques should be used to help clients stay grounded in the present and observe their thoughts and reactions to situations. Assertiveness training can also be helpful. Clients should be instructed in how to eat well, exercise frequently, and get regular sleep. Being more involved in outdoor activities (walking, running, hiking, kayaking, beach activities, skiing, snow-shoeing) and taking time to appreciate the beauty of nature can be rejuvenating and hope-inducing. To promote this, it can be helpful to hold therapy sessions outdoors.

Clients should be advised to imagine experiences, places, and role models that bring them peace and calm. They should be guided in identifying their personal strengths and skills, and finding activities that are meaningful and hope-inducing. They should be encouraged to use and strengthen their spiritual beliefs, or develop them if they are lacking. Creative expression of eco-anxiety through art and writing can also be helpful.

The existence of strong social supports is extremely important. Close connections with family, friends, and neighbors should be identified and strengthened. If these are lacking, clients should be helped to identify new sources of social support. The following climate-oriented support groups, which can be found through internet search engines, may prove useful:

- The Work That Reconnects
- Good Grief Network
- Climate Cafes
- Carbon Conversations

Purposeful Action

The most effective ongoing way to reduce anxiety and depression, and to sustain hope in the face of the climate crisis, is for people to engage in purposeful action around this issue.

Individual action can include reducing their use of fossil fuels, making their home more energy efficient, and eating less meat and dairy products.

Group actions are likely to be even more fulfilling. Climate groups provide both purposeful action and a social support network. Groups that are very welcoming and involved in a range of climate-improving activities and climate justice issues include:

350NH
Citizens' Climate Lobby
Extinction Rebellion
National Resources Defense Council
No Coal No Gas
Sierra Club
Sunrise Movement

Purposeful action does not need to be centered around climate activities. Helping others in any fashion is likely to improve one's sense of self, hope, and well-being.

The End Result

Following a successful course of climate-focused therapy, a client should be able to productively deal with climate stresses, and use them as a stimulus to increase meaning, purpose, and hope. Ideally, people should be able to make the following three statements:

- 1) I understand how trauma and stress can affect my mind and body
- 2) I have skills, a social support network, and other resources I can use in the midst of adversities to calm myself and find new meaning and purpose
- 3) I accept the condition and complexity of the current world condition, and I am committed to using the skills and resources I have to help other people and the environment

Sources for More Detailed Information

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NH Healthcare Workers for Climate Action, Climate Justice Working Group
<https://www.nhclimatehealth.org/climate-justice>