

Coping with
**CLIMATE CHANGE
DISTRESS**



**AUSTRALIAN
CONSERVATION
FOUNDATION**



**The Climate
Reality Project**
AUSTRALIA



APS

Australian
Psychological
Society



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Introduction

Coping with Climate Change Distress

The reality of climate change is actually very frightening. We are already in times of dangerous climate change, with worse forecast if we continue with business as usual, pouring excess greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

This tip sheet is on how to deal with the distress and stress of not just knowing that climate change is a threat, but also *feeling* that it is a threat. The feeling part is very important. Knowing about climate change is not enough for most people to take action. There are many, many ways in which people can ignore climate change or choose to do nothing about it. But when we feel the threat, then we are more likely to be motivated to take action. But it's also then, of course, that we feel the most distress and worry.

Feeling the threat of climate change involves a whole host of difficult emotions. Common feelings are fear, anger, guilt, shame, grief, loss, helplessness. These strong feelings might result from direct fears about climate related weather events affecting us, or vicarious distress about future threats, or about climate change impacts in other places, or even distress in response to the existential threats to civilisation as we know it. Coping with the feelings we have about climate change is very important so that:

- we don't become overwhelmed by these feelings
- we don't try to avoid the problem in order to avoid the feelings
- we don't burn out
- we can keep functioning well in our everyday lives
- we can stay engaged with climate change and with the changes we are making to reduce the threat.

Who is vulnerable?

A large percentage of people surveyed about climate change report appreciable distress about the issue (Reser et al., 2012). These might be people who know the facts, who see their world changing irreparably, who understand what is necessary for change, or who are living in places which are very vulnerable to climate impacts. And this might particularly be the case for people working in the field of climate change or environmental issues, or engaged with local climate action or environmental groups. Burnout is a significant risk for these latter groups (see tip sheet on burnout for more information).

How do people cope with climate change?

Social scientists have identified a range of coping strategies when responding to climate change (Bradley et al., 2014). Some of these strategies are adaptive (helpful), like adopting a problem-solving attitude, seeking social support or expressive coping. Some strategies are maladaptive (or unhelpful), like avoidance, denial, unrealistic optimism, wishful thinking. Even though the latter might help people to cope with the distressing feelings, they are ultimately unhelpful in relation to dealing with climate change if they result in the person giving up, abandoning pro-environmental behaviours, or accepting the status quo and persisting with business-as-usual.

In the sections below, we have grouped a number of adaptive coping strategies into four categories - behavioural, relational, cognitive, emotional - to provide you with a tool kit of strategies to help you cope with climate change.

Behavioural strategies:

Things we can do to manage distressing feelings



1. Taking action

Doing something to reduce your carbon footprint is a significant coping strategy, with the actions that people take seeming to help them manage their experienced distress.

The behaviours or actions that we can do to solve the problem of climate change include things like:

- participating in climate action groups
- lobbying politicians and industry leaders
- changing individual or household behaviours like purchasing green power, turning down heaters, bike commuting or using public transport.



2. Taking a break

Taking a break from thinking about climate change is another important strategy.

Keeping up with a constant stream of information doesn't actually solve the climate change problem. And it takes a huge psychological toll to be constantly exposing yourself to this chronic, intangible, global environmental stressor.

Taking a deliberate break is different from putting one's head in the sand because you know you are only downing tools for a breather, not quitting altogether.

Taking a break can include:

- turning off the 24/7 news feed
- taking a break from emails
- having a 'day' job that is separate to your activist work - getting money from somewhere else makes it much easier to sustain a sacrificial project
- taking 'doona days' – taking off a whole day to relax and enjoy simple pleasures.



Image: Stop CSG Illawarra



3. Having fun, feeling good

Positive experiences are critically important for inspiring and motivating yourself (and others). And when we feel good we are also more likely to show personal qualities that will help progress our causes. For example, researchers have found that people who feel good are:

- more willing to look directly at threats
- better at negotiating
- better able to find more efficient, effective, creative, novel solutions to problems (see Harré 2011 for more examples).

If the fun is going out of the work, it is important to take a break and prioritise activities that cultivate positive emotions like fun, playfulness, passion, expansion, excitement, joy, or satisfaction. We have to make sure we maintain positive emotions both in general and with regard to sustainability (Harré, 2011).

- Work out what the positive aspects of sustainability are, and talk about these.
- Spend time with people who help generate good feelings (good and bad feelings are both contagious).
- Build positive moods in the events you organise, with a welcoming atmosphere, convivial settings.
- Share humorous cartoons and jokes about the issues you are passionate about.
- Find activist tasks which engage you and excite you (people are happy when solving problems in a domain they love).



4. Maintaining healthy routines

People thrive with routines, and making sure that your routines also include some healthy behaviours creates the best of both worlds. These could include:

- taking time to do physical exercise - walking, running, yoga
- taking time to prepare and eat healthy meals
- getting enough sleep, going to bed early
- going out and spending time in the very nature that you're trying to protect
- spending time with children
- being spontaneous and playful.



5. Focussing on only a few issues

Working in too many movements or on too many climate projects becomes unwieldy and can be overwhelming. Focusing will lower stress levels. Specialisation is a good behavioural strategy for coping.

- Let go of the urge to say yes to everything and be everywhere.
- Prioritise the activities you chose to invest your energy into.

Relational strategies

Ways we can use our relationships with others to help us cope

As social beings, our relationships with other people have a powerful and positive effect in helping us to cope with the vicissitudes of life. Social support is the perception or reality that one is cared for, has assistance from others, and is a member of a supportive social network. Supportive resources can be emotional, tangible, intangible, informational, and companion-based. There is more evidence on the benefits of social support for coping with stress and distress, no matter what the cause, than pretty much any other factor you could imagine (Taylor, 2011).

Social support enhances psychological wellbeing and reduces psychological distress during stressful times. It does this in a few ways, for example by buffering people from stressful events, by providing people with alternative ways of thinking about or dealing with stressors.

- Share concerns, thoughts and feelings about climate change with trusted friends and colleagues.
- Spend social time with your community, family and friends, both those who share your values, as well as those outside of your environmental interests.
- Have access to a mentor who can help you think through your work, give you strategic advice and be a good sounding board.
- Belong to a group of people who share your values and can work on your projects together with you, or act like a support group.



Cognitive strategies:

Ways we can use our thinking to help cope with distressing feelings

When we are stressed our capacity to think flexibly often diminishes. At these times, we rely more than usual on mental short cuts and can fall into a host of unhelpful thinking patterns. These patterns of thinking are very common and are well described in a range of psychology books. You are likely to recognise a few of them in yourself, which is normal. Common examples are black and white thinking, where one thinks in terms of all or nothing about an issue (e.g. 'driving cars is completely bad for the environment'), or overgeneralising, where one infers an overriding principle from a single event (e.g. this drought confirms that we are all doomed from climate change').

The aim of cognitive coping strategies is to identify and then replace unhelpful thinking patterns. This is not just positive thinking or looking on the bright side. It might even be that some of the thoughts we have about climate change are actually quite rational and realistic, given the state of the environment. They may not, however, be particularly helpful, if they are leading to overwhelming feelings of despair or anger, and getting in the way of you coping and getting on with the important work that you want to do.

Rather, the aim of cognitive coping strategies is to attain a more realistic and empowering way of thinking about the problems. This can involve replacing helpless/hopeless or catastrophising thinking patterns with thoughts like:

- 'history shows that people can change',
- 'climate change is happening faster than expected and most of the scientists believe that there's still a window of opportunity to limit greenhouse gas emissions'.



Image: Beyond Zero Emissions

Here are some of our favourite cognitive strategies:

1. Dropping the judgements, 'shoulds' and assumptions

Difficult life experiences are painful enough without us adding harsh critical judgments about ourselves or others on top. Imagine you stumble a bit over a tricky question about environmental issues. Beating yourself up about this, calling yourself an idiot, worrying that you should have known better, are all judgments that are more likely to fuel negative emotion than help you to keep moving forward with your work. Same with feeling guilty and blaming yourself for not doing enough to solve the climate problem. A more productive way of thinking would be to think 'I felt embarrassed and disappointed for not answering a climate question as best as I would have liked, but I'm making a start in talking about important topics with them, and I'll be better prepared for this question next time'.

2. Balancing action with reflection

Reading, writing a journal or a blog, talking with kindred spirits, are all activities that help you to reflect on what you are doing and how you are feeling. In turn, these help you to develop a conscious approach to coping. Time to reflect can also help us stay connected to our short and long term goals, and provide an opportunity to break our goals down into achievable steps. Small steps are very important because they give us a sense of accomplishment and mastery, which are key ingredients in staying motivated. Reflection can also help us keep perspective on how things evolve and change over time.

This can help us manage the sense of urgency, and balance this with patience. We can say things like:

- 'Change takes time'
- 'I've got enough stamina to keep on, step by step, knowing that every step is a help along the way'
- 'From little things big things grow'.

This thinking helps us to see that change is often incremental. It is fine to sometimes start with little steps and progress to more difficult tasks until we reach the final goal.

3. Cultivating hope

Hope is a very important part of keeping engaged in the necessary work to protect our climate. People need to see that change is possible, that a low carbon world would be a welcome transformation from the current reality, that we know what to do and how to get there, and that we have some efficacy and agency (i.e. we know that we can do it).

Cultivating hope is about transforming fear about the fate of the planet into a positive experience. Fear is often a useful starting place, but needs to be transformed into a plan for action.



4. Restoring ourselves mentally

Humans are capable of sustaining a great deal of focus and effort. The capacity to direct attention, focus and block out distractions also allows us to resist temptations, exercise restraint, and have more willpower and better self-control (Kaplan & Berman, 2010). It can allow us to have a civilised conversation with a sceptical colleague. Or it may help us gather the will to walk to the train station in the rain rather than jumping in the car. Our capacity for self-regulation is essential for functioning effectively.

People who are mentally tired or fatigued are often in an emotional state that works against their capacity to behave in a reasonable fashion.

Our capacity to direct attention can become fatigued over time, throughout the day. Many aspects of the modern world like constantly checking e-mail and phone messages, and multitasking, take up a lot of our directed attention.

We often run out of this capacity before the jobs are done (Kaplan, 2001). So, looking after our attentional needs is essential in order to deal with everyday life.

We can do this in two ways: by avoiding unnecessary costs in terms of expending directed attention or by finding ways of restoring ourselves. Psychologists call this psychological restoration.

- Spending time in environments which are compatible with your aim to restore yourself.
- Being away from the attentionally fatiguing activities – e.g. by changing your physical location (going to the beach, going into a forest).
- Deciding to do something different—instead of working on that proposal all day, you can work in the garden for a change.
- Allowing your thoughts to drift away from your daily activities into something that is rich and non-threatening.
- Engaging with something that is ‘softly fascinating’ - fascinating objects or places have at least one thing in common: they require little or no attentional effort. You can watch a fire, gaze at a waterfall, or pick flowers without exerting attentional effort. While you are engaged with something that is fascinating, your capacity to direct your attention rests and, in doing so, is restored.
- Spending time in environments which are compatible with your aim to restore yourself.
- Spending time in green settings – there is much evidence that green landscapes, even in cities, assist in recovery from mental fatigue.

Emotional coping strategies

Ways we can work with emotions to help cope with distressing feelings

Engaging with climate change can evoke many raw and painful emotions, both for ourselves, but also as we empathise with others. This willingness to imagine and feel the pain that others might be experiencing can sometimes add to our own suffering. Humans have some, but not complete, capacity to regulate our emotions. We can 'up' regulate if we're feeling down, and 'down' regulate if we're feeling anxious or overly excited. Below are several ways in which you can practice regulating your emotions to manage the feelings.

- Get in touch with your body. The more you are aware of your physical body the more attuned you become to the subtlety of emotion. Bring awareness to your physical sensations – of touch, movement, heat/cool, weight. You can practise this anywhere doing anything, however meditations that focus on body scanning will rocket-fuel your skills!
- Let yourself have a cry from time to time if it helps. Some people find that expressing their sadness by crying can be a relief. It is sad that our planet is struggling to cope with overpopulation and overconsumption. These feelings are real, so let them out.
- Recognise the cyclic ups and downs of emotions and be okay with that, knowing that they will pass.
- Approach painful situations and painful emotions with kindness and compassion. Allow yourself to feel for the suffering or pain you are experiencing, wishing yourself well in that pain. Compassion is characterised by generation of warmth, kindness and care towards ourselves and others. Take a course, read a book or listen to free downloads on mindful self-compassion.
- Acknowledge how you feel by labelling the emotion (“I’m feeling shame, guilt, anger, hurt, pain, overwhelm, apathy...”). Putting feelings into words will activate the part of the brain that enables regulation.
- Validate your feelings. Acknowledge that it makes sense to be feeling whatever you are feeling. “It makes sense that I feel guilty for taking a break as I’m deeply concerned about climate change and want so badly for things to be different”.
- Recognise that other people will feel this way too. This is called “common humanity” and it is a way of countering the sense of isolation that can come with suffering. In this way we recognise that the problem of one is the problem of many. Who hasn’t felt guilty about taking a break? Statements like “I’m not alone, other people feel guilt, distress. We all struggle in our lives”, can be helpful.

“I say I am stronger than fear”

Malala Yousafzai



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