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Closing the Gap Between Anxiety and Climate Change

July 17, 2019 by [Jessica Morgan, LMSW](#)



Today, many of us are plugged into more than one news source and in our twenty four hour news cycle we hear a lot about the state of the world in a short amount of time. Aside from the continuous coverage of war, famine, political unrest, and global injustice, there are disagreements between networks, burgeoning skepticism of media outlets, and sensationalized click-bait. After scrolling through social media feeds or catching up with the nightly news, many people are left feeling [anxious](#), worried, or perhaps even grief-stricken.

Amidst all of this confusion, it can be difficult to know how to feel about the direction our world is heading, especially when it comes to the health of our planet. But, even managing to unplug from the television or phone still does not protect us from coming face-to-face with the impacts of climate change. Communities worldwide are

experiencing the devastations of superstorms, record-breaking heat, destruction of habitats, sea-level rise and much more. The climate crisis is quickly becoming a [mental health crisis](#), too.

The age of global warming has manifested [psychological experiences](#) known as eco-anxiety, climate-anxiety, and ecological grief. So, let's explore three methods we can use to enhance our stability in this ever-changing world.

Talk About It

[Isolation](#) is detrimental for anyone experiencing anxiety. When we remain alone in our thoughts they can become a dark cloud that hovers over us. Furthermore, unresolved climate-anxiety can move us into apathy. Author, researcher, and Climate Psychologist, [Renee Lertzman](#) writes, "what shows up as apathy is a defence mechanism. It's a way for people to cope with the very complicated feelings that come around these (climate) issues." Because the climate crisis can feel so daunting, overwhelming, and monstrous, we begin to experience a burden that is too much to bear and this leaves people feeling alone, powerless, and immobilized.

With the science around climate change still being so hotly contested by political and news outlets, anxieties around this topic can feel unreasonable or unworthy of discussion. Acknowledging anxiety around this controversial topic can feel shameful and experiencing shame further isolates us.

So, who can we talk to about our fears around climate change? Well, a therapist for starters. [Gestalt therapy](#) can be a particularly anxiety-relieving outlet for coping with climate-anxiety. [Gestalt therapy](#) focuses on the experience of the here-and-now as well as our interconnectedness to a greater whole. Therapists trained in Gestalt can facilitate a forum for clients to experience how they are embodying climate-anxiety in the present moment and to sit with some of the existential questions raised around this topic. A guiding principle of Gestalt therapy is that human beings have an inherent desire to find solutions to their problems while continuing to grow throughout life. This framework synchronizes wonderfully with current views of climate change as a human-made problem with human-made solutions!

Friends and family can also be another great outlet. In her essay, "Breaking the Climate Fear Taboo," [Lertzman](#) reminds readers of the importance of centering emotional experiences of climate-fear and not engaging in shaming, persuasion, or behavior change. On the surface, it might appear that discussing eco-anxiety will be a controversial topic. But, when we involve trusted friends and family with our feelings and not our political opinions we can open untold dialogue and mutuality.

(Re)Connect

[Ecotherapy](#) is a powerful tool in cultivating our relationship with eco-anxiety. Ecotherapy encompasses the activities and interventions of a branch of psychology known as ecopsychology. Ecopsychology has three core components. These components are: human beings are deeply interconnected with [nature](#) in a reciprocal relationship, the false sense of separation between people and planet creates suffering for both people and planet, and lastly, realizing the connection between humans and nature is healing for both.

Ecotherapy offers diverse ways in its approach to coping with anxiety. If you have taken a walk, gardened, or cuddled with your pet, you have started your ecotherapy journey! Congratulations! More and more science has been uplifting our intuitive instincts, proving that time in nature reduces stress. Recent studies show [spending time outdoors](#) in bare feet, also called grounding, can restore our natural circadian rhythm and calm our nervous system. Similarly, sitting by the ocean puts our brain into a mild [meditative state](#).

Ecotherapy can be performed solo or with a trained ecotherapist. Ecotherapists use activities designed to reconnect individuals and groups with nature. Activities in an ecotherapy session may include anything from mindful meditation, wilderness therapy, [awakening experiences](#), guided hikes, horticulture, conservation projects, to community art, outdoor journaling, and other creative contacts with nature.

Get Active in a Community

According to Eco-philosopher and Buddhist scholar [Joanna Macy](#), the amount of anxiety and grief we feel in response to the current climate crisis is directly proportional to how much we care about what happens to the earth. In this view, anxiety is a positive indicator. I know, right about now you are thinking, "anxiety as beneficial...seriously?" Yes, seriously. Joanna Macy has pioneered a branch of activism that centralizes human psychology as a key element in resolving the climate crisis. This work is known as "The Work That Reconnects." The Work That Reconnects begins with acknowledging feelings of anxiety regarding the future of our planet and calls upon this anxiety as motivation to take ownership of these issues. Becoming an active participant in shaping the future empowers us to work with our anxiety, be present to it, and see it as a tool for change.

And there are so many ways to become active in this movement! Participating in climate action looks different for everyone because we all have different worries, concerns, and priorities. Currently, there are numerous ways to be involved in climate-related work. Some of these avenues even include [bipartisan](#) political engagement, republicans and democrats are part of climate action these days. Additionally, the list of [faith-based organizations](#) participating in climate work is growing rapidly. People with diverse identities such as [youth](#), [mothers](#), and [people of color](#) are all joining the front lines of action as well. There is no shortage of active communities working together on climate issues.

Anxiety, like climate change, knows no bounds, affecting millions of people across ethnicities, age, race, creed, identity, and political affiliation. The bridge between a livable planet and our mental health is not as long as it once seemed. Remember, if you are experiencing climate-related anxiety start a dialogue, get your hands in the dirt, and find your community!



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About Jessica Morgan, LMSW

Jessica Morgan LMSW operates [True-North-Wellness.com](#). She earned her masters in social work from Stony Brook University in 2018. She also holds a B.A., in Women and Gender Studies from SBU, 2010. Currently she is pursuing a post masters certificate in experiential therapy and completed a 12 week Mindfulness-Based Eco-therapy program. She uses creative writing, poetry, art, and movement to explore the intersections of one's internal and external landscapes. Her diverse professional experience in mental health housing, medical account management, event planning, and the arts has cultivated an unrelenting interest in the ways narrative reflection, mindfulness, nature, and adventure can enhance the life we live.

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