

# Getting Climate and Collapse Distress and Resilience Strongly Onto the Public Agenda (Revised Version 2)

Anxiety about climate breakdown, eco-driven societal collapse, and wider social breakdown is widespread in the UK and in the wider world. **Such anxiety is a reasonable response to a real threat and could fuel urgently needed action, if handled properly.** Yet actively working with these fears and anxiety is only starting to become a subject of mainstream public discussion or policy. Though covered in progressive publications such as *The Guardian* for several years, climate and collapse anxiety have featured very little in publications or conversations that do not have a chiefly progressive audience. It can appear to be a niche issue though most people's children are feeling it. So too do the community of educators who teach climate science and mental health professionals who are in touch with all the rising fears of the public.

Our 2023/4 campaign will organise an effort by diverse communities of interest to raise mainstream awareness of climate anxiety, erase the taboo around it, raise awareness of available spaces and practices for such emotions, and call for public backing for provision of support to all (the millions) who need it. We intend to promote awareness of existing spaces that help handle fears and anxiety and turn them into action, and to build support for expansion of these spaces. **An ultimate aspiration of this effort is public support for spaces that allow all people to handle the disturbing truth of our situation as best they can, and create a personal meaningful response. However, working against the taboo around climate distress, raising awareness of spaces, and publicly affirming the need to tell and handle the truth rather than simply being optimistic about the truth are also part of the campaign.**

We intend to move towards these goals by building a coalition of aligned actors that includes youth groups, the community of educators from university climate scientists to school teachers, mental health professionals, and, crucially, the wider climate-concerned community. We consider well-held spaces to be the best way of helping millions take climate action and face the stark realities that must sink in if we are to have realistic approaches to just climate action, such as serious conversations about loss and damages. There are many people doing this work with diverse approaches, the point of the campaign is to put them in position to do more of this work, more easily.

## **Key Assertion: Climate Anxiety is not a disease, but is a threat to mental health**

"Cancer anxiety" would be rational if a person discovered that they had high genetic predisposition towards it, and today's learners find in classes on climate change that, due to conditions that are largely beyond their personal control, they are likely to suffer from climate breakdown. So it is little wonder serious climate anxiety is experienced by 75% of young people aged 18-25 (while 59% are very worried) and adversely affects the day-to-day functioning of about 46 percent of this population. A 2019 poll showed that 54 percent of respondents think

that human extinction due to climate change is possible<sup>1</sup>, an opinion shared by many climate scientists. Our campaign will also explore including support for the wider concerns about environmental collapse, war and polarisation, which have become widely recognised under the name "polycrisis".

The government's responsibility for public health includes caring for psychological health and therefore a response to these rising anxieties. The same work would help the government fulfil its responsibility to respond to the climate crisis. While all of the anxieties related to a polycrisis are important to get onto the public agenda, the issue of climate anxiety is the lowest hanging fruit which will allow us to organise community mental health responses.

**Key tactic 1:** We have created [a sign-on letter](#) that can be signed by climate scientists, science educators at all levels, and mental health professionals and which expresses the widespread experience that simply teaching climate science or ecology gives many students a rational, understandable existential crisis. Climate scientists are crucial for dispelling the notion that climate anxiety is irrational and help legitimise the campaign. We already have journalists in a number of media who are looking to help report on climate anxiety and will help us get needed attention to enrol many more in a call for a public response. We are organising secondary school teachers to sign on to the letters.

**Supporting tactic:** Also at their request, we are working to provide spaces where educators can learn more, now, about how to better hold space for their concerned students, and receive support. The best way for more teachers to become motivated to address climate anxiety is to see first-hand what existing resources can for them and their students.

**Key Effort 2:** We will use this letter to foreground, publicly, the need for a national conversation about engaging with climate anxiety. Preexisting relationships will facilitate personal consultations with key actors in a wide variety of sectors who have stake in this issue, which includes all climate concerned actors in mainstream NGOs and organisations (NHS, RSPB, Friends of the Earth, etc.). As proper care can help millions of young people to become more active on climate, most people who care about climate action are likely to share this campaign's goals. Together, we hope to influence Labour to add policies to its campaign platform.

**Key tactic 3:** Publicly making an argument that the current approach towards emotion excited by climate decline is not really working. There is a worry about not panicking the public or shutting people down due to anxiety, but we must create full education and emotional stability simultaneously. People need both enough information to inform action, *and* an environment that helps handle the truth and use their energy into credible action. Recent scholarship supports this view<sup>2</sup>. We will help organise resources that detail ways in which people can act urgently and make the case that a credible movement for mainstream urgent action is here. This helps people feel agency which reduces anxiety.

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<sup>1</sup> Pearce, R. (2019, May 10). [Guest post: Polls reveal surge in concern in UK about climate change](#). [Carbon Brief](#).

**Key Emphasis 1:** We will work to make sure that discussion of climate anxiety does not fall into the trap of providing coping mechanisms rather than real responses. We also will not address climate change as separate from other aspects of polycrisis. Our work to date suggests that community mental health approaches that rely on dialogue among members are the most viable way to provide care to the millions of people that need it, and these open and democratic support spaces will be inclusive of a wide variety of reasonable concerns about social issues.

**Key Emphasis 2:** We believe in working together to raise the profile of the whole community that helps to build psychological resilience for climate change, rather than a particular standard approach. We will not attempt to settle professional disagreements over precise language and forms of support. We will support the study of diverse efforts to support psychological resilience, which will learn from one another over time, and add to the already substantial evidence base (eg. Wellcome Global hub developed by Climate Cares).

We invite your participation in this growing coalition.

### **Organisers**

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### **Appendix: Recognising a diversity of Approaches**

Professional approaches to supporting and framing climate anxiety vary widely — even what to call climate anxiety is a point of real contention. But this should not stop all those concerned from working together on a broad range of issues. We do not pretend that a coalition can resolve all meaningful differences of opinion, but rather it can act to advance points on which we should all be able to agree. For instance:

- Climate anxiety and climate grief (by whatever name) are not pathologies, but rational reactions to our current situation.
- Many kinds of support exist, ranging through everything from talking it over with friends and family to professional ecotherapy, and that most of these are much better than no support at all, and this is supported by existing research.
- Much research on and experience with anxiety and community support in other areas can inform responses to climate anxiety, and show their likely effectiveness.
- Support for climate anxiety can be undertaken without long delays, which we cannot afford, for exhaustive research. (The Precautionary Principle applies: fully researching this matter cannot be allowed to delay urgent action to cope with it.) And the field of mental health almost never results in agreement on “one right way” in any case.
- Measuring the effects of various kinds of support will help to increase its effectiveness and result in more resourcing of it over time.
- The profile of public conversation around these issues and levels of funding do not reflect their importance. (There are vestiges of a taboo here, which needs overcoming.)
- The same is true within virtually all of the various sectors named (policy, journalism, mental health, communities, education, science, etc.)
- Time is of the essence, as the sooner some kind of framework for increasing the number and quality of support spaces is onto the public agenda, the sooner public support for these spaces can happen, and the sooner they will fulfil their potential to aid climate action.
- Coming elections, when an agenda might be advanced, provide that most useful incentive for quickly coming to an agreement on potentially endless debates — a strict deadline.

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