

Who feels anxious, about what, and how deeply dare we feel ???

Speaking on behalf of the Climate Psychology Alliance

Martin Wilks, C.Psychol, CPA
www.martinwilks.com

Climate Psychology, to be effective, needs a much broader perspective than the ‘traditional, mainstream’ psychology of diagnosis and treatment

A PSYCHO-SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE: Climate psychology draws upon a variety of sources that have been neglected by mainstream psychology, including: psychoanalysis, Jungian psychology, ecopsychology, chaos theory, continental philosophy, ecolinguistics and social theory. It attempts to offer a psycho-social perspective – one that can illuminate the complex two-way interaction between the personal and the political. It uses this understanding:

- to promote more creative approaches to engaging the public with climate change
- to contribute to change at the personal, community, cultural and political levels
- to support activists, scientists and policy makers seeking to bring about change, and
- to build psychological resilience to the destructive impacts of climate change that are already being experienced.

"We scientists don't know how to do that"

"I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change.

I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems.

But 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."

Gus Speth



ECO-ANXIETY

Eco-anxiety is the most frequently used term in literature and research to describe heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system. The term climate anxiety is often used synonymously. A 2017 report by the American Psychological Association links the impact of climate change to mental health and references 'eco-anxiety' as "a chronic fear of environmental doom".

ECOLOGICAL THREAT RESPONSE

It is important to stress that CPA does not view eco-anxiety as a clinical condition, but an inevitable and even healthy response to the ecological threats we are facing, such as food/water shortages, extreme weather events, species extinction, increased health issues, social unrest and potentially the demise of human life on Earth. This has particular significance for children and young people who have little power to limit this harm, making them vulnerable to increased climate anxiety (Marks, Hickman, Pihkala et al, 2021).

Paying heed to what is happening in our communities and across the globe is a healthier response than turning away in denial or disavowal.

The notion of solastalgia is closely related to eco-anxiety. Coined by the philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2005), it refers to the existential pain experienced when the place where one resides is subject to environmental degradation.



Table 1. The Tasks of Grief

	THE TASK	POSSIBLE NEGATIVE RESPONSES
1	Accepting the reality of the loss, first intellectually and then emotionally	Denial of the: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• facts of the loss;• meaning of the loss;• irreversibility of the loss.
2	Working through the painful emotions of grief (despair, fear, guilt, anger, shame, sadness, yearning, disorganization)	Shutting off all emotion, idealizing what is lost, bargaining, numbing the pain through alcohol, drugs, or manic activity
3	Adjusting to the new environment/acquiring new skills/developing a new sense of self	Not adapting, becoming helpless, bitter, angry, depressed, withdrawing
4	Reinvesting emotional energy	Refusing to love, turning away from life

Source: Adapted from Worden (1983).

Worden model of grief, adapted in Rosemary Randall (2009)

The need to invent new vocabulary:

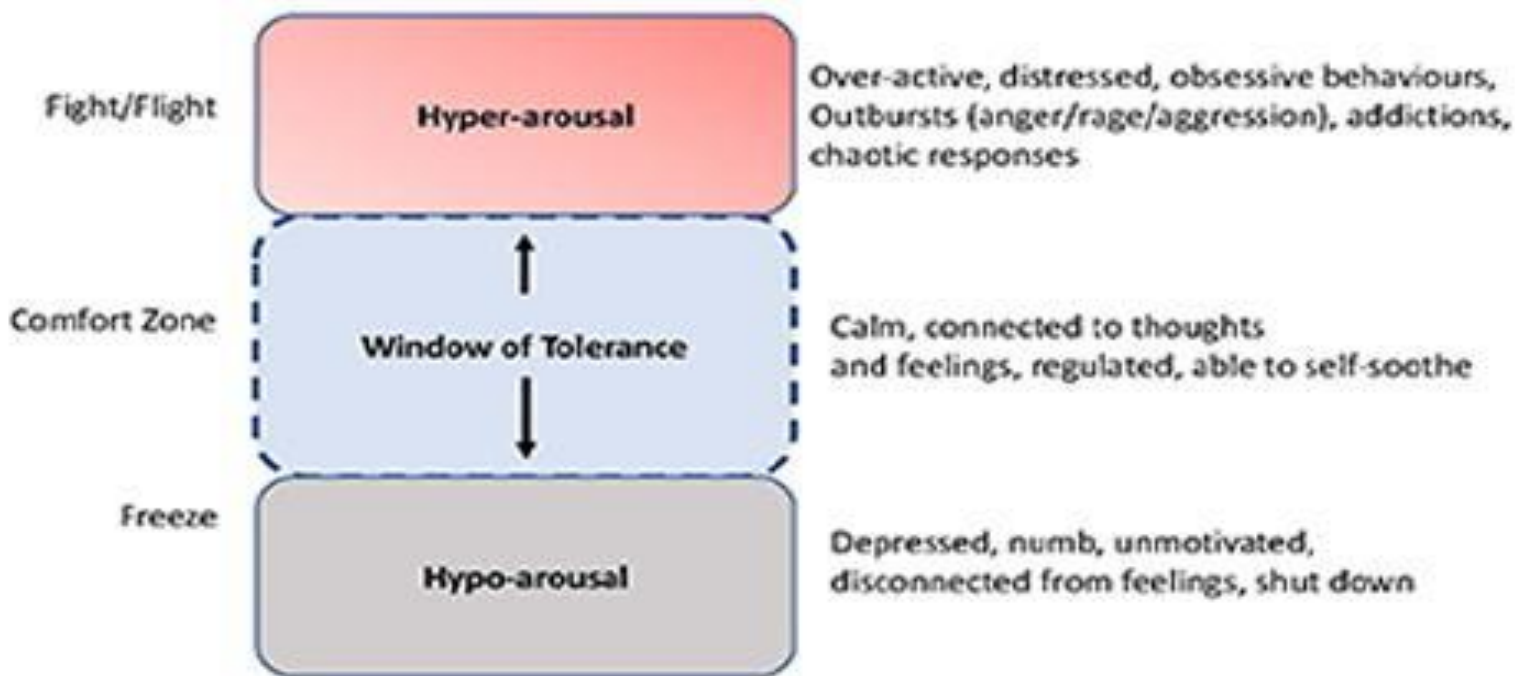
Anthropocene	A proposed geological epoch to describe humans impact on earths eco-systems, re cli change, bio-diverstiy loss & environment degraation
Hyper-object	“ ..so vast in time and temporal scope that they challenge traditional human perception and understanding”
Metacrises, wicked problems	“ the interconnected and compounding nature of multiple global crises - attempted solutions in one bring about acceleration of other problems etc
Denial	Complete ideological refusal to accept scientific data, chooses disinformation, conspiracy theories etc as a defence, it's THEM
Disavowal	Acknowledges evidence but distances from emotional, ethcial or practical implications

A RANGE OF EMOTIONS

Whatever words we use to illustrate the psychological effects of climate change, fear and anxiety are certainly not the only emotions people experience in relation to the climate emergency. Anger, helplessness, sadness, grief, depression, numbness, restlessness, sleeplessness and other symptoms can befall those who are able to face the facts. Fear and anxiety are feelings that alert us to danger and can mobilise us into action. Without enough support, anxiety can escalate into panic on one end of the spectrum or evoke a freeze response and paralyse on the other end of the spectrum.

Rather than attempting to rid people of anxiety, therapists can support individuals and communities to build strong containers that allow the expression and exploration of their emotions without collapsing under it or turning away. With strong enough support structures in place, most people can sustain strong feelings without either dissociating and numbing or going into blind panic. They can engage with difficult truths whilst staying connected and grounded. Community groups, climate cafes, supervision groups, are just a few examples

The Window of Tolerance



Climate Emotions Wheel



Climate
Mental Health
Network

ClimateMentalHealth.Net

based on research by Panu Pihkala: bit.ly/3Ky4k6G

Lancet Dec 2021: Planetary health

Climate change has important implications for the health and futures of children and young people, yet they have little power to limit its harm, making them vulnerable to climate anxiety. This is the first large-scale investigation of climate anxiety in children and young people globally and its relationship with perceived government response

Carol Hickman - lead author, key contributor to work of CPA, surveyed 10 000 children and young people (aged 16–25 years) in ten countries (Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, Philippines, Portugal, the UK, and the USA; 1000 participants per country)

Respondents across all countries were worried about climate change (59% were very or extremely worried and 84% were at least moderately worried). More than 50% reported each of the following emotions: sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. More than 45% of respondents said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, and many reported a high number of negative thoughts about climate change (eg, 75% said that they think the future is frightening and 83% said that they think people have failed to take care of the planet). Respondents rated governmental responses to climate change negatively and reported greater feelings of betrayal than of reassurance. Climate anxiety and distress were correlated with perceived inadequate government response and associated feelings of betrayal.

Mild

- Some feelings of upset, but not constant
- Reassured that others have the answers
- Little disruption in cognition/thinking

Medium

- Feeling upset more frequently (e.g. weekly) and more strongly
- Fundamental belief that solutions will be found
- Some disruption in cognition/thinking, but not pre-occupied by the crisis
- Some knowledge about facts and figures in relation to the climate crisis, but not obsessed

Significant

- Daily upset and feelings of distress increasing in duration, frequency and strength
- Fears of social collapse alongside fears about climate change
- Signs of cognitive/thinking changes such as guilt and shame
- Very little faith in 'others' finding or acting on solutions
- Willing to end relationships with people who are in denial about the climate emergency.
- Frequently feel insecure

Severe

- Intrusive thoughts, sleep affected and preoccupation with the climate emergency
- Unable to manage emotional responses (such as crying a lot, or angry outbursts)
- Struggle to enjoy any aspect of life
- Strongly held beliefs that the climate crisis will lead to social collapse and ultimately extinction of the human species
- No belief that authority figures will act to mitigate against climate change
- Severe disruption to other aspects of life ('it doesn't matter if I have a pension/home/marriage/job because the world is ending soon anyway')

Acknowledging and validating feelings



Recognizing one's negative emotions about climate change and understanding that they are valid and normal.

Emotional Coping Tools



Tools for coping with climate-related emotions include reframing; cultivating meaning, hope, and optimism; and mindfulness.

Social Connection



Feeling connected, supported, and cared for by others.

Connecting with Nature



Spending time in nature, including urban green spaces and wilderness.

Climate Action



Taking action to help mitigate climate change, which can take many forms.

Self-Care



Taking media breaks, staying active, and maintaining healthy eating and sleeping habits.

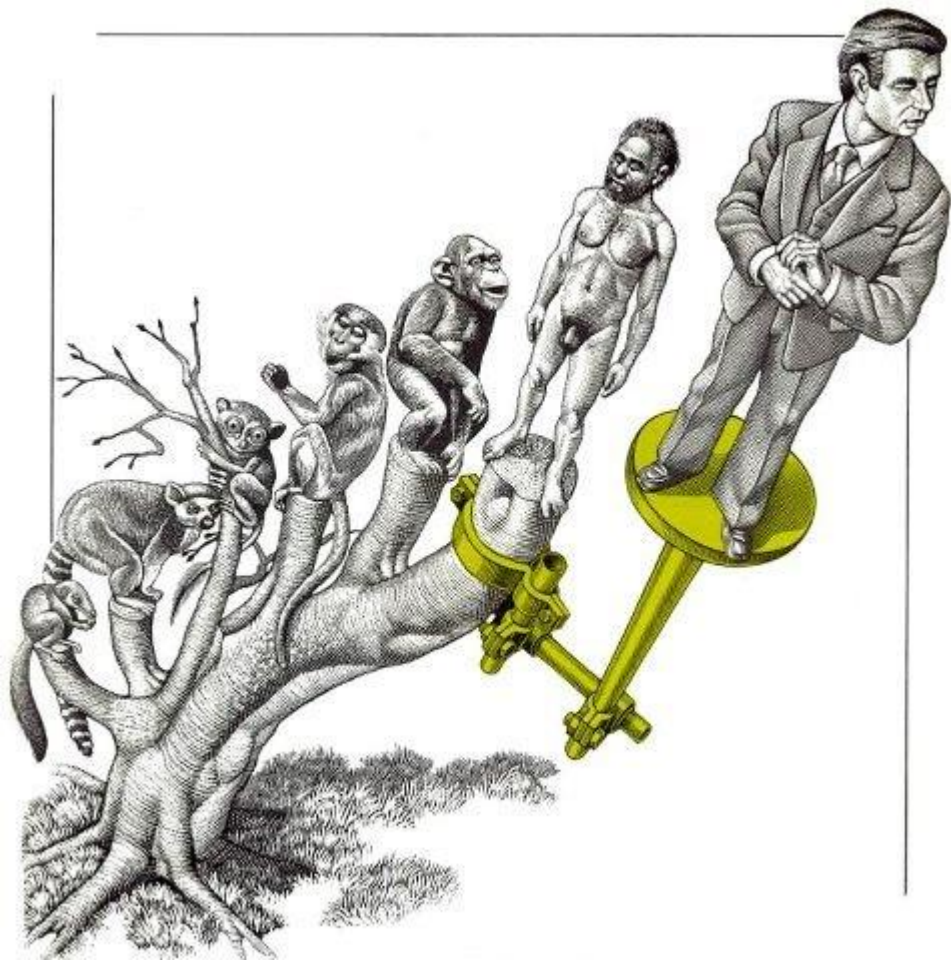
Climate Justice Awareness



Cultivating an awareness that climate change disproportionately impacts certain communities.

**Process Model of Eco-anxiety and Ecological Grief:
Living with the ecological crisis**

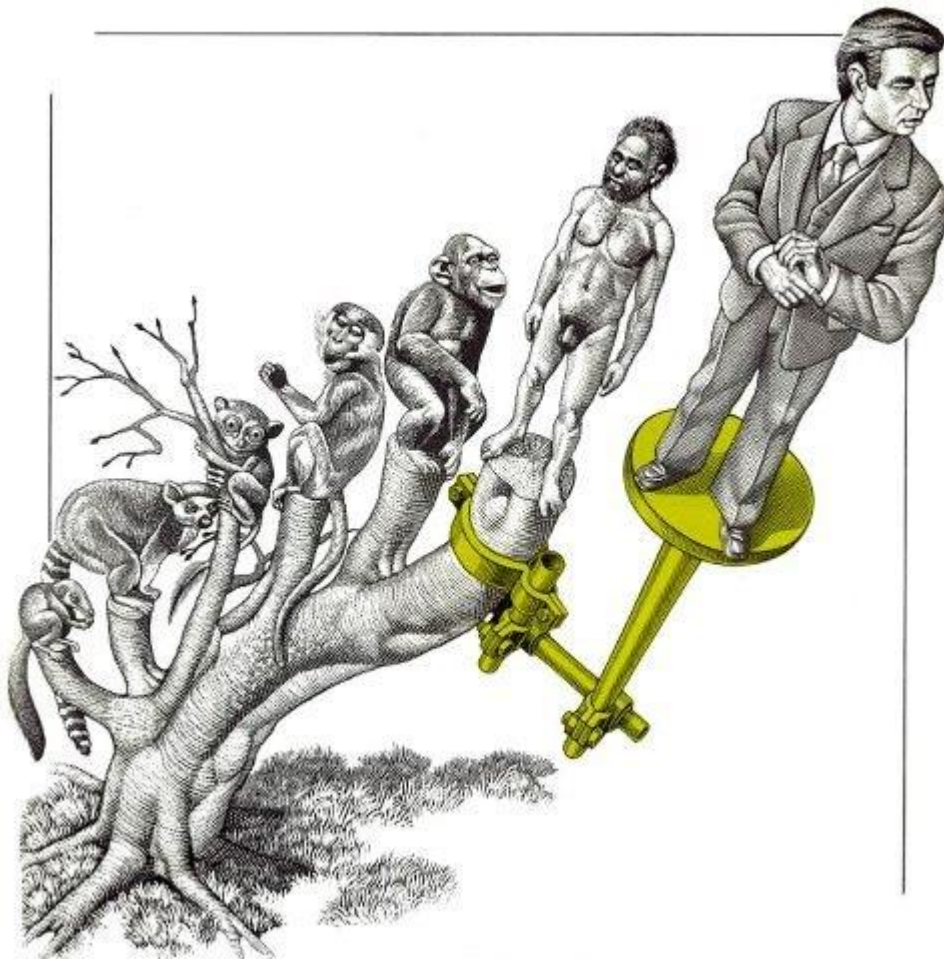




Ecopsychology

Eco-psychology explores the relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing how disconnection from nature contributes to psychological and ecological distress. It integrates ecological principles with psychological practices to foster a deeper sense of interconnectedness, (inter-being) promoting healing for both individuals, communities and the planet. Core practices include nature-based therapy, mindfulness in natural settings, and cultivating ecological awareness to inspire sustainable living and emotional well-being.

In the “deep ecology” approach described by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, (1972), the cultivation of ecological awareness is thought of as psychospiritual maturation process culminating in an expanded sense of self, beyond the “personal, skin encapsulated ego” to a ‘whole earth and all it’s beings” - the ECOLOGICAL SELF, - a profound shift from “I” to “we”



At the end of our session tonight I intend to share a guided group meditation to contact a sense of the Ecological Self - we'll wait to see if time allows for this

Eco-anxiety - dare you yet feel it?, and how deeply?

Eco-anxiety is the most frequently used term in literature and research to describe heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system. The term climate change anxiety is often used synonymously

2017 report by the American Psychological Association (very mainstream!) links the impact of [climate change](#) to mental health and references 'eco-anxiety' as "a chronic fear of environmental doom"

Long term observations 1971 - **Club of Rome** report: "limits to growth"

Mel Klein, 2015 "This changes everything" **"our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature."**

yet the economic system automatically fights back - elsewhere MK points out **"It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!"**

The Ladder / Continuum of Collapse Awareness

Paul Chefurka, 2012

www.paulchefurka.ca

Dead asleepOne fundamental problem.....Many problems.....Interconnections.....Predicament



Written in 2012, this ladder appears to be from the starting point of someone living a “normal” life (relatively privileged, “Minority Global North”), generally unaffected (as yet) by any material aspect of collapse.

	Column 1 Mainstream	Column 2 Business as Usual but Greener	Column 3 Emergency	Column 4 Collapse Aware
Paradigm	Business as Usual. Yes, it's a problem – but 'in the future' and 'elsewhere' Can kicking	Everybody must do their bit. Renewables, fly less, eat less meat Geo-engineering & Carbon Capture Work towards 2050 Paris Agreement targets Perceived as a 'crisis' but not an existential threat	Non-Violent Direct Action required as this is existential threat Peaceful civil disobedience Extinction Rebellion, School Strikers, Earth Movement Mitigation and Adaptation If we wait for Governments it will be too late Transformative Adaptation	Too late for mitigation-only due to locked-in warming and feedback loops Prepare now for community resilience – as well as mitigation in order to 'extend the glide', and 'soften the landing' Deep Adaptation Minimize suffering Psycho-spiritual approaches We need to build community resilience
Political & Economic System	Industrial Growth & Extractive Neo-Liberal Capitalism	BUILD BACK BETTER Capitalism	Circular & Regenerative Economy e.g. Doughnut Citizens Assemblies & Local Governance Mutual Aid & Community Building	Business As Usual System and 'civilised' society collapses – probably messy and very different depending on where you live Any new economy will be hyper-local and community-based
What's Most Important Now?	Recovering Economy post-Covid	Net-Zero by 2050 Being perceived as a 'leader' – resulting in much greenwashing	Advocate and campaign for radical system change Transformative Adaptation	Adaptation & Preparation now for climate-resilience Deep Adaptation Build community resilience
Likely Outcome?	Carbon emissions still growing. Tipping points passed, 3 – 4 degrees warming baked in	Lots of Greenwashing Economic Growth still the sacred cow	Preparing and Adapting as best we can <i>May result in transition to a better way of life ... and what do you think?</i>	Much suffering; social injustice; conflict over scarce resources; mass migration; famine; authoritarian governments? Dramatic drop in human population <i>May result in transition to a better way of life (albeit with much suffering in the process)</i>
Paul Chefurka: Stage of Awakening	Asleep	Awareness of one fundamental problem – usually carbon or other GHG emissions	Awareness of many problems – and interconnectedness of these	Awareness that our predicaments encompass all aspects of Life – including the 'stories' of our industrialised civilization, and the stories individuals have created about who they are. Pro Life (all Life – not just human). Realisation: we ARE nature , and that it is not simply a resource and dumping ground for humans Reconnecting with our deeper selves, each other, and all of Nature A shift from 'I' to 'We'

Dead asleep

- Sees no fundamental problems, just some shortcomings in human organization, behavior & morality
- Can be fixed with the proper attention to rule-making
- Lives happily, occasional outbursts of annoyance at the system

One fundamental problem

- One problem mobilizes and engages attention completely – climate change, overpopulation, river pollution etc.
- May see everything through that lens
- May become ardent & vocal activists for chosen cause, blind to others

Awareness of many problems

- Allows in more evidence from other domains, awareness of complexity and of systems begins to grow
- Worries about prioritization of problems re immediacy & impact – job security, cost of living, environment
- Views problem space as already complex enough, effort must be on solving the "highest priority" problem

Awareness of interconnections between many problems

- Realization that a solution in one domain may worsen a problem in another
- Marks the beginning of large-scale system-level thinking
- Marks the transition from thinking of a set of problems to a predicament
- Possibility that there may not be a solution begins to raise its head
- Withdraws into small personal circles of like-minded individuals for sharing & sense-making

Awareness that the predicament encompasses all aspects of life

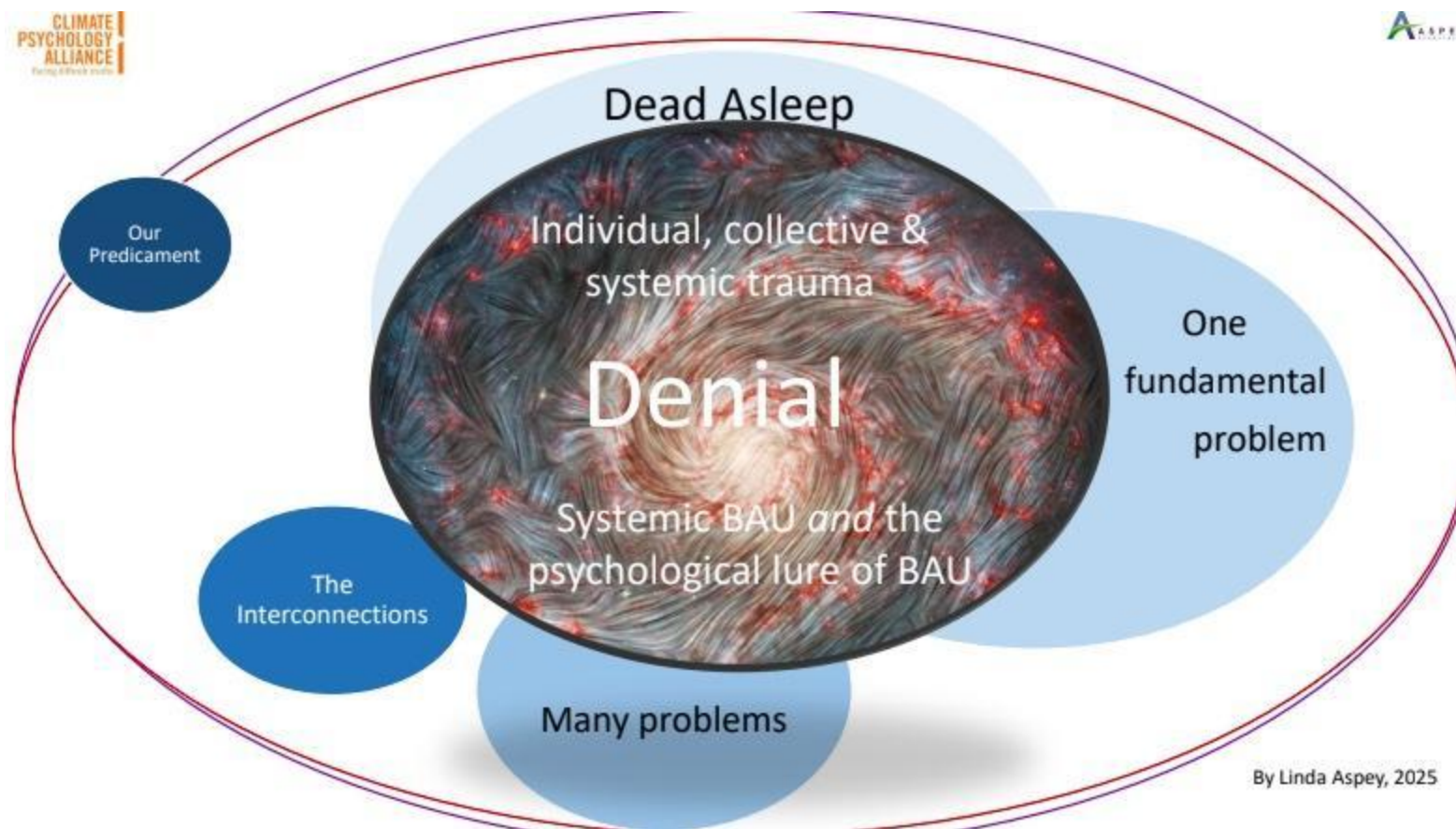
- Includes everything we do, how we do it, relationships with each other, other lives and lifeforms, & planet Earth
- Floodgates open, and no problem is exempt from consideration or acceptance
- Concept of a "solution" is seen through, and cast aside as a waste of effort
- Real risk that depression will set in - hope for tomorrow usually lies in our ability to solve problems today –hope may be replaced by the “suffocating darkness of despair”

STAGES OF AWARENESS



Dean Walker of www.livingresilience.net
Video at <https://tinyurl.com/stagesofawareness>

Exit full screen (f)



Whats to be done, and how to be with this?

Whilst individuals may need support to increase their resilience to “bear the unbearable”, interventions to reduce suffering need to be on a systemic level rather than an individual one. Decisive global action to reduce CO2 emissions is therefore the appropriate ‘treatment’ for eco-anxiety, not medication or interventions to eradicate the discomfort.

If eco-anxiety is treated as a pathology, **‘then the forces of denial will have won’** says Graham Lawton (2019) in the [New Scientist](#). He goes on to say that **“what we are witnessing isn’t a tsunami of mental illness, but a long-overdue outbreak of sanity.”**

Or, to put it another way, as Jiddhu Krishnamurti stated back in the 60’s **“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society”**

And when distress comes from the so-called “Snowflake” generation?” May I apologise - on behalf of the “Boomer” generation? Our mechanisms for denial are so very well rehearsed and were maintained during a long period of minimal news coverage, that’s maybe why we don’t detect our anxiety in the way you do despite the current tsunami of threatening news.

Anxious snowflakers are as precious as “canaries in the mine” As mainstream business as usual (BAU) continues to “dig, baby, dig” we are reminded by youth to bear witness to the predicament we have dug ourselves into !

Thank you, and hoping to be back with the Ecological
Self meditation to finish the evening together