

# Climate-Informed Counselling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – A Living Document

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We live and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - a time of climate crisis, increasingly frequent and severe environmental emergencies, and accelerating species extinction. This paper highlights key issues in the field of Climate Counselling/Psychotherapy at this time. It is designed as a tool for members of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) who are seeking to increase their capacity to work with clients on climate issues and to reinforce their personal resolve to do this work. Drawing on the vast, far-ranging, and quickly growing body of literature in the field of climate psychotherapy (including ecopsychology/ecopsychotherapy), the authors (all of whom are practicing counsellors/psychotherapists within the CCPA) have included references to articles, books, and organizations that they have found to be particularly useful.

### Background

The first CCPA webinars on climate counselling/psychotherapy were conducted by Nancy Blair in the Fall of 2021 and addressed the topics of eco-grief and eco-anxiety. Based on the attendance at these webinars, it was obvious that many CCPA members were already thinking about this field of work. Jess Diener and Nancy Blair built on this interest and started the CCPA Peer Support Group for Climate Counselling/Psychotherapy in January, 2022. A number of participants led the monthly Peer Group meetings covering topics such as: Climate and Career Counselling (Trevor Lehmann); Climate and Narrative Therapy (Bonney Elliot); Selected Papers in the Field (Nancy Blair); Nature Therapy (Laura Cohen); Youth and Climate (Julia Clarke); Selected Writers, including Charles Eisenstein and Leslie Davenport (Patti Lott), and EFT for Relaxation (Patti Lott). This group has continued, and is scheduled to meet until June, 2024. Trevor Lehmann also started the Climate-Informed Book Club in the Fall of 2022. Last, but certainly not least, the [CCPA Climate-Informed Chapter](#) was launched in the Spring of 2023 with Trevor Lehmann as the founding, and subsequently elected President.

Climate-informed work within the CCPA has been shaped collaboratively by the members who have participated in the Chapter, as well as by the Peer Group. This work has also been influenced by international leaders in this field, especially the [Climate Psychology Alliance \(CPA\) - UK](#), [Climate Psychology Alliance \(CPA\) – North America](#), [Psychology for a Safe Climate in Australia](#), and individuals such as Holloway et al. (2022), Roszak, who is considered the founder of the field of ecopsychology (Roszak, Kanner & Gomes, 1995), and others who came before (Shepard, 1982).

### Climate-Informed Counselling and Psychotherapy in the Context of the Climate Crisis in Canada

The following is an elucidation of the key ecological and social principles with which climate-informed counsellors/psychotherapists (henceforth referred to as counsellors) should orient themselves when working with clients or groups in Canada. While it seems unlikely that any one counsellor will be an expert in every area, someone who plans to dive deeper into this work may wish to at least be aware of the range of issues that clients may raise in the therapy room.

To this end, the authors assert that climate-informed counsellors/psychotherapists would recognize that:

#### The Climate Crisis is Scientifically Undeniable

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (2023) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) is an eight-year long project that provides the best available scientific assessment of climate change. It provides a very grim look at our situation, and makes clear that the reality of climate change is a global consensus within the scientific community. At the same time, the report also suggests a number of possible solutions that can reduce the impacts of the climate emergency. In Canada, the Federal

government has released the Canadian National Adaptation Strategy: Building Resilient Communities and a Strong Economy (2023) in order to translate some of these principles to the Canadian context.

The Climate Crisis is Anthropogenic (i.e., The Result of Human Activity)

The IPCC (2023) also makes clear that climate change is a result of human activity. Humans' impact on the environment is driven in part by an anthropocentric worldview, a perspective explained by Blanche Verlie (2022) as

... the belief that humans are separate or separable from, unique in comparison to, and more important than, the non-human world. Some of our apparent unique qualities include the possession of minds (and thus consciousness, spirit, knowledge and intelligence) and of agency (the ability to influence change in the world). ... This myth of human cognitive supremacy also works to justify the belief that humans can and should fully comprehend and control the non-human world. (p. 4)

To the extent that we as humans live by this belief, we live in ways that change the climate. Human agency to change the climate presents both challenges and opportunities however, as our agency allow us to generate solutions to our present crisis.

Mental Health is Being Increasingly Impacted by the Climate Crisis and by Climate Emergencies

This has been clearly demonstrated in the literature, such as by Doherty and Clayton (2011) and Hickman et al. (2021) with their focus on youth, and a recent study by the Learning for a Sustainable Future Institute (2022). The Government of Canada clearly identified that this issue is a problem in [Canada's Adaptation Strategy to Climate Change](#) (June 27, 2023). Also in Canada, the Canadian Psychology Association underlined the importance of psychological science in addressing the climate emergency in their Position Paper, "Addressing Climate Change in Canada: The Importance of Psychological Science" (McCunn et al., 2021). It is important to note that research is starting to demonstrate that certain climate emergencies, e.g., wildfires and smoke (Pappas, A., 2023) have both physical and mental effects on those experiencing them.

While it is becoming increasingly clear that the climate crisis and climate emergencies are having an impact on individuals' mental health, it is not always clear to the individual clients themselves that this is what they are experiencing. In the clinical setting, clients may bring up issues that are obviously related to climate issues without recognizing these issues are connected to our changing climate. For example, a client may express existential despair and an inability to make decisions, yet not be aware of the extent to which climate issues are contributing to this distress. In such cases, the counsellor may need to help the client to understand the impact that the climate crisis is having on them.

Research Demonstrates that all counsellors, NoMatter Their Training, Have the Means to Support Clients Working on Climate Issues

Research demonstrates that all counsellors/psychotherapists, no matter their training, have the ability to support clients working on climate issues. Baudon and Jachen's (2021) scoping review on eco-anxiety spoke of five major themes that a therapist could tap into, despite their specialization, three of which are: fostering client resilience, encouraging emotional support through group work, and developing practitioner's inner work and education. Within our CCPA context, Trevor Lehmann's specialization in career counselling is a good example of someone who has brought climate-informed work into his area of expertise, both through his clinical work as a career counsellor and through the delivery of webinars and

trainings. In the Peer Support Group, Bonney Elliott, a narrative therapist, has demonstrated on several occasions the ways that she brings climate-informed awareness into her work.

Societal and economic issues such as Colonialism, Systemic Racism, Consumerism, and Wealth inequality are all linked to the destruction of our environment and of our sources of life.

The climate-informed counsellor recognizes the intersectionality of these issues as they relate to client identity and experience, and acknowledges that the climate emergency is inexorably linked to societal issues. A client's climate distress, for example, may be intertwined with experiences of social injustice and economic disadvantage that mutually reinforce and amplify each other. Moreover, the climate-informed counsellor recognizes that this intersectionality exists on the local through to the global level, such that various groups and populations (such as the Global South) suffer disproportionately from these social, economic, and ecological issues.

In addressing these intersecting issues, the climate-informed counsellor invites and affirms a range of voices, perspectives, and worldviews, especially those of Indigenous and First Peoples. Both from a social justice and an environmental perspective, the climate-informed counsellor honours these diverse and distinctive voices, helping to foster an open and collaborative dialogue that is both anti-colonial and conducive to a more creative and respectful approach to the Earth and its inhabitants - both human and more-than-human.

As members of the CCPA, counsellors are encouraged to hear and learn from the experience and expertise of the CCPA Indigenous Chapter, and to support their campaigns, as a step towards the open, collaborative, and informed dialogue described above.

There is a vast and growing body of literature on the sociological, political and intersection aspects of climate. The following is a selection of books that focus, in whole or in part, on Canada:

- This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate by Naomi Klein
- A Good War: Mobilizing Canada for the Climate Emergency by Seth Klein
- The End of this World: Climate Justice in So-Called Canada by Look et al.
- Restoring the Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth by Topa & Narvaez
- What Really Counts: The Case for a Sustainable and Equitable Economy by Coleman
- Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future by Wainwright & Mann
- Future on Fire: Capitalism and the Politics of Climate Change by Camfield

#### Competencies: Preparing to Help Clients Care for Themselves and the Earth

This paper highlights key issues being discussed in the climate-informed field to support counsellors in developing their awareness of these issues. This awareness, in turn, will help counsellors to better prepare for their work with clients. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each issue in depth, the authors have provided a limited number of references for anyone who wishes to dive deeper into a specific topic.

Having thereby acquired an increased awareness and familiarity with the topics raised in this paper, the authors contend that a competent climate-informed counsellor/psychotherapist be able to:

Assess Clients' Mental Health Through a Climate-Informed Lens, as well as Their Cognitive, Behavioural, and Emotional Responses to the Climate Crisis Through a Mental Health Lens

In *Earth Emotions: Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, Glenn Albrecht (2019), has been foundational in giving language to the range of emotions a person might experience in relation to the Earth. When considering such emotions in the context of the climate crisis, often the focus is on “eco-anxiety”, sometimes accompanied by “eco-grief” (Burton-Christie, 2011; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). However, clients may also experience feelings such as anger, fear, terror, dread, melancholy, guilt, and despair, in addition to feelings on the other side of the spectrum such as hope, determination, and commitment. The Climate Psychology Alliance has been clear in their messaging that these emotions (and eco-anxiety in particular) represent a rational response to the climate emergency and are not pathological.

Indeed, there is an evolving discussion about these “climate emotions.” Kurth and Pihkala (2022) contributed to our understanding of eco-anxiety by saying that:

The authors also find that a specific form of eco-anxiety, “practical eco-anxiety,” can be a deeply valuable emotional response to threats like climate change: when experienced at the right time and to the right extent, practical eco-anxiety not only reflects well on one’s moral character but can also help advance individual and planetary wellbeing. (p. 61)

The question is not just about having feelings, then, but about how someone uses these feelings. In some cases, individuals use these feelings to move to action (Stanley et al., 2021). From this perspective, one of the roles of the counsellor is to support the client in determining how best to address and channel the particular emotions that they are experiencing.

Assess Clients' Climate-Related Feelings, Emotions, and Challenges in Relation to Their Overall Presentation

Counsellors recognize that a client’s climate-related distress may amplify, displace, or otherwise interact with other challenges that the client may be facing. Counsellors often find that clients move back and forth between climate-related and personal issues.

In addition to the competencies outlined above, a climate-informed counsellor is also aware of the following:

The Range of Psychotherapeutic Approaches that are Currently Recommended for Supporting the Many Feelings, Emotions, and Behaviours that a Client May Experience in Relation to, or in Conjunction with, the Climate Emergency

Counsellors may advocate concrete responsive actions, such as encouraging emergency preparedness, as a way to help clients reduce various climate emotions (Fyke & Weaver, 2023). A counsellor may also choose to use therapeutic approaches to work with clients suffering from eco-anxiety (Grose, 2020; Ray, 2020), or a combination of both concrete and therapeutic approaches. There are a range of therapeutic approaches being used at this time, including: looking at how to reduce overall stress, as well as the physical and mental effects of climate distress (Susteren & Colino, 2020); looking at therapy in a social justice context (Doherty & Clayton, 2021); the “gift of tears” (Burton-Christie, 2011); and looking at the overall impact of climate and environmental crises on mental health (Thoma, Rohleder & Rohner, 2021).

Counsellors will understandably be most comfortable using the therapies, approaches, and treatments with which they are most familiar, (e.g., ACT, DBT, ecopsychology, IFS, meditation, mindfulness, nature therapy, solution-focused therapy, somatic therapy, and talk therapy), and can adapt their practice as needed. It is important to remember, as practiced in talk therapy, that listening is essential. Clients are looking for a counsellor who understands what they are talking about and how they are feeling (Budziszewska & Jonsson, 2022).

### The Nature of Hope and Doomerism

The counsellor will likely hear clients express views ranging from hope to despair, and it is useful to be aware of what key authors are writing on this topic (Hayhoe, 2021; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Solnit, Young & Lutunatabua, 2023; Wray, 2022). An individual's views often move back and forth between hope and despair, and are influenced by factors such as what the individual believes, their personal issues, food and housing security, their health and the health of loved ones, their support network, and what is going on in the world around them. Counsellors, of course, will also have their own views, as well as personal feelings that may include hope and despair.

### Both Individual and Group Work are Important

The following three organizations (each taking a somewhat different approach) have been active for years and that have been proven effective in supporting climate distress:

- [CPA Climate Cafe](#)
- [Good Grief Network](#) - some of these programs are aimed at specific groups (Schmidt, Beau, & Rivera, 2023).
- [The Work that Connects - Jonna Macy](#)

It is also useful to watch for local groups. They may not have national or international reputations, but they can often be very effective as well in providing emotional support.

### Different Groups of People May Think About the Climate Crisis and Be Dealing with it in Different Ways

One group that consistently draws attention is youth. There is extensive research on the attitudes of youth towards climate change (Galway & Field, 2023), as well as regular media and youth advocacy expressing their views on the climate crisis. One topic that many counsellors encounter when working with youth (Goldman, 2022) is whether or not to have children (Wray, 2022).

### The Interplay Between the Climate Crisis in General and Specific Climate Emergencies

The dramatic and frightening increase in wildfires across Canada in the summer of 2023 impacted many Canadians, both directly and indirectly. Bratu et al. (2022) completed a study of British Columbians following the 2021 heat dome that clearly showed the heat dome increased climate change anxiety among British Columbians. Furthermore, it is quite possible that a counsellor may themselves be facing a climate emergency while they are working with clients in a similar situation. Not all counsellors will be trained to work with trauma; however, it is becoming increasingly important that we be trauma-informed and that we be aware of what is within our scope of practice.

## Knowing When You Need Support to Work with Your Own Feelings

The role of the counsellor is to provide a safe and contained space for clients. To do this, we need to be aware and in control of our own feelings (Davenport, 2017; Gillespie, 2020). Silva and Coburn (2023) address this dialectic between the personal and professional when working with clients. It bears remembering that climate-informed therapy is a new field that is often being created by those who are working with clients at the same time as they are going through the climate crisis and climate emergencies themselves. This work can be very difficult at times and self-care is essential (Pihkala, 2023).

Support may be accessed individually by reading, going to one's own counsellor, meeting with groups, and/or gathering with like-minded clinicians. Within the CCPA, you are invited to participate in the Climate-Informed Chapter and attend their Peer support group, and/or attend climate webinars. Consider the words of environmentalist David Suzuki's statement that "despair is a luxury that we can't afford" (Morton, 2023).

## Ways to Express Environmental Values in the Workplace

Counsellors can express their environmental values in their workplaces. There are many ways this can be done. Examples from the Climate-informed Counsellor chapter membership include Graham Nichols, who gave a presentation to the April, 2023 Peer Group on ways to make an office setting carbon neutral (personal communication, April 18, 2023). Trevor Lehmann has presented and written on connecting and promoting organized labour initiatives to combat climate-change and promote social justice through the national organization [CERIC](#).

## Counsellors/Psychotherapists Must Be Aware of the Range of Ways that They, and Their Clients, May Relate to Nature

How an individual relates to nature impacts how they feel both mentally and physically as well as how they live their life (Bodnar et al., 2023). In the words of Howard Clinebell (1996):

... the quality of our continuing relationship with nature is a major dynamic in our sense of being firmly grounded versus feeling "up in the air" or unrooted. Thus, our relationship with the earth, mother-father of all living things, is an often-ignored but foundational factor influencing our overall wellness and the wholeness of our identity. (p. 27)

David Suzuki (2022) explores the place of humans in nature, and Robin Wall Kimmerer deepens the understanding of this relationship in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013).

## Ethics: Questions that Climate-Informed Counsellors/Psychotherapists May Face

As counsellors working within the CCPA, we must work within the CCPA Code of Ethics (2020). As individuals living in Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we, as well as our colleagues, families, friends, neighbours (both human and other-than-human) are affected by the climate crisis. We share this reality with our clients. All of us, either now or in the future, will be feeling the concrete realities of the climate crisis, as well as the emotions resulting from it.

The following are ethical questions that we bring to CCPA's members and leadership for reflection, discussion, and action. Many, if not all of us were trained to not disclose our personal feelings and actions to clients, except very occasionally and for a specific therapeutic purpose. Has the climate emergency changed that way of working? What is the role of a counsellor at this point in human history (Gillespie, 2020; Mowatt, 2022)?

Most counsellors are familiar with the Feminist Therapeutic model of counselling with its clearly stated belief system and ideology. Working from that orientation, the counsellor is clear from the start that they operate within a specific belief system. In *Unruly Therapeutic*, Foluke Taylor (2023), a black feminist in the 'traditional' feminist approach, demonstrates a profound and creative approach to working within such a belief system. Those interested in considering how social justice could be made an integral part of counselling/psychotherapy, and in how psychology might be decolonized, may want to read *In Liberation Psychology*:

*Theory, Method, Practice and Social Justice* (Comas-Diaz & Rivera, 2020).

As counsellors engage more deeply in climate-informed work, they are likely to find themselves facing the following ethical questions. Given the newness of climate-informed work, it is not expected that any counsellor would necessarily have a fully developed response to these questions. However, considering these questions in the context of the personal and professional supports discussed above will help the counsellor start to prepare for these situations when they arise.

As a window into the issues discussed below, consider the following situation: you are at a meeting dedicated to protecting your neighbourhood lake. Your daughter and son are with you. Your client, who has come to you for help dealing with crippling climate anxiety, is also at the meeting. You did not talk about this meeting when she met with you earlier in the week, and neither of you expected to encounter each other there. You both care deeply about this lake.

#### Dual Relationships

In the situation given above, are you in a dual relationship with the client? How do you balance the personal and professional implications of this situation? What do you do? Do you stop attending these meetings? Do you stop working with the client? How do we balance your engagement with these issues outside the therapy room with our clinical work (Silva & Coburn, 2023)?

#### Self-Disclosure

A counsellor's decision whether or not to self-disclose is informed by whether the disclosure is beneficial for the client (Fyke & Weaver, 2023). Is this principle affected by the reality that counsellors and clients are all 'in this' together? Is it beneficial for the client to know that the counsellor also has anxiety around the climate crisis? When is it beneficial for a client, who may be dealing with feelings of isolation and aloneness, to know that their counsellor also has those feelings and yet is living and thriving?

#### Scope of Practice

How do we as counsellors know when we are out of our depth and in need of backup? How do we know when we are 'over our head' while struggling with the effects of climate change and climate emergencies? What do we do? Who do we call? Do we have colleagues to back us up before we get into this situation?

#### Client Activism

Through our work, we help clients to move forward - to support them in developing agency and increasing wellbeing (Stanley et al., 2021). When we are working on climate issues, this may lead to a client wanting to act in some way. This raises the question of activism. If a client is interested in becoming an activist, it is the role of a counsellor to work with them to understand what types of activism might be best for them. For some clients this will mean transforming their angst to action (Salamon, 2023).

## Counsellor/Psychotherapist Activism – The Right to Express Our Beliefs and to Protest

Similarly, those active in climate-informed therapy can determine the type and level of their engagement in climate work. How do we support ourselves and our peers who decide to protest? How can the CCPA best support the membership in this regard? If a counsellor received legal repercussions and/or a criminal record from protesting or other direct action, will their licensure be protected? Is this something that we would want to discuss within the CCPA? In such situations, what responsibilities are borne by the CCPA, regulatory colleges, insurers, and counsellors?

### Where Do We Go from Here?

This paper has attempted to provide information, insights, and questions to help guide the climate-informed counsellor. We are on the edge of a new world and a new field of psychotherapy. We as CCPA members are faced with the necessity of working with clients dealing with climate issues while we are also facing the effects of the climate crisis and emergencies ourselves. We face these challenges personally, as well as within our families, our workplaces, and our neighbourhoods - both in our hearts and our minds.

At this time, there is very little training on climate-informed counselling/psychotherapy in Canadian academic institutions. So, what do we do to support our members? What is our role? Where we go from here is up to us.

We end this paper with the following quotation from Mary-Jayne Rust (2020):

I also cannot deny there are things I hope for. My greatest hope is that we do not walk into the fires and the floods asleep. That as many people as possible are able to wake up and attend to the crisis at hand. That we can work together and support each other on this tumultuous journey we are on. That we can be tender with one another as the situation worsens. That we can keep returning to the present, over and over again, offering gratitude to the earth, over and over again, for all that we are given. Then maybe, just maybe, there is a chance of a way through that lies beyond our current ways of understanding the world. For me this is keeping faith rather than holding onto hope and leaving the door open to miracles. (p. 135)

September 2023

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