

# Is there a therapy for climate-change anxiety?

**Steffi Bednarek** calls for a collective response to a global ecological disaster

**I**n February 2019, BBC Current Affairs correspondent Aisling Gallagher interviewed Gestalt psychotherapist Steffi Bednarek about how she works with climate-change anxiety. This is an extended version of that interview.

**Aisling Gallagher:** You have written about psychotherapy and climate change and will be aware that the current predictions about our future have started to make a lot of people extremely anxious. Can you explain what climate-change anxiety is and how we should understand it?

**Steffi Bednarek:** I understand climate-change anxiety as heightened distress in response to the ecological, social and cultural threats we are facing in relation to changes in our climate system. I don't see anxiety about climate change as a problem to be solved or a condition to be medicated. To me, it's an important encounter with our awareness of our impact on the world and the reality that the world is facing a climate emergency.

More and more people are waking up to the damage we have caused to the planet and the challenges we now face. The reality is extremely scary to contemplate and anxiety is an inevitable and understandable consequence. The question is how we engage with our collective responses to these predictions.

**AG:** Is climate-change anxiety a recognised condition and if so, how long has it been recognised for?

**SB:** A 2017 report by the American Psychological Association references 'eco-anxiety' as a likely effect of climate change on our mental health.<sup>1</sup> I would like to stress that this is

not a 'disorder' but a reasonable and predictable response to a dangerous situation - one we need to wake up to in order to be able to mobilise.

I think we have to be very careful with the terms we chose. Terms like 'eco-anxiety', 'climate-change anxiety' or 'pre-traumatic stress' can be useful as they communicate complex dynamics quickly and tell us something about the psychological terrain we are navigating. On the other hand, these terms place basic human experiences in a clinical framework. Using clinical terms can make us feel there is something wrong with us for feeling distress in response to a serious threat.

Also, clinical language invites a clinical response. It opens the door for things to be measured, analysed and predicted. It suggests that there is an us and them. When we use a distanced, analytical language, we don't have to engage with the messiness of human turmoil. We bring to it an attitude that we can 'fix this', which is in line with our heroic culture, our individualistic outlook and our belief in scientific progress. In this context, anxiety is often treated as an individual malfunction that needs to be fixed. There is a whole industry of self-help books and quick-fix therapy interventions devoted to eradicating unwanted feelings. The irony is that we thereby attack the

parts of us that are sensitised to the fact that something is amiss.

I can't help but see the parallel between how we control our environment with pesticides and how we attempt to eradicate wild feelings in our inner ecology. We have turned nature, including human nature, into something we must wrestle to the ground in our attempt to be in control. I believe that climate change forces us to re-think the attitude we bring to our inner and outer landscapes. It shakes us out of our habitual ground and asks us to acknowledge the complexity of the interconnected relationships between the world and the human soul in a much deeper way than we have done for a long time.

So, personally, I would like us to depart from a clinical language and find a humbler stance, one that recognises our shared human fragility and our inter-relationship with a world that is on the brink of collapse.

**AG:** How does climate-change anxiety manifest in your counselling room?

**SB:** I have seen only a few clients who have presented overtly with climate-change anxiety so far. The ones that did were exposed to the information professionally, either as journalists, activists, scientists or students. Their anxiety ▶

*'I would like to stress that this is not a "disorder" but a reasonable and predictable response to a dangerous situation'*





manifested in distress about images of disaster affecting themselves and their children and loved ones in the near future. What these clients suffered from most, apart from general anxiety symptoms, was a feeling of isolation, highlighted by what they perceived to be inertia in people around them. In our grief-phobic culture, these individuals carry the weight of the sorrows of the world for the rest of us and all too often they carry it alone. Some clients described mental health professionals treating their anxiety as unfounded, pathological and excessive. They didn't know how to find informed counsellors or psychotherapists and this heightened their sense of helplessness and feeling that there was no one to turn to.

Most people still avoid thinking about climate change, not because they don't care but because it is too overwhelming. We dissociate when we feel unable to deal with the enormity of the challenges we are facing. Weintrobe speaks about disavowal - a state where the person splits off uncomfortable knowledge so that it doesn't interfere with their everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Climate change reality is accepted, but its impact is minimised. This defence can lead us further and further away from accepting the dire state of affairs and our role within it. The more reality is systematically distorted or avoided, the more anxiety builds up unconsciously and the need for further disavowal increases. In this way, we maintain

emotional equilibrium but at a high cost to the Earth. And this makes our situation dangerous. When the splitting is no longer possible, there is either further defence through anger or projection or collapse into anxiety. This is what we work with as psychotherapists.

I believe that we currently live in a trauma field that affects all of us. The American psychiatrist Lise van Susteren has coined the term 'pre-traumatic stress disorder',<sup>3</sup> which she describes as 'a before-the-fact version of classic PTSD'. It is about anticipated trauma rather than trauma we have already experienced. She later changed the word 'disorder' to 'condition' to make it clear that, in her eyes, it would be disordered not to feel stress, given the information we have. So the question becomes, what support do we collectively need in order not to freeze and anaesthetise ourselves against this context of so much loss?

There is an emotional range within which most people can sustain strong feelings without either dissociating and numbing at one end of the spectrum or going into blind panic at the other. This window of tolerance describes the range within which we can engage with difficult truths while staying connected. Therapists trained in trauma work will know how to support self-regulation through mind-body and nervous system regulation. This is important work. In the case of anticipated trauma, it is important to remember the concept of post-traumatic growth, which tells us that positive, far-reaching psychological shifts can occur as a result of experiencing adversity. Individuals' personal resilience to withstand trauma is increased through connection to strong social networks and supportive relationships. The building of community can therefore be seen as a way of increasing collective resilience.

In the face of trauma and turmoil, what we need most is connection - connection to each other, connection to community, to friends, to nature and to ourselves and compassion for others and ourselves. This is lacking for many people in our culture. Anxiety becomes problematic if the conditions needed for individuals to be heard and supported are absent. This forces sorrow and pain underground and it can then become unmanageable or harden into violence or persecution of otherness.

I believe that we need recourse to safe spaces that can hold the raw, undefined edge of our fear, grief and outrage. There is so much emphasis today on getting rid of unwanted

## I JUST SEE NATURE COLLAPSING AROUND ME

I came across the term 'solastalgia' a few years ago. It is a relatively new term that describes a form of mental or existential distress (anxiety) caused by environmental degradation, mainly climate change. After reading an article about it,<sup>13</sup> I realised that I have been 'suffering' from such a condition for a long time. In retrospect, I can say that my life has been marked by feelings (and concerns) about environmental damage.

As a result, I decided, at a very young age, not to have children. After 35 years of working in the field of biology and living through a lot of ecological changes, I think that decision was the most important I have ever taken.

I am a marine biologist and a university lecturer in environmental science in Columbia, South America. Lately, I am having a really difficult time, as my students struggle to deal with the data I present to them. Many simply close themselves off and refuse to accept it. I have also stopped talking to my colleagues about the subject, simply because I get a lot of negative responses. 'Fatalist' is the least negative of the adjectives they use to describe what I consider an honest approach to the crisis.

In my classes, I talk about cognitive dissonance, optimism bias, in-group loyalty and out-group hostility and death terror management to try to explain why most people deny or put off reality, but that does not seem to help much. I feel frustrated about not being able to convey the urgency and magnitude of the crisis, and I feel like I am wasting my time altogether. That is a terrible thing to feel when you love what you do - teaching. So now my own solastalgia is at its peak.

For me personally, environmental grief has been the most difficult emotion to deal with. We live in a

grief-phobic society and I am not separated from that. I am afraid that any societal collapse will result in a lot of violence. My wife and I sometimes think about what we will do if society collapses. She really does not want to talk about it at all, and when she does, it is because she sees my preoccupations getting out of control. Fortunately, we don't have kids to worry about.

And that is where I am at a loss. I have no clue about what to do. Although I try to occupy my mind with positive thoughts, the despair continues to linger over my head 24/7. Every day I walk my dogs in the green tropical mountains where we live, and I can see nature showing many signs of change.

I do not enjoy my walks anymore. I just see nature collapsing around me, and it is all I can think about. Sometimes I catch myself thinking horrible things such as 'I hope we humans go extinct soon, so nature can recover faster'.

My therapist helps sometimes, but she herself is not convinced things are that bad, although she does not tell me that directly. I can see it in her eyes, and in the tiny facial expressions she makes when I am talking about these issues. Sometimes I think I am wasting my time talking to her about it; I am sure she is not very interested in what I am saying. (It is something we have discussed, and she knows I have written this!)

I don't know where to go with my grief. Grief is a communal issue. Why would anyone grieve in solitude? However, that is what most environmentally-aware people like us have to do all the time for fear of being ridiculed. I feel fortunate to be able to interact with people on the Climate Psychology Alliance network and I hope, with time, I will learn to live with chronic solastalgia.

**Juan Camilo Jaramillo**

emotions. What I am proposing is the opposite - it is about building our capacities to stay open and responsive to what life lays at our collective feet. This can't be an individual endeavour. We are facing this collectively and need to think about collective responses.

**AG: Has climate change awareness changed the way you work with clients?**

**SB:** For a long time, I felt I lacked the skills to know when and how to address wider world issues with clients as this was not something that featured in my training, the conferences I attended or the journals I read. Mostly it seemed as if the aperture of what constitutes an adequate focus in the consulting room was too narrow for climate change to emerge as a valid topic. Elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> I have discussed how our profession's individualistic perspective tends to individualise the client's experience and focus on the client's perceptions of the world rather than the state of the world itself. Psychotherapy may therefore be at risk of dissociation from the fact that our lives are intricately interwoven with the living systems of the world and that these systems are breaking down.

I started to experiment with subtle ways to widen the focus while being careful not to force anything on the client. Many personal fears and wounds can be tied into larger, collective threads. Noticing where individual lives touch a larger story seemed to open up new ground. I also realised that many clients talk about the weather to ease themselves into a session. It was often me who moved the conversation on with the question 'So, how are you?' It was as if I were suggesting that the weather was not an adequate topic for psychotherapy. With some clients, all it took was for me to stay with the topic that they brought up. We soon ended up speaking about the ways they anaesthetise and cut off from nature or the state of the world. Once the numbing was named, their memories of caring deeply often flooded in, as well as a longing to connect to something larger than their self. Many clients re-connected with an energy to engage with the world.

I have started to view climate-change anxiety and its related disavowal as a threshold emotion that can lead to a larger awareness of what really matters to us and guide us into action. In order to facilitate this process, I had to get myself out of the way and re-frame my own perspective of what constituted an appropriate focus in the consulting room.

The issue is not anxiety itself, but how we meet this anxiety. Our symptoms tell us that

'Our symptoms tell us that something is amiss. We don't want to get rid of them; we need to find a way to listen to them'

something is amiss. We don't want to get rid of them; we need to find a way to listen to them, to find out what they are asking of us. The symptoms are the gateway through which we find our way to meaningful action. The first stage is to welcome them rather than to fight them.

We may need to create communal spaces where we get to name our fears and our fragile hope. Personally, I believe that a certain degree of derangement is needed in order to shake us out of our dysfunctional ground. We need to wake up from this sleepy state we are in and support each other in finding a multiplicity of ways to re-ensoul our inner and our outer worlds, and we need to do it swiftly.

In her book, *Hope in the Dark*, Rebecca Solnit encourages us to actively mobilise to bring about the change we want to see in the world, regardless of the likelihood of success.<sup>5</sup> I think these times challenge us to find the willingness to be of service to the things in life that are bigger than our own personal concerns, our own lifespan and even the lifespan of the people we love. Our hearts need to get wider and we may need to learn to love more fiercely.

It has been important for me not to feel alone on this journey. The Climate Psychology Alliance has been a wonderfully supportive network<sup>6</sup> and the work of many colleagues has informed my thinking, such as Rust,<sup>7</sup> Lertzman,<sup>8</sup> Macy and Brown,<sup>9</sup> Randall,<sup>10,11</sup> and Weller,<sup>12</sup> to name a few.

**AG:** How would you work with someone who displays debilitating levels of climate-change anxiety?

**SB:** In psychotherapy I listen to the story that the symptoms hold. This is frequently a counter-cultural story that nobody wants to hear, including the client themselves. Behind the anxiety there is often deep grief and anger. Once we touch these forgotten parts with our

compassion, the heartbreak that lies hidden in their depths can slowly reveal itself. Our broken hearts have the potential to open us to a wider sense of self, one capable of seeing through the confinements that keep us separated from others and the world. If we dare to move through our despair, our heart can break open and become big enough to embrace life in its darkness as well as its richness. We often see the world differently as a result and have something to offer to the community in return.

But this kind of work requires adequate containment. It is hard to grieve without communal space. We may need to remember old communal practices in this time of collective need. I have started to offer communal grief rituals and councils on climate change. It is hard to carry the enormity of what is going on in the world in isolation. Our feelings need containment, relationship, friendship and a sense of belonging. In modern life most of us have been socialised out of our deeply shared sense of connection. Instead, we rely on what Francis Weller calls 'secondary satisfactions',<sup>12</sup> such as individual power, prestige, wealth, status, possessions, hedonistic pleasures, stimulants and so forth, to give us a sense of self-worth. These are things that, however much we get of them, will never be enough. To sate the hunger that remains, we have depleted the world.

The paradigms we live by can be changed. I believe that we need to educate our hearts, cultivate the ability to stay with uncertainty, tame our self-focused drives and play our active part in the larger community of all living presences. We need to re-learn how to live in right relationship with the other-than-human world and with each other. Acts of kindness and engagement can keep us grounded and help us to re-ensoul the broken places in our local culture. We don't need to mend the whole world; we just need to remember to act with integrity in consistent and ordinary ways and live as though our lives depended on the choices we make. Because they do. ■

#### Steffi Bednarek About the author

**Steffi** is a Gestalt psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor in private practice in Brighton. She has been head of counselling and mental health in higher education and has worked as an international consultant and trainer for several government ministries, the Council of Europe and the World Health Organization. She is a regular consultant to organisations and offers 'councils on climate change' and grief rituals for groups and organisations.

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