**Cognitive Therapists and the Climate Emergency: Using Emotions Positively**

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Relevant skills: understanding behaviour, motivation, behaviour change and barriers to behaviour change. The relationship between rational thinking, emotion and sense of self.

**Thinking and Emotion**

We see ourselves as rational, and coherent. This is an illusion! We are hard wired for our emotions to take over; our OK sense of self is based on feeling safe and contained moment by moment. When threat seems to disturb this, past experience gets added to the current crisis.

**Immediate v. more distant threat**

Our rational minds can appreciate impelling but not immediate threats such as climate crisis. When this is translated into major lifestyle changes now, that switches to the sort of threat that mobilises emotion and body to defend the status quo. “You mean I have to give up my car?......”

**Paralysis and Denial**

Further, where the enormity of the climate threat is felt as a destabilisation of the good enough sense of self, the emotion/body system hastens to shut out the threat, leading to paralysis and denial

**Turning the Problem into the Solution**

Emotion and body take over in the service of short term feeling OK – and do so ‘under the radar’ of conscious awareness; this is the problem. Conscious use of the power of our emotions can be the solution. Left to themselves, emotion/body controls us even though we might not realize it. We can consciously take back that power.

**Emotions triggered by Climate Emergency**

Fear, anger and sadness, followed by guilt when recognising our complicity are the most obvious ones.

**Fear** can be the starting point for action, but only the starting point. If it is allowed too much scope it will paralyse. A bit of fear will mobilise us to defend.

**Sadness.** Meeting sadness head on and allowing the tears to flow is the natural way for humans to come to terms with what is unbearable. We need that healing – but again, it must be limited. Action is needed too.

**Anger.** Anger mobilises the body for positive action. The dangers inherent in anger are obvious so it needs careful management. Anger under your control can use the body’s energy for action and the accompanying courage to work on change.

**Guilt**. Like fear, has some motive power, but needs to be strictly limited.

**The positive power of relationship and expansive emotions**

All these emotions and others are about managing relationship. The emotions listed above focus on defence; preserving our fragile sense of self; on our relationship with ourselves. Other emotions operate in the opposite way. They enable us to open out beyond being narrowly centred in our self-consciousness and to embrace relationship. Joy, love and wonder are obvious examples. These emotions have a crucial part to play in our need to accept responsibility for our planet.

**Wonder**

Wonder, (or Awe as Matthew Fox who has written eloquently about all this would put it – Fox 1983) is a natural response to the beauty of the earth and her creatures.

**Love**

Love for our planet, our fellow humans, our children and their children down the generations; the non-human creatures with whom we share the planet;- all this is crucial. Allied with the other emotions this gives the self-transcending motive force to make a difference.

**Eco-anxiety**

Love means responsibility for the beloved, and where love of earth meets the climate emergency, this responsibility can feel crushing, leading to fear, withdrawal, depression. As with all emotions, there is no straight ‘right way’ but a dialectical dance, that needs to be managed in what DBT calls our ‘Wise Mind’ (Linehan 1993), in the service of both living, as far as possible, in a way that fosters a good future both for ourselves and for the planet.

**How to use the emotions positively in this way**

Human cognition shuttles constantly between its rational and its emotional/body systems. The skill of mindfulness can be developed to help us steer the rational side that knows the bigger picture, and appreciates the crisis, into taking control. The body’s threat mode can be calmed by breathing

**Conclusion**

By understanding the human being and the emotions, cognitive behavioural therapists have much to offer to the vital work of facing up to and addressing the climate emergency. The BABCP is meeting this challenge with the foundation of the Climate Change SPIG. Do join our next online event on Thursday 18th May at 7.00 p.m. (details to follow).

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Fox, M. (1983) *Original Blessing*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Co.

Linehan, M. (1993) *Cognitive Behavioural Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder,* New York: The Guildford Press.