**Relationship, Self and the Climate Crisis – What can Psychotherapy offer?** Isabel Clarke

**Abstract**:

*This article discusses the psychological dimensions of the climate crisis and the role of psychotherapy  in addressing it. The author outlines the psychological barriers that prevent adequate action, as individuals cling to familiar comforts and avoid facing longer term consequences.  Relationships with the earth and future generations are crucial  in understanding our response. Defensive emotions arising from the need for a stable self can obstruct climate  action. The author suggests that expansive emotions and collective action are essential for change.  Psychotherapy can help navigate these psychological complexities, promoting a sustainable  relationship with the planet. The article calls for greater engagement from the psychological  community to tackle this urgent issue.*

**Keywords**: Climate Crisis; Psychotherapy; Psychological Barriers; Collective Action.

**Introduction: the problem**

It is a cliché to say that the climate crisis is the greatest existential threat to the future of humankind’s  ability to survive on this planet, so why doesn’t that awareness translate into immediate remedial  action? 30 years ago, when I first got involved in climate activism (e.g. protesting against the road  through Twyford Down), the effects of climate change were predicted rather than evident. Now they  are upon us: flood, fire, melting ice, to say nothing of the wars raging around us whose origins can  ultimately be traced to scramble for diminishing resources, and the plagues born of unnatural  proximity between humans and other species. A truly apocalyptic scenario – yet our leaders, driven by  voting intentions among the wider public, roll back on their inadequate pledges towards mitigating the  looming disaster. The media, obedient to the interests of the billionaire class who own most of it,  successfully direct attention elsewhere.

Locked in lonely individuality it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge, and just  give up; take refuge in making life comfortable in the moment while turning our backs on the bigger  picture. We know that this is a short-term solution. The bigger picture does not go away if we ignore  it; on the contrary, it looms more threateningly and the means to keep it at bay, such as burying the  head in the very consumerism that hastens the destruction, are ultimately addictive because they can  never achieve their end.

As psychotherapists, we know about the fragility of the human self and its tendency to resort to such  means of self-protection. We know about the limits to our self-sufficiency; just how dependent we are  on the roles and relationships that provide that good-enough sense of self on which we rely, and how  disruption to this equilibrium can destabilise us. We know that the, often shaky, foundations of that  sense of self are built on relationship; relationship with our first caregivers and then broadening out to  embrace an ever-widening circle of relationships. The character of these relationships, whether  nurturing or destructive, affects us to the core. Much of our work centres on disentangling people  from the legacy of adverse earlier relationships. A key relationship here, which tends to get overlooked,  is our relationship  with the earth, and with the non-human creatures with whom we share this planet.  To participate in the modern world is to be in an ultimately destructive relationship here, along with  all the guilt and unease that accompanies a malign relationship. Another key relationship that it is painful to contemplate, is the relationship with those of our human race who will come after us; our  descendants, because they will need to survive on the planet we have bequeathed to them.

Relationship, and the healing of relationship is our business. The healing of the self-self relationship  lies at the heart of our work, as the people we see are invariably treating themselves badly, whether  through self-denigration, neglect, attack, or plots to kill (i.e. suicide). Other relationships are inevitably  drawn into this destructive tangle that needs tackling before the individual can reconstruct that good  enough sense of self needed to enable flourishing. The important people in their lives and their roles  in the world are the most obviously relevant containing relationships, but these are themselves  contained within wider, societal, national and professional relationships.

It is our dysfunctional relationship with the planet that needs addressing here. My own reading of the  paradoxical human response to the crisis outlined in the first paragraph is as follows. We might see  ourselves as unitary selves, but as the stability of our internal state is dependent on those roles and  relationships that contain us and give us context, connection is key. Gilbert (1992) emphasizes our  dependence on our perceived position in the primate hierarchy for inner coherence. Our newer brain,  rational, faculties, that have enabled us to so dominate our environment, only hold sway while we feel  safe and contained by our relational context. When that falters, we are hard wired for defensive  emotions, and at this point our bodies, to take over. The fight/flight response gets the body ready for  rapid action, or shuts it down. Context in terms of time and place recedes, so past threat experience  gets added to the current crisis, further fuelling the response (Brewin, Dalgleish & Joseph 1996; Clarke  2021 pp 35-6).

Our rational minds can grasp the intellectual arguments around an important, but not immediate,  threat like climate change. However, 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?......” 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. This is the sort of process those of us who work in mental  health, for instance, are familiar with on the individual scale. Multiplied across a population, and  affecting reaction to such an urgent crisis, this response heralds disaster.

As psychotherapists, we know how to support our clients to manage emotion, behaviour and  relationships. As psychologists, we are scientists of behaviour change. How can this expertise be  harnessed in the service of meeting the climate challenge? What follows are suggestions, based on the  way that I work clinically, through using emotions positively (Clarke 2021), and earlier writings on the  climate emergency (Clarke 2009). Emotion and body take over in the service of short-term internal  state management – 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. As the fathers and mothers of  psychoanalysis have pointed out, left to themselves, emotion/body controls us even though we might  not realize it, but with conscious effort, we can take back that power.

**Defensive Emotions**

Awareness of the danger to our way of life and future posed by climate change triggers what might be  called the defensive emotions: fear, anger and sadness, followed by guilt when recognising our  complicity. These are sometimes labelled ‘negative’, but of course, each has a useful function as well  as a down side. 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. In the case of sadness, meeting the  feeling 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, and allowing the flow is easier if it is expressed along with  others who feel the same way. The grief will be more bearable if shared, but it needs managing, as  giving in to grief must not become a mere indulgence. Action is needed too, and this is where anger  can shine. Anger mobilises the body for positive action. The dangers inherent in anger are obvious, so  it too needs careful management. Anger under conscious control can use the body’s energy for action  and provide the accompanying courage to work on change. Guilt, like fear, has some motive power,  but needs to be strictly limited, as it can too, easily paralyse.

If it were simply a matter of deploying this armoury of emotions in the service of preserving rather  than destroying the viability of life on earth, all would be simple. Human beings are never simple. As  well as managing our relationship with our environment and the world beyond our skin, our emotions  have the important function of managing our own fragile and slippery sense of self. They register how  we are doing in relation to the people and circumstances in the vicinity; they move into action when  our sense of where we fit in the world threatens to slip, and they supply a glow of satisfaction when  we have achieved status or goal. It is the props that accompany this shifting sands of maintaining and  building status, that can fuel the consumption that threatens planetary health in our consumer led  society; the SUV, the exotic holiday, fast fashion – the list could go on. We need other means to  preserve the wobbly balance that is the human condition. This is where the expansive emotions such  as love, contentment and wonder come into play.

**Expansive Emotions**

These emotions figure less prominently in the psychologist’s armoury but have most to offer in  response to the environmental crisis. Humans are hardwired for affiliation as well as to meet threat,  and an array of emotions facilitate this. Compassion focused approaches to psychotherapy explore this  dimension (e.g. Gilbert 2005). The importance for wellbeing and security of belonging to a kinship  group of friends and family is evident. However, sense of connection has a wider reach. Membership  of social group, job or profession, nation etc. are all embedded deep in our identity and consequently  evoke strong emotions. Our sense of connection with place, with the non-human creatures with  whom we share this planet, such as those kept as pets, runs deep. Then, across the ages, humans have  experienced and honoured experience of relationship with something all encompassing, whether  designated as a deity or acknowledged in vaguer terms. This is an example where relationship, which  is known through experience and not facts, reaches beyond the precision of our verbal knowing, so  that labels matter less than that sense of connection, sometimes known as spiritual. This connection  has a strength and a moral compass that needs harnessing in the cause. I have unpacked this  argument, and linked it to Interacting Cognitive Subsystems (Teasdale & Barnard 1993) elsewhere (e.g.  Clarke 2005)

While the defensive emotions concentrate on preserving our fragile sense of self, expansive emotions  operate in the opposite way, enabling us to open ourselves in relationship and take responsibility  beyond narrow self-interest. They liberate us from being sunk, blinkered, in our individual self consciousness, to embrace relationship and engage with the wider cosmos. Joy, love and wonder are  obvious examples. These have a crucial part to play in our need to accept responsibility for our planet.  All human consciousness is a dance between these two states. Facilitating recognition of this dance

and working to shift its balance away from getting bogged down in individual self-interest, towards  opening to the cosmos around, is a task that we as psychologists should be capable of.

So, what are these expansive emotions and how can they be harnessed in response to the crisis?  Wonder, (or Awe as Matthew Fox who has written eloquently about all this would put it – Fox 1983),  and gratitude, are natural responses to the beauty of the earth and her creatures. Love for the natural  environment, and therefore our planet, can flow from this, and connect (as expansive emotions  connect while defensive ones separate) with love for our fellow humans, our children and their  children down the generations, along with the non-human creatures with whom we share the planet.  Allied with the other emotions this provides the self-transcending motive force to make a difference.

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. This is the source of ‘eco  anxiety’, which has been rightly identified as a rational, non-pathological, response to the situation.  The imperative is to harness this anxiety towards action and divert from its paralysing potential. 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 for ourselves and for the planet.

Anger, with its potential to motivate, provide courage and energy as it gets the body ready for action,  can come into play here – again, bypassing its destructive potential by harnessing it in service of love  and gratitude to right the wrongs that have been perpetrated on our precious home, the earth.

**Collective Action and Redefining the Self**

Whereas it is possible to invite the individual to foster this sort of positive relationship with the earth,  the wider societal context can be the challenge. I have argued above that we are simultaneously  incomplete as lonely individuals, yet are encouraged to see ourselves as such, particularly by the  society we inhabit in the global North, that rejects the communalism of earlier or more distant  cultures. There is growing recognition of the need to take seriously the social dimension within  psychotherapy (e.g. the literature on ‘the social cure’, Haslam et al 2018). The pressure to prove status  with material things is probably a human universal, but the particular form it takes in the context of  current consumerism creates a tension between need to protect the planet and to attain a good  enough sense of self. Social groups holding shared values are a vital counterbalance, and the climate  emergency has encouraged likeminded people to gather and work together in organisations such as  XR. As mentioned above, I was active in the road protest movement in the 1990s, and have written  about how involvement with the Twyford Down action was transformative for me personally, in  introducing me to the experience of relating to landscape with the same emotional intensity as a close  human relationship. (Clarke 2008 pp124-130). Such deepening of relationship entails intense pain as  that land was brutally destroyed. However, other places, such as the Salisbury water meadows, were  saved.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I offer no easy answers. As therapists we help people face avoided dark places and  accompany them from false and limiting certainty towards the expansive uncertainty that offers the  possibility of growth. The very pliability of the self, emphasized throughout this piece, affords  opportunity for such growth; growth out of being trapped in a partial individuality towards the

richness of really engaging in relationship. In the case of relationship with the earth, this requires the  courage to open ourselves to suffering, and we need a community to provide courage to do this. It is  good to see professional bodies such as the BPS coming together in such communities: e.g. the overall  BPS Climate Emergency Action Committee (CEAC) and the Division of Clinical Psychology’s Climate  Emergency Action Group (CEAG). As psychologists we are in a better position than most to recognize  the way human cognition shuttles constantly between its rational and its emotional/body systems,  and the dangers inherent in this. Further, we have tools that can help steer the delicate balancing act  this requires. On the most basic level, the skill of mindfulness can be developed to help us link the  rational side that knows the bigger picture and appreciates the crisis, with the expansive emotions and  their motivational power, towards taking control. The body’s threat mode can be calmed by breathing,  and that is just the start, as this foundation can be used to face and manage the conflicting forces that  buffet our fragile sense of self, and to choose to engage in sound relationship with ourselves, those  around us, and the earth. We have a duty as creatures dependent on the health of this planet to use  our expertise to do whatever we can, and to guard against ourselves becoming sunk in despair and  paralysis at the enormity of it all. At the least, this needs to be a live debate within our communities.

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Parts of this paper have appeared in Clarke, I. (2024) The climate crisis – A question of connection.  Clinical Psychology Forum 1(373):6-9DOI: 10.53841/bpscpf.2024.1.373.6