

**Inviting Eco-Anxiety into the Therapy Room: An Exploration of Current Research and
Interventions**

By

Zoe Nichele

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APPROVED BY

Dr. Bruce Hardy, MA, PhD, Capstone Advisor, Master of Counselling Faculty

Dr. Laleh Skrenes, MA, PhD, Faculty Reader, Master of Counselling Faculty

School of Health and Social Sciences

Abstract

This paper discusses the current literature on eco-anxiety and what the therapeutic community is doing to support clients through their experiences. As the topic of eco-anxiety is fairly new due to the recent cultural awareness of the climate crisis, the need for therapeutic support is high, however, the research is still in its beginning phases. Research has demonstrated how various types of therapy can assist with the experience of eco-anxiety, therefore, this paper brings light to those specific forms of therapy and how they are used. There is also a consideration of the populations these therapeutic models are likely to be conducted with, as most of the people experiencing eco-anxiety are in the Generation Z and Millennial age groupings. This paper presents a robust literature review to gather what information currently exists around the topic of eco-anxiety, and then uses this information to inform the outline for an eco-anxiety support group. The major findings within the research were that due to eco-anxiety being a very rational response to the climate crisis, that rather than suppressing the client's experience practitioners can assist clients in managing their experience. The most profound way to manage the eco-anxiety experience was demonstrated to be community connection with others who feel similarly about the climate crisis. The support group outline in chapter 3 focusses on group sharing for connection, and regulation strategies.



Keywords: Eco-anxiety, climate crisis, climate change, climate anxiety, eco-grief,, climate emotions

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Inviting eco-anxiety into the therapy room is something that therapists have been doing as an ambient issue for years, however, more recently this is a struggle that is central to many clients as the climate crisis is becoming more prominent and in the cultural zeitgeist. Our conversations, news coverage, and physical environmental changes are pushing the climate crisis to be something that can no longer be ignored by citizens worldwide, rather the topic is now central to conversations and lived experience. The increased awareness of the topic of the climate crisis has demonstrated a consistent trend of the population reporting excessive worry about the future of the planet, and the future of humanity (Begotti, 2020; Clayton, 2020; Taylor, 2020). This excessive worry due to understanding the realities of the climate crisis, yet not being able to tone down the worry, is considered to be eco-anxiety (Phikala, 2018). This paper will be looking at the current research that exists within the topic of eco-anxiety, and what this research has shown as actionable solutions on how people can manage their eco-anxiety. The body of research on eco-anxiety is still very much in its growth phase, however, what studies have been done have offered inspiration and a trajectory forward. This paper will then close with a working framework for a support group for those experiencing eco-anxiety. The primary hope of this paper is to provide context and the current theoretical understanding of working with clients who speak to eco-anxiety as a presenting issue. The secondary hope is for the group framework to be of inspiration to create further supports for people who are in the midst of struggling with their eco-anxiety experience.

Purpose Statement

This paper will demonstrate the relationship between climate crisis awareness and the eco-anxiety experienced within individuals. The more attuned one gets to the climate crisis, the more anxiety and depressive symptoms seem to follow (Albrecht, 2011; Pihkala, 2020). This paper will look at how counsellors can encourage their clients to stay aware and involved in climate crisis activism while managing the anxious and depressive symptoms that can often coincide with being involved in activism (Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). The research question of this literature review and capstone paper is: How does eco-anxiety affect individuals, and how can therapists support their client's eco-anxiety to be more manageable on a daily basis? As this paper works toward answering the research question, there will be a look into what has been uncovered as effective techniques to manage eco-anxiety, how eco-anxiety shows up in individuals, as well as an understanding on how eco-anxiety is different from the standard forms of anxiety presented in the DSM-IV.

Significance & Context

The struggle of the climate crisis and its ensuing anxiety is present in almost every aspect of life for those who choose to stay tuned into the human impact on climate change (Albrecht, 2011; Begotti, 2021; Pihkala, 2020). Staying aware and engaged with the climate crisis can be a helpful way to promote activism and energy toward making environmentally friendly choices, however, it can also lead to burnout (Grose, 2020; Davenport, 2017; Weintrobe, 2012). The ecological grief that is being presented in the news on a daily basis for places that are struggling with extreme weather, droughts, species extinctions, and more, can be challenging to separate from oneself and one's own emotions. Due to the extreme content that most people are exposed to on a daily basis, there is also the opposite effect from activism, where people can get paralyzed and wind up living in a state of denial about how their actions, or inactions, may be

affecting the planet. Considering the level of media exposure of the climate crisis it is perhaps of no surprise that several studies have found a correlation that the media around the climate crisis has been wreaking havoc on the mental health of citizen worldwide (Albrecht, 2007; Albrecht, 2011; Begotti, 2021; Berry, 2010; Blashki, 2008; Clayton, 2020, Taylor, 2020). There is another side to the anxiety as studies have demonstrated that when people are experiencing eco-anxiety, this will often activate them to start taking action toward minimizing their personal impact on the planet. Though this inspiration toward energizing one's spirit of change and activism, there still seems to be a limit to this activism that can result in a state of burnout for individuals (Begotti, 2021; Clayton, 2020; Taylor, 2020).

Across many of the studies reviewed for this paper, there seemed to be a common theme of existential thoughts in study participants whether the researcher explicitly stated it or not. Existential thoughts are understandably linked to climate anxiety as climate change will begin to open minds to the understanding that the world as we know it will not be the same for future generations (Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). As climate change brings about more natural disasters, there is more opportunity for death, and the news of natural disasters have been shown to increase thoughts that death can be at any point (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Begotti, 2021; Pihkala, 2020). There is a different tone that existentialism can take when in relationship to climate change. Rather than seeing oneself as having an ultimate end to their existence on earth, there is also existential concern with how the world around has an ultimate end to how it exists in this moment (Pihkala, 2020). This observation is not speaking to the fact that the only constant in life is change, rather it is an observation that the planet is only being further and further depleted of all its health and life-giving resources.

The reality of our earth being in a rapid state of deterioration is bringing existential thoughts to younger folks and the upcoming generations (Agoston, et al., 2022; Begotti & Maran, 2021; Blashki, 2008). In a study on Australian children around their thoughts on climate change, a quarter of the participants noted that they believed the world will be over by the time they are adults (Blashki, 2008). The ages of people who experience eco-anxiety are across all generations, however, the way these different age groupings manage their eco-anxiety trends in differing ways (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Begotti & Maran, 2021; Campbell & Watts, 2020). The younger people in generations Z and millennials tend to have a more action-oriented focus and are more willing to see the climate crisis for what it truly is, and to be willing to take responsibility through action toward minimizing one's individual impact (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Campbell & Watts, 2020). Whereas the people in generations X and the baby boomers trend toward a state of denial or thinking that there is nothing that can be done of significance therefore there is no good reason to change (Agoston, et al., 2022; Campbell & Watts, 2020; Grose, 2020). These are trends found in these age groupings with the white westernized nations, and by all means, there are many outliers with each of the groupings that engage with the climate crisis in unique ways. Due to these differing approaches, there is a correlation to younger people being the ones who will most likely be seeking help explicitly for their experience of eco-anxiety. By simply being able to name the experience of eco-anxiety, there is already a much higher chance of those people going to seek out help in managing their emotions in a way that will be helpful and healthy for long term engagement with the climate crisis (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).

The topic of climate anxiety has been rapidly picking up popularity as an area of research, as ever more people are reporting symptoms of anxiety from media exposure to climate

change (Begotti, 2021, Blashki, 2008; Taylor, 2020). While it is important that the media educates world citizens on the damage that the planet is experiencing, there can be a point of overwhelming levels of information. When people begin to tune into the reality of climate change and the way the environment is trending, this has a strong correlation to self-reported anxiety (Pihkala, 2020). This section of the paper will be focussing on a few research articles that were particularly well presented in their data around climate change resulting in the experience of eco-anxiety. The following articles are the basis of what inspired the topic of inviting eco-anxiety into the therapy room.

A research study done on 312 Italian undergrad and grad students demonstrated significant relationships between climate change attunement and anxiety. The anxiety that the participants reported was from both indirect and direct exposure to climate change (Begotti, 2021). The indirect exposure was through news and media coverage, and the direct exposure is from the experienced changes within one's own ecosystem and environment (Begotti, 2021). The researchers also uncovered that eco-anxiety actually wound up activating people toward becoming more active within the fight against climate change (Begotti, 2021). This is a particularly interesting result due to the fact that the, often perceived, negative symptom of anxiety actually resulted in an objectively positive behaviour of climate activism. The researchers also noted that the levels of anxiety stated by the study participants was relatively low, therefore, there is a possibility that if the participants reported high anxiety levels they may wind up being frozen by the anxiety. This frozen state would lead to people not taking any action, or possibly going the opposite direction and claiming that climate change is not real (Begotti, 2021; Davenport, 2017). The researchers ended the paper with an expression of concern

for the mental health and wellbeing of the entire planet, with climate change as a major threat to global mental health (Begotti, 2021).

In a study by sustainability researcher, Glenn Albrecht, focussed on the disruption of routine as being the primary source of distressing climate emotions (2011). These researchers noted how the environment has been a constant for all of human history, with relatively few and far between major natural disasters. Now these natural disasters are rapidly picking up in speed, and are colliding with areas that had not experienced disasters prior. The research paper makes an assumption that it is the disruption to predictability and routine in daily life that is the driving force behind eco-anxiety, rather than the scientific knowledge of the climate crisis itself (Albrecht, 2011). Climate emotions researcher, Glen Albrecht, notes that there is an overarching term for mental health issues that stem from the environment, it is “Psychoterratic” which means “earth-related mental health syndromes” (2011). Albrecht proposes that eco-anxiety will only intensify over time, and that it may transform into a state of helplessness or paralysis rather than launch the anxious individual into a state of activism (2011). This state of being paralyzed by climate anxiety has been named by Albrecht as “ecoparalysis” (2011). Ecoparalysis is expressed through apathy toward climate change, or a pure avoidance toward accepting it as a reality (Albrecht, 2011). The final piece within Albrecht’s paper is that once people start to experience climate anxiety it tends to only build due to almost every regular action that one takes in a first world country will ultimately be a poor decision in the face of climate change activism (2011). People are faced with cognitive dissonance around wanting to be conscious global climate change citizens, and to still be able to take part in society in a functional way.

In the next paper, environmental theologian Panu Pihkala researched how different areas of study approached climate change’s effect on the mental health and well-being of people

globally (2020). Pihkala's meta-analysis spanned across several fields of study, and there was a recurring theme that the acknowledgement of the climate crisis is wreaking havoc on individual's nervous systems (2020). This sympathetic nervous system over-activation is being expressed through generalized anxiety disorders (Pihkala, 2020). Pihkala also uncovered common threads between eco-anxiety, health anxiety, death anxiety, learned helplessness, and intolerance of uncertainty (2020). Death anxiety ties back into the existential concerns that come up when people bring awareness of the finiteness of the world as we know it. In Pihkala's research, he found a recurring prediction that existential therapies would be the best way to work with clients to encourage them to hold onto the eco-anxiety in a helpful way rather than becoming overwhelmed by it (2020). By holding the eco-anxiety in a less distressing way, this gives an opportunity to allow for people to grow into changes while they honour the reality of the climate crisis. There was also a significant amount of critique regarding the use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapies with climate anxiety. CBT and climate anxiety would encourage clients to not see the issue of climate change to be as threatening as they are making them out to be (Pihkala, 2020). The threat may not be immediately and directly impacting the client, however, this approach minimizes the seriousness of this global issue and with the minimization comes a risk of being disillusioned (Pihkala, 2020).

Some of the other papers that were included in this initial research and inspiration gathering were backing up what the last two presented articles discussed. There is little question within the current research that eco-anxiety is very real and is only going to intensify as the climate crisis itself intensifies. One of the particularly interesting subjects that was discussed was the adaptive versus maladaptive anxiety that occurs from exposure to climate change (Clayton, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Adaptive anxiety was structured as a helpful response to climate change

stress. This is the kind of anxiety that can push people toward action and activism. However, there is also maladaptive anxiety which draws people into a state of passivity and eco-paralysis (Clayton, 2020; Taylor, 2020). In this maladaptive anxious state is due to the eco-anxiety experience being so overbearing that one is not able to engage in healthy coping mechanisms. Something that these papers did not touch on was the levels of anxiety, and whether the adaptive anxiety was due to a low level of it to induce change, versus the maladaptive side bringing such great levels of eco-anxiety that the person is unable to contain it. In one of these articles the researchers suggested that programming such as climate anxiety support groups, treatment programs that teach people to morph their anxiety into action, and workshops that offer resilience training when engaging with media and heavy conversations, can all be good first steps to managing maladaptive anxiety symptoms (Taylor, 2020).

Contribution to the Field

My best hope for this paper is for the condensed research to be an easily digestible primer and launch point for people wanting to get acquainted with eco-anxiety. This paper also includes a working outline for a group therapy which is structured around supporting those experiencing eco-anxiety. The bulk of the research around the topic of eco-anxiety focussed on community healing through the universality and normalizing of the experience (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychological Association, 2019; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). Once this paper is completed, I intend to run this support group for eco-anxiety and continue to make revisions to the content (Nichele, 2022).

Definitions of Key Terms

Some of the key terms that this paper will be using are as listed below:

Anxiety: Anxiety as defined by the founder of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, is “a prolonged, complex, emotional state that occurs when a person anticipates that some future situation, event, or circumstance may involve a personally distressing, unpredictable, and uncontrollable threat to his or her vital interests (Beck & Clark, 2012).” This definition of anxiety directly relates to eco-anxiety as the world does not have any guaranteed ways to predict future natural disasters or the exact progression of the climate crisis, therefore, it is a sensible reaction to experience anxiety in the face of the climate crisis.

Burnout: Burnout is a condition of extreme emotional exhaustion that occurs from a prolonged period of unmanaged stress (Porges, 2022). Within the context of eco-anxiety, this prolonged unmanaged stress is directly related to anxiety as in its definition, anxiety is a prolonged state of emotional distress (Beck & Clark, 2012). Burnout was noted multiple times throughout the research around individuals experiencing eco-anxiety (Campbell & Kay, 2014; Davenport, 2017; Gutmann, 2007; Porges, 2022)

Climate Crisis: I chose to use the term climate crisis rather than climate change, as the term crisis demonstrates a more accurate depiction of the state of the world (Austin & Power, 2022). Research repeatedly noted how it is important for practitioners to not dull down the intensity of the state of the planet, rather there is an encouragement to speak to the state of the world in direct terms as to not mislead or negate the accurate reaction of eco-anxiety within clients (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).

Eco-Anxiety: eco-anxiety is a negative psychological experience that occurs when one becomes aware of climate change, or when one begins to engage with climate change (Pihkala, 2020). The negative psychological experience can be defined by panic attacks, decrease in appetite,

insomnia or difficulties staying asleep, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and excessive worrying (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2020).

Eco-Paralysis: eco-paralysis is when the symptoms of climate anxiety become so overwhelming that an individual becomes frozen in their ability to respond (Albrecht, 2011; Weintrobe, 2017). They may find themselves unable to take action toward making changes due to the overwhelming feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. There is also part of eco-paralysis that can induce people into a state of denial that there is any issue with climate change at all (Albrecht, 2011). This denial can often be pointed out as the beginnings of the thought process that moves people towards denying climate change's existence. Eco-paralysis is also considered to be a denial coping mechanism (Albrecht, 2011; Grose, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this paper includes a research question, a literature review, and a suggested application of the information gathered. The research question is not fully answered as this paper does not include any original experimentation, however, it does demonstrate a correlation in how a therapist may treat a client for their presenting eco-anxiety. This correlation is then further demonstrated through an eco-anxiety support group outline that is presented in the final chapter of this paper.

Data Collection Procedures

This paper drew the relevant literature from academic peer reviewed journals. The primary search engines used were the City University of Seattle Library and Google Scholar. To get appropriate research papers, search terms such as "climate change anxiety," "eco anxiety," "climate change", "mental health," and "climate anxiety" were used. I also used the reference pages used in some of the more influential papers to find follow up research. Some of the main

theorists within the climate emotions and eco-anxiety field are Panu Pihkhala, and Glenn Albrecht. Panu Pihkala is a theologian who became very interested in how humans are dealing with the climate crisis and how the crisis is affecting our mental and emotional health. Much of Panu Pihkala's work is launched from the environmental philosopher, Glenn Albrecht. Glenn Albrecht was one of the first people to bring climate-based emotions into academia.

This paper contains a literature review based off of some of the most relevant papers that have been published within the past 15 years for data collection. Eco-anxiety research is only recently taking off, so this paper studied literature that is outside of the 5 years that is typically considered recent literature, however, the bulk of the paper will be considering papers within the past 5 years. The literature review, which will be presented in detail in chapter 2, needed to draw on papers that directly address eco-anxiety, and how eco-anxiety is affecting the study participants in their either action or inaction in tackling the climate crisis. The chapter 2 literature review also dives into what research currently indicates as empirically aiding people in their eco-anxiety management, and how therapists are able to implement these helpful interventions today.

Personal Positioning

My personal positioning within this topic of eco-anxiety is one of emotional investment. I have been struggling with the existential thoughts and anxieties around how to be a functional human in a westernized society while also not being extremely taxing on the natural environment. Being in a deep state of emotional investment with the climate crisis and its effects is a dangerous place to exist in when conducting research due to my biases. When considering my inherent bias, I have done my personal best to keep an open mind to research that does not confirm the same position that I stand by. All the articles I considered and read were all

confirming what I was already suspecting, which is that more knowledge of the climate crisis is related to greater levels of eco-anxiety. A secondary contemplation that this paper touches on is when eco-anxiety becomes paralyzing, and how to support one in moving through the state of eco-paralysis. There is also a contemplation that perhaps the eco-anxiety experience is actually a positive feature that activates people to take serious steps and actions toward protecting the planet.

This topic of eco-anxiety is a sensitive subject for me as I have been experiencing a steady increase in eco-anxiety over the past few years. The more aware I am of the climate crisis, the more anxiety symptoms I experience. I chose this topic to hopefully do a bit of self-healing, however, I also see it as a very relevant area for people to seek therapy for around managing their eco-anxiety symptoms. I am particularly drawn toward existential therapy within the context of climate anxiety due to the honouring of reality while also holding space for the distressing experience of eco-anxiety. Through therapy, whatever theoretical orientation, the therapist will likely help clients with finding a purpose when the fight for climate change feels futile to truly create an impact in the experience of eco-anxiety.

A hope of mine is to carve out eco-anxiety as an area of specialty within my future private practice. I strongly believe that eco-anxiety, and climate emotions are a niche area where people will be seeking more help and support as reality further settles in.

Outline of Next Chapters

This paper has two additional chapters with specific intentions. Chapter two is a literature review focussing on the recent findings and theories from professionals working with eco-anxiety and other climate crisis struggles that are showing up in the therapy room. Chapter three will present the reader with a functional outline for a group therapy. This group therapy outline

will be using some of the principles of acceptance and commitment therapy, giving participants a greater understanding of the nervous system, and tools to manage the distress that shows up in their unique experience of eco-anxiety. My hope for the progression of this paper is that it will equip the reader with enough information to be able to facilitate an eco-anxiety support group from using the information provided in this paper.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, there will be discussion of some of the most recent and influential research on the topic of eco-anxiety and how it interacts with the general public. This chapter will consider the different generations of folks who are affected by eco-anxiety and how that is showing up for the different age groupings. There will also be discourse on what lands under the umbrella of climate emotions, and within this, when is the overwhelming worry categorized as anxiety or rather eco-anxiety. Once the parameters are established, there will be an outline of why it is important to have a distinction of eco-anxiety rather than the existing branches of anxiety in the DSM-5. From there, the paper will outline how eco-anxiety shows up within the nervous system, and what actions can be recognized as an activation in the sympathetic nervous system's fight, flight, or freeze response. The research around emotions within the climate crisis is still in the blooming phases, and there has not been much human subject or clinical research, therefore this section will largely be in unpacking theories and demonstrating how they have been shown to support the managing of the eco-anxiety experience. By having a solid foundation of theoretical knowledge in the area, this offers a more robust holding of space, and more grounding for the therapist to not be caught off guard. There were many anecdotes that I came across where mental health professionals stated that they found themselves getting dysregulated or caught up in their own realizations by the climate crisis content being brought into sessions with clients (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Davenport, 2017; Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022; Pihkala, 2020). Though the climate crisis surrounds each and every one of us, it is from this universal experience that almost shuts down the conversation of eco-anxiety (Dougherty & Pihkala, 2020). Communally we are having this climate crisis experience that is so massive and overwhelming that each of us as isolated individuals is unable to make any real dent or positive

change within our planet's current catastrophe. Oftentimes the origin of eco-anxiety is the realization that there is truly nothing we as individuals have any power to change, therefore, when managing eco-anxiety there is a process of consciously releasing control and expectation of change.

Climate Emotions

Climate related emotions is a considerably new area of emotions to explore, it is when there are, generally, negative mental health effects originating from the state of the climate, physical environment, or ecosystem (Albrecht, et al., 2007). Negative climate related emotions have been labeled as psychoterratic disorders (Albrecht, 2011). Eco-anxiety is just one of the many mental health disorders under the greater umbrella term for psychoterratic disorders. A psychoterratic disorder is a health, physical or mental, issue that is directly associated with our ecological environment (Agoston, et al., 2022; Albrecht, 2011). Under psychoterratic disorders is solastalgia; solastalgia can be defined as a deep despair about the deterioration of our planet (Agoston, et al., 2022; Albrecht, et al. 2007). I have placed solastalgia as an umbrella over eco-anxiety, and under psychoterratic disorders, the essence of solastalgia is the lived experience of being exposed to our planet's deterioration within our lifespan (Albrecht, et al. 2007). It does not take much analysis to understand how one's contemplation of our planet deteriorating before our eyes can draw one toward a state of overwhelming anxiety.

Though psychoterratic disorders and solastalgia are important factors when working with the climate crisis and clients, this paper will be narrowing in on the topic of eco-anxiety. Within this section I have amalgamated several of the most current and referenced definitions into the following: eco-anxiety is excessive worry about the collapse of our environment (Agoston, et al., Albrecht, 2011; 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Pihkala, 2020). Eco-anxiety has also been called

climate change anxiety, climate anxiety, existential anxiety, and likely more that this paper is missing (Albrecht, et al., 2007; Austin & Power, 2022; Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2022; Verlie, 2022). It is becoming increasingly important to recognize the difference between the more known DSM forms of anxiety and eco-anxiety, as, eco-anxiety is becoming a heavily reported experience in children, youths, people that regularly consume the news, and most people that are living in places that are experiencing the visible and felt effects of the climate crisis (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Campbell & Watts, 2020; Gislason, et al., 2021). It is also slightly different than most well known and researched forms of anxiety as the climate crisis is in fact an active threat to the existence of our world today, and it is arguably an appropriate reaction to how deeply injured our main source of survival is, our one and only planet Earth (Austin & Power, 2022; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). In a webinar with eco-therapy researchers, Dr. Craig Chalquist and Linda Buzzell, there was mention of eco-anxiety perhaps even being a poor choice of name, rather, it could be argued to be called rational fear (Austin & Power, 2022). When one is in a state of upset due to the climate crisis, this is not something to be pathologized, rather, it is something to be validated and welcomed into the therapy room.

Eco-anxiety brings in a large piece of existential worry which can amplify the distress one is experiencing as we live through fossil-fuel laden lifestyles (Dougherty, & Pihkala, 2022; Pihkala, 2020; Verlie, 2022). The everyday experience of those living in North America is to live in a way that is actively harming the planet (Austin & Power, 2022; Dougherty, & Pihkala, 2022; Pihkala, 2020; Verlie, 2022). There is almost no socially comfortable way to remove ourselves from this Earth damaging lifestyle while still being able to exist in community or with any resemblance of the lives we have today (Pihkala, 2020). Even considering something as minor as choosing to only eat from local harvests, this is known to be very challenging as humans are

inhabiting areas that are too cold or dry to have year-round harvests and food diversity (Grose, 2020). There is importance placed on the experience of eco-anxiety as it is an existential anxiety, and it is also a practical anxiety that can be used to promote change and positive action (Grose, 2020; Kurth, 2018; Pihkala, 2020; Verlie, 2022). Eco-anxiety is a mental health struggle that cannot be reasoned out of, rather it is something that we need to learn to live with and learn how to adjust our expectations of what we can realistically do on an individual level (Austin & Power, 2022). The practical or rational anxiety that can result from eco-anxiety exists as an alarm system that lets one know that something is off and the individual is prompted to work toward considering solutions and actions (Davenport, 2017; Onishi, 2022; Verlie, 2022). There is some research on how eco-anxiety shows up in a practical way, that it can often result in wonderment and curiosity, and this is where unique, lasting, and innovative change is created (Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Onishi, 2022). Through the successful management of eco-anxiety, it can be used in a helpful way toward the betterment of one's world through creativity, curiosity, and energy. These objectively positive ways of being often have a ripple effect that goes beyond each individual's life and into the greater community. Through a lens of eco-anxiety potentially being of service to individuals, this does not ask people to be rid of their struggle, rather it calls on people to use the alarm system of eco-anxiety for their own healing practice of taking manageable steps towards bettering the planet.

Anxiety and Eco-Anxiety - Is There a Difference?

The definition of anxiety from the father of cognitive behavioural therapy, Aaron T. Beck is “a prolonged, complex emotional state that occurs when a person anticipates that some future situation, event or circumstance may involve a personally distressing, unpredictable, and uncontrollable threat to his or her vital interests” (Beck & Clark, 2012, p. 15). When approaching

the existing literature on eco-anxiety, there seems to be enough crossover with many other anxiety disorders that it is perhaps questionable as to why some psychology researchers are pushing to have eco-anxiety added to the DSM-5. Though eco-anxiety is not listed or recognized as a disorder within the DSM-5, there is still work being done within the therapeutic community of recognizing that eco-anxiety is a different disorder than any of the more traditional anxiety disorders listed within the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Baudon & Jachens, 2021) This chapter has already broken down much of what makes eco-anxiety different from a DSM-5 definition of anxiety, so the focus will turn to why researchers are believing it is important to have eco-anxiety included in future versions of the DSM-5. At this time, eco-anxiety is being defaulted, considered, and diagnosed through the lens of generalized anxiety disorder in the DSM-5 (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When considering the complications of how eco-anxiety differs in its presentation to other forms of anxiety, it is troubling to think that the way much of the research is approaching it is through a lens that is nonsensical to what therapists are seeing within the counselling room (Austin & Power, 2022; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020). Generalized anxiety is an irrational worry, whereas eco-anxiety is a rational fear of the trajectory of the relationship that our planet and culture is on (Austin & Power, 2022; Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022; Weintrobe, 2014).

Some of the leading researchers within eco-anxiety are seeing it presenting itself as a mix of both an anxiety disorder and a pre-traumatic stress disorder (Austin & Power, 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2022). A pre-traumatic stress disorder is brought on by anticipation of knowing that there is need to act without knowing what that action will entail (Enticott, et al., 2022) Another aspect that makes pre-traumatic stress disorder unique within the realm of Eco-anxiety is how it calls upon realistic worries around the perceived intensity of the

consequences of the climate crisis that are fairly unknown (Enticott, et al., 2022). Pre-traumatic stress disorder is not in the DMS-5, and research seems to be much less urgently calling on the American Psychiatric Association to include pre-traumatic stress disorder in the future revisions of the DSM-5 (Agoston, et al., 2022; Austin & Power, 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021).

There is some debate amongst researchers as to whether eco-anxiety is a state of being or whether it is an emotion due to the practicality of it in relation to the climate crisis. Psychologist, Charlie Kurth, defines emotion to mean a conscious feeling that can be named from existing vocabulary and is related to a person, place, or thing (2018). Whereas, climate expert and philosopher, Panu Pihkala uses the concept of emotion broadly to describe a wide array of feelings, including both unconscious bodily feelings and conscious experiences of feelings (2022). As for a state of being, this can be distilled down to how someone is in a more unchanging and steady way (Pihkala, 2022). In the spirit of a strengths-based lens, there is likely a tendency for therapists to understand clients as landing more in the realm of eco-anxiety as an emotion which has the ability to pass through the client and is a state that can be changed, rather than the consideration of eco-anxiety as a fixed state or way of being. As people are supported they can have more ease with the experience of eco-anxiety and bring it from experienced suffering to a managed struggle. Within the space of eco-anxiety as a state of being or an emotion, this also brings in the consideration of how anxiety is perceived.

Arguably, most counselling practitioners would consider a client with an anxiety disorder to be in a fleeting emotional state or a more persistent way of being that simply needs time and patience to move through (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2022). This goes against lead eco-anxiety researcher and theorists, Panu Pihkala's, definition where he considers eco-anxiety to be a more fixed emotional state that has its purpose and therefore can't be moved through or past (2022).

The concept of eco-anxiety as an emotional state feeds into the argument of whether eco-anxiety has a place within the DSM. As more research is being conducted around working with eco-anxiety, more clarity will enter the field in what aspects of eco-anxiety are changeable and more in the emotion space, and what is steadier and more in the realm of a state of being.

Who is Affected by Eco-Anxiety

Every living being on the planet is affected by the climate crisis. As for humans, we are the only species that is able to consider the implications of the climate crisis, and we are the ones who are doing the vast majority of the damage. Due to this explicit damage to our planet, our one and only home, this seems like an issue that all of humanity would be up in arms about. What we are seeing, rather than the community at large being in a state of upset, is that there are simply pockets of people that are truly upset amongst the masses of people who are either successfully managing their upset, or are seemingly (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Begotti & Maran, 2021; Davenport, 2017). Oftentimes, the people who are in the pockets of awareness of the climate crisis have transformed their generalized worry, or anxiety, into eco-anxiety (Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). This is not a judgment on whether eco-anxiety is better or worse than general worry or generalized anxiety, however, it is a more honed in and specific type of anxiety, and by naming it within its specifications, this can open up more possibility to heal (Austin & Power, 2022; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). Eco-anxiety is not a worldwide experience, despite the climate crisis being a worldwide experience. Since not everyone experiences eco-anxiety, this next section will discuss the stats and findings from recent literature on who is most likely to be affected by eco-anxiety and how these effects are showing up within these different groupings. This is relevant as it will prepare counselling practitioners with who they might

expect to be working with around psychoterratic emotions and disorders, and how to tailor their counselling approach to fit the different age groupings.

Effects on Generation Z

The effects of climate change related mental illnesses are concentrated at a much higher rate within children and youth. Studies have been done in Canada, The United States of America, Italy, Australia, England and all have uncovered that the rates of deep existential concern regarding the climate crisis are highest in Generation Z (those children to emerging adults who are currently 9 years old to 24 years old in 2022) (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Austin & Power, 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Begotti & Maran, 2021; Campbell & Watts, 2020; Davenport, 2017; Gilason, et al., 2021; Morganstein, J. C., 2019). The existential concern that these children and young adults are experiencing can be correlated to the experience of eco-anxiety. Much of generation Z is considered to be kids who are under 18 years old and these emerging adults are predicting, while stepping into their early adulthood, that they are going to be taking the brunt of deep resource depletion, lifestyle changes, and attempts to rectify the damage that has already been done by previous generations to the planet (Agoston, et al., 2022; Campbell & Watts, 2020; Gislason, 2021). The eco-anxiety regarding stepping into the responsibility of caring for a planet that is already at a disadvantage, is amplified by them still being at an age where they are not able to vote or participate in many adult and lifestyle decisions (Gislason, 2021; Morganstein, 2019; Pihkala, 2020). Not being able to take action within the larger sphere of citizenship can cause feelings of helplessness toward their situation, and anger toward the more senior generations (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Morganstein, 2019; Pihkala, 2020). The eco-anxiety work with children and youth is beginning to be developed by the Climate Psychiatry Alliance (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).

When working with children, the Climate Psychiatry Alliance suggests to be truthful and not negate the conversation around the climate crisis with false hopes and assumptions of everything being fine (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Morganstein, 2019). It is the same as many other forms of trauma, where adults can be perceived as unsafe or unpredictable if they are not congruent in what is present in the everyday versus what they are telling their children to soothe their eco-anxiety (Morganstein, 2019). A particularly interesting piece of literature around climate change emotions is from psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe and she speaks to how the climate crisis can be viewed through the lens of an attachment injury (2012). When considering attachment theory, there is an undeniable disconnect in what we have been culturally raised to expect of our planet as an enduring and predictable source of sustenance (Weintrobe, 2012). This attachment rupture with our planet can be connected directly to the foundational parts of relationships and how we relate with the world at large (Heller & Levine, 2012). Particularly when considering how the climate crisis affects children, it makes sense to recognize how depending on location, children could have the experience of either developing a strong anxious attachment system with the world, or perhaps even a disorganized attachment system (Weintrobe, 2012). An anxious attachment system is one that is very common within the eco-anxiety experience and it is becoming of particular importance when considering one's relationship to our planet (Grose, 2022; Weintrobe, 2012) Anxious attachment shows up as a yearning for closeness due to fears of an attachment figure, in this case, the planet, not reciprocating the love that one has for the attachment figure and perhaps the attachment figure demonstrating further distance and disconnect, no matter how much effort is put toward showing love (Heller & Levine, 2012; Weintrobe, 2012). The anxious attachment is what can be expected to show up in those generation Z folks who are aware of the climate crisis, the more one knows

and the more one takes actions to try to mitigate their damage to the planet, the more this anxious attachment may present itself (Weintrobe, 2012). Theorists have also considered how a disorganized attachment system can show up in the face of the climate crisis as disorganized attachment systems become activated through inconsistent and unpredictable responses from the earth's expected and researched patterns (Heller & Levine, 2012; Weintrobe, 2012). The disorganized attachment is understandable for how young folks in areas that experience natural disasters can experience their relationship with the planet due to the inconsistency in weather patterns, crop yields, and damage to communities (Weintrobe, 2012).

There are also suggestions around keeping teens' solution focussed and honouring their worry by stepping up and into the role of a more active ally in rectifying one's own carbon footprint (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). One's carbon footprint is the measurement of the levels of carbon emissions an individual pollutes due to the participation in a fossil fuel laden lifestyle (Arce, et al., 2019; Verlie, 2022). Even within the definition of carbon footprint, a colloquially used term, there is full responsibility being pushed onto an individual rather than a community view (Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022). When a child or teen, relatively out of control of their lifestyle due to parental dependence, learns of climate crisis related terminology there can be a fairly direct correlation to how one may develop feelings of helplessness, and existential or eco-anxiety. The Climate Psychiatry Alliance suggests that having direct and honest conversations with underaged folks about the climate crisis and committing to parental and adult allyship through observable actions of care for the planet can be some of the most helpful ways to engage with this generation Z crowd (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Parental allyship is what can be done in the home and within the social spheres of teens in a state of eco-

anxiety, however, there are complications when considering how to show up as a therapist to these teens that have every right to be angry.

The research in working with eco-anxiety is still in its infancy, however, there is definitely an urgency felt by many psychology researchers in wanting to uncover what works to mitigate the effect on children and youth as they are being affected by eco-anxiety at a much higher rate than any other group (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). The particularities of eco-anxiety being a legitimized reaction to the climate crisis is that it is often a response to the truth that the way the world is currently functioning is taking away a comfortable future for this generation (Pihkala, 2018).

Effect on Activists and Millennials

Likely the most obvious grouping of people who are experiencing eco-anxiety, are climate change activists. These are folks who are from all generations and age groupings, and are actively dedicating some portion of their lives to climate change awareness in the community at large, taking action in their home environments, attending and organizing marches, and many other activities to raise awareness (Agoston, et al., 2022; Pihkala, 2020). The bulk of climate crisis activists are millennials who land between the age grouping of 25 to 40 years old, as of 2022 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The activists reporting a state of eco-anxiety are folks that started with the anxiety state, and that is what actioned them into activism (Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). This for the most part is being seen as a healthy and helpful form of coping with eco-anxiety, however, it can only go so far, as the eco-anxiety experience can often become exacerbated as one is faced with the harsh reality of their actions being fairly futile within the greater context of the climate crisis (Davenport, 2017; Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022; Pihkala, 2020). There seems to be a fine line between when activism moves from being a healthy form of

coping into an obsession, or a vessel for catastrophic thinking and suicidal ideations. Activism as a coping mechanism will be expanded on in the next section entitled Coping in the Face of Eco-Anxiety.

Effect on Generation X and Above

The grouping of generation X and above, including baby boomers and the silent generation, seem to be the least affected overall from the mental health effects of the climate crisis (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). These folks who are having the least negative effects are aged 40 years old and above, as of 2022. These more mature generations, in westernized cultures, are often existing in ways that have a high usage of fossil fuels and perhaps are in a mindstate where they feel they are too late in life to consider making the drastic, and uncomfortable changes, of adjusting to a climate friendly existence (Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022; Morganstein, 2019). When engaging with these folks Climate Psychiatry Alliance has encouraged people to connect with the younger generations to get a true understanding on how much distress it is causing the younger individuals to see these older generations live without much thought of the repercussions of their actions (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022; Morganstein, 2019). This is a way of asking for empathy and allyship in treating the planet in the way that one would hope previous generations did for them, and to not leave their younger generations with the full burden (Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022; Grose, 2020). Though generation X and above seems to have the lowest levels of eco-anxiety, there can be an assumption made that those who do experience eco-anxiety are even more isolated than any other generation in finding peers who are willing to approach these challenging topics and to offer allyship in doing better in relationship to environmental protection and minimizing one's carbon footprint (Davenport, 2017). Later on this paper will touch on the

current best known strategies for coping with eco-anxiety, and one of the most widely quoted interventions is finding communities of support (Agoston, et al., 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Gilason, et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2018; Pihkala, 2020). The more isolated one feels with their eco-anxiety, the more challenging it will be to disentangle where their eco-anxiety ends and where everyday mental health struggles begin.

Who does not Experience Eco-Anxiety?

Thus far in the research around eco-anxiety, there has been proof that not all or even the vast majority of the global population experiences eco-anxiety (American Psychiatric Association, 2020; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Campbell & Watts, 2020; Davenport, 2017; Gilason, et al., 2021; Morganstein, J. C., 2019; Pihkala, 2018). When noting that not everyone is having this same experience of eco-anxiety, despite living on the same planet and having a relatively similar lifestyle (when considering the westernized world), there have been hypotheses that the people who do not experience eco-anxiety are either in denial or are able to cope well (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2020). When people are able to cope well or cope through denial with their eco-anxiety this suggests that some folks mute expression of discomfort. The muting of emotional expression can lead to a judgment of the people that do experience eco-anxiety in an outward fashion as being in a state of hysteria, or perhaps these expressive folks are being seen as maladjusted humans unable to accept the realities of life on our planet (Pihkala, 2020; Prager, 2019). There is danger in this assumption as it can take a tone of overreaction toward people who are feeling empathetic toward the state of the planet. As for the hypothesis that folks who do not experience eco-anxiety as being in denial, this is often associated to a state of overwhelm (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2020; Prager, 2019). There have been multiple papers by eco-anxiety researchers that are seeing how people, and populations, can enter a state of denial

and apathy when becoming overwhelmed when contemplating the climate crisis (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2020). Denial and apathy can also manifest themselves when people are in a state of information fatigue (Onishi, 2022). Information fatigue often shows up when people feel that they are being overburdened by information about the crisis without ways to take action, and most of all, are bored of the topic as it is persistent and always presented in a state of breaking news (Davenport, 2017; Onishi, 2022). With an ongoing crisis, there are sometimes peaks of interest, however, it can simply become neutral news as the climate crisis is consistently horrific with the occasional peaks and valleys (Onishi, 2022). It can also be argued that the climate crisis is no longer news and has transformed simply into our daily reality, which makes any level of panic or anxiety around the topic to be perceived as a maladaptive way to manage one's daily realities (Grose, 2020).

Coping in the Face of Eco-Anxiety

One of the major pieces of research, across many mental health struggles, shows how people's internal resilience is often a highly predictive factor in how well they are able to cope with struggles. Chapter 3 will detail how to build up resilience in clients within the therapy room, however, this section will be focussing on the most commonly reported coping mechanisms that are being seen in the eco-anxiety related research available.

Denial

There is a vicious circle between anxiety and denial. It is difficult to accept the ecological crisis and the climate crisis, because it means a) accepting a potentially annihilating threat and b) accepting that there must be vast changes in the lives of individuals and communities. Some people try to escape fear and anxiety into denial, but deep down there remains dissonance related to internal conflicts—knowing and trying not to know at the

same time... anxiety may breed denial, which in turn breeds more (repressed) anxiety.
(Pihkala, 2022, p.20)

Denial is by far the most common coping mechanism that shows up in relation to the climate crisis. Research is finding that many people use denial as a way to cope as it is in direct alignment with the flight or freeze response of the sympathetic nervous system (Agoston, et al., 2022; Davenport, 2017; Weintrobe, 2012; Pihkala, 2020). When denial starts to blossom as a coping mechanism for individuals, there is generally a tendency toward the flight response which is primarily characterized by avoidance of environmental news and numbing out thoughts on how one's actions affect the planet (Davenport, 2017). The sympathetic nervous system gets activated in one of 3 ways, fight, flight, or freeze, and in each of these ways there is a different way that the nervous system unconsciously pushes us into a behaviour (Davenport, 2017; Porges, 2022). In regards to the nervous system response to the climate crisis, there is a tendency toward either overwhelm which results in freeze or flight, or anger from loss of control which is directly related to the fight response (Davenport, 2017). When active denial and emotional numbing builds in the body, or when the nervous system becomes more taxed than the flight or fight response can handle, the sufferer will resort to the freeze response (Dalgleish, et al., 2015; Porges, 2022). The freeze response in people in a state of nervous system overwhelm due to the climate crisis shows up in actions (or inactions) that include turning away and tuning out climate crisis information (Bechel & Churchman, 2002; Davenport, 2017). This turning away and tuning out can transform from being a healthy adaptation of a coping mechanism to help those experiencing eco-anxiety to get by, to a formed habituation (Bechel & Churchman, 2022) In a formed habituation people are in a state of denial and it is inhibiting them from feeling and experiencing the reality of the state of the climate crisis (Bechel & Churchman, 2002). This is an

understandably enticing way to move through a time of environmental instability and feelings of helplessness, however, it is also a way to numb out the world around us, and when humans numb out, we are not present (Dalglish, et al., 2015; Porges, 2022). This solution of numbing as a long term coping mechanism is one that can cause damage to important relationships and to one's own ability to experience the fullness of life and fullness of emotional expression.

Denial also has other theories connected to it, the main one being that it is simply the easiest option for folks that truly do care about the climate crisis and just don't know what to do to help (Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2022). Both researchers and counselling practitioners have found that people who are aware of the climate crisis, but are not admitting to be disturbed by the information are likely in a state of overwhelm (Agoston et al.; Begotti & Maran, 2021; Clayton, 2020; Enticott, et al., 2022; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2022; Verlie, 2022). Experts within the field of eco-anxiety are in agreement that there is likely such a deep care within many people in a state of denial, and that the denial appears due to them feeling like they, as individuals, cannot make the change that they would like to see in the world. This realization of being a single human in the grand scheme of the severity of the climate crisis can push people to a state of overwhelming helplessness, and to avoid this painful emotional state, they may shut down their engagement with the climate crisis altogether (Begotti & Maran, 2021; Clayton, 2020; Davenport, 2017; Enticott, et al., 2022; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2022). Denial due to overwhelm is crucial information for practitioners to work with as it can be used as information as to where the client's discomfort and emotional numbing is truly coming from - a place of helplessness, rather than being someone who truly does not care for the outcome of our planet.

Activism

Action is perhaps the most obvious coping mechanism within the field of eco-anxiety, however, it shows up significantly less in the literature than denial. Activism has been shown to be used as an effective way to quell anxious thoughts, the experience of guilt, and feelings of complacency. There is the common saying “too much of a good thing” and activism as a coping mechanism for eco-anxiety sufferers may be an example of that. Activism is considered to be in response to the fight reaction of the sympathetic nervous system (Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020). The fight response is when the sympathetic nervous system becomes aroused and we are pushed into action (Porges, 2022). The nervous system encourages the mind that if one just continues to take action, speak up, and dedicate their life to the climate crisis that this is what will quell the eco-anxiety (Davenport, 2017; Porges, 2022). On a surface level, this action-oriented anxiety management system may seem like a good thing, however, when the action is coming from a place of nervous system overwhelm, this can result in burnout and an extremist effect (Campbell & Kay, 2014; Davenport, 2017; Gutmann, 2007; Porges, 2022). The extremist effect is defined by demonizing anyone that disagrees with one’s stance, and an almost refusal to be open to solutions, as existing in a problem state becomes the comfort zone (Campbell & Kay, 2014; Gutmann, 2007). There gets to be a comfort in the state of the activist in fight mode, and when that sticks is when the activist may enter a state of nervous system overwhelm, and burnout (Cambell & Kay, 2014; Davenport, 2017). The action of activism can be extremely beneficial to both the planet, and to living in alignment with one’s values, however, there is concern when this becomes compulsive, or when the action is being taken when one is in a state of nervous system overwhelm (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2020). Alternatives to being in a state of burnout activism, is to find like-minded people to connect with in more gentle and caring ways where communities are able to recognize and encourage one another to care for themselves to be able to

continue to care for the planet (Davenport, 2017). This group care shows up in support of support groups and group therapy which will be detailed in the next section.

Theoretical Orientations for Treating Eco-Anxiety

Within the research of working with eco-anxiety, there are some existing therapeutic models and theoretical orientations that practitioners have been gravitating toward, and have been reporting promising results with. The main orientations used and researched when working with eco-anxiety are Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Eco-Therapy, and Group Therapy (Agoston, et al., 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a therapeutic modality that calls upon clients to make behavioral changes based upon their values systems (Harris, 2019). A leader in the field of ACT, Russel Harris, stated that the main goal of ACT can be distilled down into “be present, open up, and do what matters” which is, in essence, *psychological flexibility* (2019). The Open Up portion of ACT is considered to be a path to recognizing thoughts and emotions for what they are - external, and fleeting (Harris, 2019). As for *Be Present*, this is where the therapist encourages and teaches clients to turn inwards with body recognition, and to begin to develop mindfulness to embody the phrase “be here now” (Harris, 2019, p.8). One of the portions of ACT that makes it unique from other forms of therapy is the emphasis on values. In the third building block to ACT, Do What Matters, this is where the client identifies their life values and begins to make committed actions toward living in a way that embodies and respects those values (Harris, 2019). ACT is of particular interest within the field of working with eco-anxiety as it is not trying to minimize or challenge the experience that one is having, rather, it is about finding a

healthier and more sustainable relationship with one's reality. Another part of ACT that can assist with eco-anxiety is taking some of the control in an uncontrollable situation. ACT encourages clients to take control of their actions through a choice-point (Harris, 2019). Choice-points are when a client takes note of when they are making choices that are in alignment with their values and when they make choices that go against their values. Whether one is making choices toward or away from one's values is perhaps not going to quell the greater existential anxiety of the climate crisis, however, it does offer some opportunity to discover agency over one's own life in the everyday. ACT is a particularly strong theoretical orientation to use with eco-anxiety as it encourages committed action, likely in the form of activism and daily habits (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Grose, 2020). Living in alignment with one's unique set of values is a key factor in the efficacy of ACT (Grose, 2020; Harris, 2019).

Eco-Therapy

Another fairly common form of therapy that has repeatedly come up in the eco-anxiety literature is eco-therapy, or nature-based therapy (American Psychiatric Association, 2019; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2018). Eco-therapy is a style of therapy that is conducted in nature (Brough & Buckley, 2017). It often consists of a blend of talk and somatic therapies where the client is asked to turn inward and experience what it is like to be connected to nature and our planet (Brough & Buckley, 2017). By reconnecting clients with nature there is a calming effect on the nervous system, and it allows for people to feel more interconnected to a grander sense of self, rather than us existing in our own independent worlds (Brough & Buckley, 2017; Dana, 2020; Davenport, 2017). There is a plethora of research pointing toward nature being a strong nervous system regulator, and this on its own can offer powerful taming of one's anxiety experience (Brough & Buckley, 2017; Dana, 2020; Grose,

2020). Even if a therapist is not trained in nature based therapies, or if the weather does not permit for a comfortable outdoor session, nature can be brought into one's office through plants, a bird feeder outside the office window, or photos of serene nature-scapes (Dana, 2020; Grose, 2020). These objects can be used as reminders that there is more to life than what is in our minds, and they can be used at grounding points when considering nervous system toning which will be expanded on in chapter 3 (Dana, 2020; Grose, 2020; Porges, 2022).

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy

Mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is another evidence-based approach to working with clients struggling with eco-anxiety (Collins, et al., 2019). The heart of MBCT is the teaching skills for clients to embody mindfulness within themselves. The MBCT programs are very structured and are facilitated in a group therapy model, where the MBCT therapist will assist the clients with the learnings of Buddhist teachings, psychology, mindfulness, and how these mindfulness and meditation practices can work together to assist with dismantling distorted cognitions (Collins, et al., 2019). Each week the therapist facilitator assists MBCT group members to discover and work with TRIP (Theme, Rational, Intention, Practice Skills), this TRIP framework gives a structure and a goal for each of the group therapy sessions to keep individuals firmly working toward personal goals within a group context (Collins, et al., 2019). The Theme of each session is set so the group members know what type of shares they will be asked to bring forward, along with what the learning objectives are. The Rational portion brings in the justification around why the specific theme is important for one's mindfulness growth. Intentionality is set as a way to give the focus and carve a pathway for group members. And last of all, there is the Practice Skills portion which is crucial for participants who may learn better from applying the knowledge rather than simply speaking to it. In practicing the skills learned,

this also can solidify how it feels in one's body and allows one to experience and interpret the skill for themselves to hopefully offer a more easeful approach in the future. Having this program be hyper-structured is an important part of dealing with eco-anxiety as there is so much unknown and it can be very easy to have a group of participants experiencing eco-anxiety to get into a doomsday level of thinking and conversation (Agoston, et al., 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021). The mindfulness portion of this group therapy is the key learning for those dealing with eco-anxiety, as it opens the pathway to turning inward and focusing on the here and now rather than getting caught up in future focussed thinking that is not in our control (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Dana, 2020; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020)

Group Therapy and Support Groups

Most of the literature around supporting eco-anxiety clients points to group therapy and support groups. This paper just outlined some of the benefits of MBCT, however, on a more expansive level, there is a focus on being in a supportive group with like-minded people as the most influential factor in healthy coping (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychological Association, 2017; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). There are multiple groups that are recommended for those experiencing eco-anxiety, and this is much more to do with the gathering of like-minded people than it is to work on the specific anxiety (American Psychological Association, 2017). By gathering people together who are all experiencing a similar worry, there is hope that people who may have been feeling isolated in their eco-anxiety are able to see that there are many others having a similar experience (Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Weintrobe, 2012; Yalom, 2019). This validation and normalization of one's feelings is very powerful, and it can begin to transform the isolated helplessness in one's actions, to expand to be more of a community mindset in understanding that there are many like-minded

people taking the same actions in their day-to-day (Pihkala, 2020). These groups and gatherings are not even necessary to be therapy groupings, rather they can still have a lot of healing success in a support group format (Baudon & Jachens, 2021). The key piece of the efficacy of these groups is for people to feel supported, heard, and in community with others (Davenport, 2017; Yalom, 2019).

Chapter Summary

From the information gathered through this literature review there was a clear emphasis on support being necessary for those in the Generation Z cultural grouping, within a format of group therapy. Perhaps, without any surprise, the research points to Generation Z and climate activists as being the people that are experiencing the highest levels of eco-anxiety (American Psychological Association, 2019; Begotti & Maran, 2021). These groupings are likely unsurprising as generation Z is starting their adult lives with more knowledge and transparency than ever before in how our planet may not be able to continue to allow us to live with the same comforts that modern humans have been able to enjoy (Davenport, 2017). As for activists, they are experiencing higher levels of eco-anxiety as they are doing the front-line work of protesting and are immersed in the culture around doing a lot more talking and planning than taking the world-wide action that is required to make any noticeable impact (Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2020). Due to their level of involvement, generation Z and activists will likely be the groupings approaching therapy with eco-anxiety as a topic to bring forward. As the field of eco-anxiety is still considerably new, it is understandable that interventions and theoretical orientations around the topic are still in the infancy stages; it was a challenge to find much practical information in the available literature around how to work with clients having this eco-anxiety experience. What is known so far is that group therapies and support groups are the most powerful healing

interventions understood at this time (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychological Association, 2019; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). After that, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Mindfulness practices, and Nature Based Therapies are best for when a client is bringing the eco-anxiety experience into individual therapy (Agoston, et al., 2022; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). Though this was not spoken about in the existing literature, one can make an assumption that integrating mindfulness (such as mindfulness based cognitive therapy), ACT, and nature therapy into a group setting could bring in an even deeper level of healing to the participants.

Some important content of successful eco-anxiety group therapy will likely include psychoeducation around coping mechanisms. Fight, flight, and freeze are the standardized states of the sympathetic nervous system when in any fear inducing life scenario. Through the work of Stephen Porges, and the polyvagal theory, there are known ways to bring clients back into balance and to encourage landing in the parasympathetic nervous system (Dana, 2020; Porges, 2022). This work of assisting clients out of the sympathetic nervous system, and into the parasympathetic nervous system, or zone of tolerance, will be covered in chapter 3. Denial and activism are the two main coping mechanisms that have been researched with eco-anxiety as the instigator. There is a gap in the research, as many papers touch on the use of drugs, alcohol, and consumerism as coping mechanisms, however, it is not as robust as it could be (Agoston, et al., 2022; Begotti & Maran, 2021; Blashki et al. 2008; Davenport, 2017; Pihkala, 2018; Verlie, 2022; Weintrobe, 2012). There is also a gap in the literature in how to foster activism in a way that will not result in burnout.

The gaps within the research are plentiful at this time, as this is still a growing field of study. The specific area where the field of eco-anxiety research is lacking is the application of

therapeutic interventions and the results that ensue these interventions. There are many theorists who are laying the groundwork out for researchers and practitioners to work from, however, not enough has been done, at this time, to show what level of impact therapy can offer to clients struggling with eco-anxiety. From the research and knowledge that has been shared around working with eco-anxiety, the next chapter will be distilling the information down into a group therapy series. This group therapy intends to work as a suggestion as it has not been run with participants, rather it is simply an application of the research uncovered within this past literature review.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Application

This chapter will be putting the research around eco-anxiety into a functional 6 week therapy group. The eco-anxiety support group will combine psychoeducation, the TRIP framework from MBCT, and the hexaflex from ACT (Collins, et al., 2019; Harris, 2019). In the previous chapter there was research pointing to the benefits of using ACT and mindfulness-based interventions within individual therapy for those struggling with eco-anxiety. There was also a plethora of research demonstrating how influential it can be to simply be in the company of those who have the same concerns and eco-anxiety struggles. Influential group therapy theorist, Irvin D. Yalom states that one of the main benefits of group therapy is for the experience of universality (2019). Each of the participants signed up for the support group, likely, due to some level of feeling isolated in their experience (Davenport, 2017) This group hopes to provide an opportunity for community and connection with others that feel similarly to the other group members (Yalom, 2019).

The support group outline presented in this chapter is one that is fairly structured with select activities, and points of psychoeducation. This outline can be expanded upon or presented as barebones as the facilitator would like, as research has shown that the most beneficial healing will be from the group coming together for the experience of validation and community (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychological Association, 2017; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). Within the suggested structure for this six week support group, there will be a piece of the ACT Hexaflex that gets unfolded with each meeting. The group offers a short and shallow presentation of the parts of the Hexaflex, so there is encouragement for participants to discover how they already embrace these Hexaflex parts rather than needing to be deeply taught anything. Through empowering participants to recognize the

strengths they already possess within themselves, this is an opportunity to deepen one's relationship to one's own resilience.

Participants

For this group there will be an intake process to ensure that those joining the six week group would be an appropriate fit for the group. Having an intake process intends to help to keep the whole group moving at a similar pace and will help for the participants to find more universality within their experience (Yalom, 2019). The primary criteria for people to be accepted into this group therapy is if they are struggling with feelings of eco-anxiety. This struggle may show up as burnout, hyper-sensitivity, depression, hyper-vigilance, inability to enjoy life, and general overwhelm (Davenport, 2017). These symptom requirements should be presented on all the media and advertisements used for gathering participants for the eco-anxiety support group. The people joining into the group therapy do not have to have done any individual therapy before, nor would they need to be in individual therapy while in this group. The group will likely be for a fee, and this is something that could possibly be seen as a barrier, however, being able to pay the fee is another criterion of being accepted into the group. As for the aspects that may eliminate someone from being eligible for the group, the main piece would be that participants must not be in an active state of crisis. The group is not to be used as a crisis or suicide intervention. In cases where people are in a state of crisis, individual therapy would be encouraged until the participant is able to self-regulate well enough to partake in a group therapy setting without becoming actively dysregulated. Another aspect that would demonstrate someone as being a poor fit for the therapy group is if they are in a state of denial. Denial as a coping mechanism is something that will be discussed within the group, however, that level of nervous system shut down will not be conducive to a group therapy sharing environment. If the group is

being run in-person the participants are expected to arrive to the group on time and in person, each week. There will not be a mixed model of this group at this time. Due to the group being estimated to run for 2 hours a session, there will likely be a 10-person cap on this group. The 10-person cap is running under the assumption that this will give enough time for personal shares and discussion, along with ample time for the psychoeducation of each week. The last piece is that the group members need to be self-referred. The participants themselves need to be the ones who reached out and opted in for working with their eco-anxiety. The ages for group participants will be for adults, 18 years old and up, all genders and social locations are welcome.

Six Week Group Outline

This section will include a detailed breakdown of the six week group from session to session. With this breakdown, my hope is that any registered clinical counsellor will be able to use the framework to facilitate a group on managing eco-anxiety anywhere in the westernized world. Each of the groups are estimated to be two hours long with a 10-minute break at the 1 hour mark. This break would likely land after check ins and psychoeducation for the group session, this way the second half of the time can be reserved for personal sharing and discussion. This group outline has a powerpoint to accompany it, the powerpoint can either be presented in person, emailed out to participants, or screen shared while the content is being presented upon in an online format (see Nichele, 2022 for the link to the powerpoint). The outline for the group will go into detail about what content is suggested to cover in each session, and what order to present it in. There is still room for creativity and to allow for the group participants to lead the way through pacing, check-ins, open discussion, and check outs in each session.

Week One: What is Eco-Anxiety?

In this first group of the six part series, there will be space to introduce the group format and content, get to know the participants and what drew them to the group, and the facilitator will open the conversation around eco-anxiety with the group. To open the group the facilitator may find it wise to have a land acknowledgement. Land acknowledgements are of great importance within the context of working with eco-anxiety as a way to honour the earth, and those who took care of the land for centuries prior to colonization (Carlson & Whitmore, 2022). For this support group on managing eco-anxiety, it could be beneficial to specifically name the aboriginal groups, the natural resources, and wildlife that have always existed in this space prior to colonization, capitalism, and concrete. Through making land acknowledgements meaningful and appropriate for the specific contexts, they are of greatest value when there is a moment of pause and specific recognition of the land and world that existed just a couple of hundreds of years ago (Carlson & Whitmore, 2022). Including a land acknowledgement is up to the facilitator and they can create it however they like for it to be appropriate for the specific location and group of participants.

Attached to this paper in the reference section there is a powerpoint that facilitators can use if they see fit under Nichele, 2022. This powerpoint will allow for the outline of the group to be at the front and center for participants to know what to expect from the time together. By having the outline for the group to see is to help quell some of the nerves that participants may have upon arrival. This transparency is of particular importance as these are folks who are already prone to anxiety due to their self-referral to the group.

Once the facilitator has introduced the group format and expectations to the participants, there will be an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves in a way that they are comfortable. One of the suggested methods of introduction is to share one's social location with

the rest of the group. Social location is an important factor to bring forward in a group setting where we are asking folks to be vulnerable, as different social locations will allow for a different understanding of the world (National Council on Family Relations, 2019). Through noting one's race, culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender, socio economic status, and anything else that feels important for them to share, this is an opportunity to recognize how though we are all sharing the same experience, we may have very different understandings of that experience (National Council on Family Relations, 2019). Through giving participants a chance to speak to their gender pronouns, this can be a way to invite people away from a space of assumptions and into a space of curiosity (National Council on Family Relations, 2019). Qualitative research has consistently demonstrated how important it is for non-binary and transgender people to be given a chance to speak to this major personal identifier (National Council on Family Relations, 2019).

The next step in creating safety and a space of empowerment for participants is to spend time creating rules, regulations, and boundaries for the space. The creation of the boundaries will be different for every group, and through allowing the group to discuss what their expectations are, this brings in an opportunity for greater understanding of others, and to recognize that the therapy space is their own. Boundaries and regulations are for the whole group at large to speak to, as it is a chance to empower each group member to identify their own needs within the therapeutic space (Yalom, 2019). Some of the boundaries and rules that the group will decide on will likely be around the use of phones, cross talk, interruption, confidentiality, break taking, amongst other aspects that may come up. With the use of phones there will need to be discussion around what people are comfortable with and to decide when it is okay for people to have their phones out and when they can be on volume. With crosstalk there is a risk that another

participant may have misunderstood what another has said and in responding to the share with crosstalk, this can cause feelings of judgment, hurt, and unsolicited advice (Yalom, 2019). There may be times where crosstalk is welcome, and when this is the case, the group will need to decide whether it is something that the original sharer will state, or whether another participant can ask consent to crosstalk. As for interruption, likely this is not going to be welcomed, however, if the group decides to have a more natural give and take in discussion rather than putting a hand up, there is always risk that interruption will occur. When setting up the group boundaries, the discussion will include how to handle interruptions. When participants are needing to take breaks, there will be a request from the facilitator to receive a thumbs up that all is good from the participant before leaving the room. If the participant is needing to leave the room due to being triggered, overwhelmed, or medically unwell, the facilitator will need to make it clear that they will follow the participant out to the room to be sure that everything is alright. The participants may have some specifics of how they may want that to look, and to add to the list of reasons a participant may need to be tended to. Confidentiality is another piece that will be spoken to in great detail, similar to how the limits of confidentiality are shared in the first counselling session with an individual client. Group participants must understand that we are all bound to confidentiality of the space, and to not speak of the details of participant's shares outside of the group. There will also be an explanation of how the confidentiality will need to be broken if there is an imminent risk of suicide or harm to another human, or risk of harm to a child or vulnerable person. This boundary and regulation setting conversation is an ongoing process that will be brought up in the first few group meetings in case anyone has anything they would like to add or contest.

The next section of this first week of the group therapy will include a discussion of what the research states as being under the umbrella of eco-anxiety. This will allow for a common language and understanding to work from moving forward with future group sessions. This is also an opportunity for people to speak to how eco-anxiety shows up for them as unique individuals as the research definitions may not be true to each participant's personal experience. The research around what is considered to be eco-anxiety can be found in Chapter 2 of this paper under the heading Climate Emotions. The most important pieces to be spoken about are a definition of what eco-anxiety is, along with how the experience of eco-anxiety differs from that of generalized anxiety. The main difference between eco-anxiety, and any other version of anxiety found in the DSM is that eco-anxiety is technically an appropriate reaction to one's current life circumstances (Grose, 2020; Weintrobe, 2017). It has been noted that eco-anxiety should perhaps not even own the title of anxiety, and rather be considered rational worry (Dougherty & Pihkala, 2022).

The final portion of this session will be to offer an intentional check-out for the group. The check-out process is a time when each individual can speak to what their experience was from the time together, and how they are feeling in the here-and-now. A check-out is an important part of closing a group as this allows for each participant to use their voice (Jacobs, et al., 2015). Often there will be people who do not feel comfortable speaking up in a group format, particularly in the first couple of sessions, by simply allowing for opportunities to speak, this can help to break down some of the tension of speaking up in the group (Jacobs, et al., 2015).

Week One Outline:

- Introduction to the group, land acknowledgement, and outline for what will occur in today's meeting ~10 minutes

- Personal introductions (names of participants, pronouns, social locations, hopes for the group) *~20 minutes*
- What rules and boundaries do we want to see in this group? *~30 minutes*
- Break *~10 minutes*
- Speak to the research on eco-anxiety, how is it different from a standard DSM-VI versions of anxiety *~10 minutes*
- Introduce the TRIP framework (Collins, et al, 2019) *~5 minutes*
 - Theme: understanding eco-anxiety
 - Rational: to empower participants to understand what is occurring for them
 - Intention: allow for more ease of conversation amongst the group
 - Practice Skills: noting how eco-anxiety presents itself in each individual
- Open Discussion *~20 minutes*
- Check-Out *~10 minutes*
 - Example: What will you continue to think about from our time together today?

Week Two: Managing the Nervous System

For the second session of the six part eco-anxiety group, there will be a relatively similar format, with another slide that has an outline setup for participants to observe. To open the group, participants will be asked to engage in a check in of sorts. Check-ins have a similar purpose to check-outs by way of getting people talking (Jacobs, et al., 2015; Yalom, 2019). When there is an opportunity for participants to speak, this helps to break the tension from being silent and is simultaneously a way for people to get to understand one another better (Jacobs, et al., 2015). After doing a check-in with the group, the facilitator should reconnect with the participants on what the rules and boundaries they set were. When reviewing the boundaries and

rules, this is a demonstration of taking them seriously and is also a chance for participants to integrate any changes they may be seeking (Yalom, 2019). The revising of rules and boundaries gives an opportunity of empowerment within the group to demonstrate that the participants are ultimately in control of how the group is run (Yalom, 2019).

The psychoeducation for the group in week 2 is teaching and working with polyvagal theory and the nervous system. The facilitator will teach participants to recognize when one is in the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) rather than the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) through teaching a basic introduction to polyvagal theory. The facilitator will explain how when the PNS is active there is a sense of calm, steady breath, connection to the present moment, and one is able to feel their body in the here and now (Dana, 2020; Porges, 2022). When recognizing SNS activation, this is when there is the fight, flight, or freeze response (Dana, 2020; Porges, 2022). The fight and flight responses are also called hyperarousal, and this hyperarousal can be noted through hypervigilance, difficulties sleeping or focussing, quick to react with irritability or aggression, and risky behaviors (Dana, 2020). As for the freeze response, or hypoarousal, this can be recognized through emotional and physical numbness, dissociation, inability to communicate, and a sense of hopelessness (Dana, 2020). Once the group has learned what falls in the category of SNS versus PNS, the facilitator can move toward teaching strategies for how to interrupt the SNS by activating the PNS through nervous system regulation exercises.

When dealing with eco-anxiety there is a general state of low level SNS activation, and through some basic exercises, we can begin to interrupt this activation through building awareness and strength of the PNS. Some of the exercises to use for PNS activation and awareness are Autonomic Names, Savouring Snapshots, The Sounds of Your Voice, and Find Your Breath (Dana, 2020). In the Autonomic Names exercise, this gives participants an

opportunity to write their names 3 times and to describe themselves when they are in a state of hyperarousal, PNS, and hypoarousal (Dana, 2020). This exercise offers a chance for people to attune to the specific ways that they as individuals exist in each of those states of being. Through this individuation of the nervous system experience, this gives a greater chance for participants to recognize when they are in each of the states. The Savouring Snapshots exercise entails participants to take 20 seconds to savour a sensory experience (Dana, 2020) This asks people to truly take a moment to experience something that gives pleasure or ease, such as feeling one's hands on a warm mug of tea, the sound of rain, or looking at a pet. By taking the 20 seconds to deeply attune to these ease inducing experiences, this will automatically work as a PNS strengthener through inviting it to stay active. Another exercise that is fairly simple to tap into is The Sound of Your Voice. This exercise uses a conscious effort to go slow and low with one's voice as if they are teaching a meditation exercise. Through changing one's voice into a more relaxed tone, this will work on the nervous system to let the SNS know it can back down as everything is safe (Dana, 2020). The last exercise that can be taught is Find Your Breath. In the Find Your Breath exercise, Dana encourages people to try breathing at different paces and to note how this can affect one's emotional experience (2020). We can draw a correlation from how breathing in a shallow and rapid pattern can encourage the anxiety experience, this can also mean that if we breathe in a slow and deep way into the belly, that this can encourage activation of the PNS (Dana, 2020). A plethora of exercises can be found in the Exercise Worksheets of Deb Dana's book Polyvagal Exercises for Safety and Connection (2020). If the exercises outlined are not of interest to the facilitator(s), they can choose some of the exercises that they feel the most comfortable teaching to a group.

Once the group has an understanding of polyvagal theory and some tools on activating the PNS, the facilitator can then speak to the ACT Hexaflex (Harris, 2019). The Hexaflex is being used within this group setting as a method of self-study and mindfulness. The first piece of learning from the Hexaflex is open up. This teaching of opening-up was chosen as the first step in the group as it is fairly explicitly what we are asking participants to engage in. It may be an uncomfortable space for them to be in, therefore, speaking to the direct benefits of open-up, could be helpful to progress the group along. ACT's Russ Harris notes that open-up, or acceptance, is the welcoming of unwanted experiences within one's internal state of being (2019). These internal states are affected by one's emotions, thoughts, and feelings, and through the process of opening up we allow for more acceptance of these thoughts, feelings, and emotions as being valid, yet not necessarily truths (Harris, 2017). Through the acceptance of experience, there becomes and greater sense of non-attachment to the distressing emotion.

Week Two Outline:

- Check-in *~10 minutes*
 - Suggestions: name, pronouns, thoughts from the previous week
- Review the collaborative group rules and boundaries, and make any necessary changes
~10 minutes
- TRIP *~5 minutes*
 - Theme: Manage the nervous system
 - Rationale: Bring more ease into daily life
 - Intention: Lessen the intensity of the anxiety experience
 - Practice Skills: Parasympathetic nervous system regulation exercises
- Psychoeducation around polyvagal theory and managing the nervous system *~15 minutes*

- ACT Hexaflex: Open-Up (Harris, 2019) ~15 minutes
- Break ~10 minutes
- Open Discussion ~45 minutes
 - Suggestions: Speak to recognition of SNS and PNS, how they have been managing it. Speak to what it means to stay open to experiences
- Check-Out ~10 minutes
 - Suggestions: reflections and takeaways from the session

Week Three: Coping Mechanisms

In the third week of this course there is already an expectation set for a check-in, and this is to connect with what people feel is needed to pick up on from last time and to get the group speaking aloud (Yalom, 2019). The intro to the TRIP content for the workshop will be around coping mechanisms that show up when experiencing eco-anxiety. The facilitator will speak to the coping mechanism of activism and denial, and how these are very sensible ways of showing up for the climate crisis. Within the category of activism, this is related to the fight or flight, or hyperarousal space in the SNS. It shows up in a way of feeling like one must be in motion or an active participant making noise to quell feelings of anxiety. This state of hyper activation is dangerous in the way that it presents as activism as this can lead to burnout. When an activist is burnt out they are no longer able to make an impact. On the other hand, with denial, this shows up when the freeze and/or flight response is triggered. Likely the folks in the support group will not be in the state of denial as they are people that are willing to look at the climate crisis head on. The folks who will most likely be in a state of denial are friends, colleagues, and family members surrounding the participants. It is important to go deep into denial as this is likely a point of frustration when it shows up in participant's communities. It will be important to speak

to how denial can show up when people actually do recognize the climate crisis and simply find that the best way for them to cope is to ignore it. This act of ignoring the issue is due to the extreme discomfort and to protect oneself from experiencing distressing emotions or thoughts. Through the exploration of these coping mechanisms, there is a chance to build empathy for those in states of denial or inaction, and to recognize when being an activist can approach burnout.

Through using the ACT Hexaflex, participants will be introduced to the category of The Noticing Self and Defusion. With the noticing self, ACT encourages people to look inward to discover what they are experiencing. By noting what is going on for us, we can isolate our experience from that of others and understand that we are ultimately in control of our reactions and responses (Harris, 2019). Russ Harris defines the noticing self as “the part of us that is thinking - generating thoughts, beliefs, memories, judgements, fantasies, plans, and so on, (p.7, 2019).” By inviting deeper awareness to the Noticing Self, this can give some distance to one’s thoughts and feelings to note that they are not their thoughts or emotions. Defusion is another layer to the noticing self as it encourages people to detach from their thoughts, it is a way of engaging with thoughts in a gentle and passing way, rather than having them firmly speak to truth in oneself (Harris, 2019). Through thought observation and distance, this can encourage people to find less intensity within their experiences, and therefore have more access to noticing when they are being pulled to engage in coping mechanisms.

After teaching the two additional parts of the ACT Hexaflex, there will be time for open discussion amongst the group. This session will end with a check-out from each participant and facilitator.

Week Three Outline:

- Check-in *~10 minutes*
 - Suggestions: feelings, thoughts from the previous week
- TRIP *~15 minutes*
 - Theme: Coping mechanisms, how we deal with unpleasant emotions and experiences
 - Rationale: To empower participants to notice when they are engaging in coping behaviors and to make decisions about whether to continue or change course
 - Intention: To recognize when we are engaging in coping mechanisms
 - Practice Skills: Remember a time when they were activated
- ACT Hexaflex: Defusion and the Noticing Self (Harris, 2019) *~15 minutes*
- Break *~10 minutes*
- Open Discussion *~45 minutes*
 - Suggestions: What coping mechanisms do you recognize in yourself, when do they show up, and how do you manage? How do we notice ourselves reacting to the ways others cope?
- Check-Out *~10 minutes*

Week Four: Committed Action

In this week of the eco-anxiety support group, participants will start their meeting with a standard check-in to get talking and to reflect on anything that needs to be spoken to from the previous week. From there, we will speak about the TRIP framework for the day which is focussing on values and committed action. The values and committed action theme is pulled from the ACT Hexaflex (Harris, 2019). Russ Harris defines values as “how we want to behave on an ongoing basis” and our values are deeply personal and can be used to guide decision

making (p. 7, 2019). As for Committed Action, this is described as choosing to live by one's values, Harris also refers to committed action as "doing what it takes" to live by one's values (p.7, 2019). Knowing values and taking action on those values are clearly interconnected, they are also very large topics on their own, therefore this group will be doing mostly a guided values discovery activity and a discussion around the committed action portion.

The values assessment pairs up well with Committed Action, as once we know our values we can assess how we can make more mindful decisions and exist with more congruence (Harris, 2019). As an activity to help narrow down and discover one's values, I have pulled the values presented by Brené Brown in her recent book *Dare to Lead* (2018). The exercise that Brené Brown developed to find one's core values is to narrow a list of 107 values down to one's top 10 values (2018). Once the participant has their top 10, they must narrow it down to the top 2 – these top two become core values (Brown, 2018). By choosing only 2 core values, this helps to focus where to put one's attention. If we are not able to care for everything, perhaps we can care for the couple of things and ways of being that truly align with one's truest self. Once participants have their core values noted, there will be time to share them and to discuss initial thoughts on how they see these showing up in their future decisions and actions.

As usual, there will be a check-out to ground the group and to ground the content from the session. As this is officially the halfway mark, it will be important for the facilitator to remind the participants that there will only be 2 more meetings left before the support group will be complete.

Week Four Outline:

- Check-In ~10 minutes
 - Suggestions: feelings, and thoughts from the previous week

- TRIP *~15 minutes*
 - Theme: Values and action, what we can do
 - Rationale: To find a sense of universality in the room, knowing that we are all committed to doing our best, and understanding that different things are important to different folks
 - Intention: To offer a trajectory in how to move forward and a hopeful conversation with others
 - Practice Skills: Recognize our values and choose to move forward in a way that honours this
- Values Activity *~20 minutes*
 - Present slide 9 with the list of values that were pulled from Brene Brown's book Dare to Lead (2018), and go through the instructions one at a time. It is crucial to not expose the following steps before the prior is done.
 1. Write out which values matter the most to you
 2. Narrow it down to the top 10
 3. Choose the top 2 values
- ACT Hexaflex: Values, Know What Matters & Committed Action, Do What it Takes *~10 minutes*
- Break *~10 minutes*
- Open Discussion *~45 minutes*
 - Suggestions: How have we prioritized ourselves in the past and what ripple effects were noticed? What small (or large) acts of self-care can you participate in before next session?

- Check-Out ~10 minutes

Week Five: Eco-Therapy and Mindfulness

Within this 5th eco-anxiety support group, there will be an opportunity to explore what it might be like to integrate nature into one's mindfulness practice. As always, the group will start with a check in, and will move into the TRIP agenda. The TRIP framework will cover mindfulness moments with nature, and how to integrate these when we are not able to leave our city dwelling lives to connect with the most explicit version of nature. For the Practice Skills portion of the TRIP framework, facilitators will walk the participants through a mindfulness meditation with natural objects and experiences that are easily within reach. Within this mindfulness meditation the participants will be invited to travel mindfully through the exploration of the 5 senses with natural items and resources (Brough & Buckley, 2017). When engaging with nature and natural objects in this way, there is an emphasis on the forest, ocean, mountains, and grassy fields, however, this is not always possible for people who live in cities. For this group, the mindfulness meditation will be using things that can be found in the everyday in an urban city (Grose, 2020). Some of the sensory stimuli that can be found in the everyday experience are as follows: drinking water, eating a grape, smelling rosemary, feeling rocks, listening out a window. This can be a simple slow and guided practice of interacting with the objects. It may take the shape of a PNS exercise before encouraging participants to explore what is in front of them, such as the Savouring Snapshots exercise from Week 2 of the support group (Dana, 2020). Or perhaps the facilitator could gently guide them through the experience with encouragement of deeply noting how their senses are engaged.

The facilitator will then outline how this mindfulness falls into the ACT Hexaflex with relationship to *Contact with the Present Moment* (Harris, 2019). Contact with the present

moment is an open awareness to everything around us and within us (Harris, 2019). This is a particularly complicated piece of the Hexaflex, which is why I chose to present it past the halfway point of the group. There is also an encouragement within contact with the present moment to invite people to consciously shift their focus from one area on the present moment to another, and within this shifting there is empowerment over one's attention to experience (Harris 2019). There will then be time for open discussion, and then a closing with a check-out. As this is the second to last meet-up in the support group, it will be important for the facilitator to note that this was the second to last group, so participants can prepare for the goodbye session.

Week Five Outline:

- Check-In *~10 minutes*
 - Suggestions: feelings and thoughts from the previous week
- TRIP: *~15 minutes*
 - Theme: Connecting with nature
 - Rationale: Finding readily available ways to feel connected to the planet
 - Intention: Discovering mindfulness in a reasonable way within the standard westernized lifestyle
 - Practice Skills: Mindfulness moment with what is available
- ACT Hexaflex: Contact with the Present Moment *~15 minutes*
- Break *~10 minutes*
- Open Discussion *~45 minutes*
 - Suggestions: How was it to have a mindfulness moment while using pieces of the environment? How can we find moments to connect with nature when we live in cities?

- Check-Out ~10 minutes
 - Suggestion: reminder that next session will be the last session

Week Six: Holding Hope with Psychological Flexibility

This is the last week of the eco-anxiety support group, and this is when all of the parts come together for integration within the ACT Hexaflex to demonstrate Psychological Flexibility. The group will start with a check-in and will move into the TRIP framework to review the learnings over the course of the support group's time together. This session is primarily focussed on reviewing the learnings from the group, how people will integrate it into life outside of the group and building resilience through noting one's own strengths.

In the middle of the ACT Hexaflex, there is the invitation of Psychological Flexibility when all of the Hexaflex parts are working together. Harris defines psychological flexibility as "the ability to be present, open up, and do what matters (2019, p.6)." Being present is the combination of contact with the present moment and the noticing self, open up is the combination of defusion and acceptance, and do what matters is the mixture of values and committed action (Harris, 2019). Each of the individual parts holds a great role within the psychological flexibility and putting it into action. This is a good point within the session to note which areas are strong for group participants and where they see themselves inviting in more growth to areas that are less developed. There will also be reflection time that will invite participants to consider how each of the 3 main parts of the Hexaflex assist with managing one's eco-anxiety. Within open-up, there is a softening to the anxiety experience, and the recognition that our thoughts and feelings are temporary, passing, and only have as much weight as we give them. As for being present this assists in the eco-anxiety management experience through using mindfulness to decide whether the moment requires a level of reactivity, and if yes, then what

would be the appropriate response. When it comes to do what matters, this is important in the management in the anxiety experience as when one is existing in authenticity, there is less chance to feel the incongruence that can lead to an anxiety reaction. These 3 parts working together show how psychological flexibility is able to manage each and every experience with the most appropriate action for the moment, despite what the nervous system may be trying to override.

The closure of the group will be conducted in a calculated way to bring attention to growth points within each of the members (Yalom, 2019). This strengths awareness will be offered to the group members to reflect on for themselves, and if they are open to it, to have other group members and the facilitators to speak of what growth they have all seen in the members. There is also a suggested discussion topic of what is next for the participants, and how they see themselves building upon the work that has already been set in place.

The group will wrap up with a longer check-out, and if the facilitator sees fit, perhaps, give a chance for critical feedback to improve the group for the future rounds of participants. The closing of this group can be the facilitators creative choice.

Week Six Outline:

- Check-in ~10 minutes
 - Suggestions: thoughts and feelings from last session
- TRIP: ~20 minutes
 - Theme: Review the work done and learnings
 - Rationale: To integrate the material
 - Intention: To allow for understanding of personal growth and trajectories created in our time together

- Practice Skills: Reflection and noting strengths
- ACT Hexaflex: Psychological Flexibility *~15 minutes*
- Break *~10 minutes*
- Open Discussion *~45 minutes*
 - Suggestion: What growth have people seen from the time within the group? How do they see themselves using and building upon this thoughtful work when there is no longer a regular weekly group scheduled in?
- Check-Out *~20 minutes*
 - Suggestions: reflections, takeaways, whatever participants feel is important to share, creative choice to paint 2 core values on a rock to keep in close proximity for a tactile experience

Chapter Summary

The support group format is set in a fairly loose way to allow for creativity from both the group members and the facilitator to make it unique and applicable to them. This group outline has not yet been used, and cannot be vouched for as being something that could truly help people move through and manage their experience of eco-anxiety. What the group outline does offer through, is pieces from researched therapeutic methods that can assist people in managing their eco-anxiety better (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychological Association, 2017; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). The pieces used were the ACT Hexaflex, Mindfulness, Eco-therapy, and the support of like-minded people. Research has shown that the most important part is for the group to be together in solidarity with one another's pain and communal experience of eco-anxiety (Agoston, et al., 2022; American Psychological Association, 2017; Baudon & Jachens, 2021; Davenport, 2017; Grose, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). If

the psychoeducation portion of the group offers anything of help, it is at least a shared language and a launch pad for participants to connect around. The greatest hope for this group is for participants to feel a sense of universality in their experience and to have access to a couple of resources to tap into when in times of overwhelm and anxious reaction.

Conclusion

This paper is coming to a close with the hopes of supporting people who are invested in the betterment of our planet. There is still a general lack of research in the area of eco-anxiety and how the climate crisis is affecting the mental health of individuals across the world. Though the mental health effects of the climate crisis is a fairly under researched topic, it does not seem to discriminate based on age, gender, or physical location. There is research momentum building and there is an appetite for betterment of mental health resources and support in handling the climate crisis on an individual and a global level. This paper is being written in the early stages of climate emotion focussed therapy, and as long as the world is actively in a climate crisis, the need for climate crisis aware therapists will be a necessity in the field.

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