Climate grief : How we mourn a changing planet

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BBC: Climate emotions

Climate grief: How we mourn a changing planet

Climate grief comes in many forms. There is the bereavement-like grief and trauma when a climate change -enhanced "natural disaster" hits you or your close ones. Think of people in the Amazon area or Australia suffering from the fires. Then there is transitional grief: a growing awareness that things are changing, and feelings of grief and sadness because of the many losses involved. The range of things (and creatures) that people mourn for is wide: loss of human, animal and plant life, but also loss of identities, beliefs, and lifestyles.

Many people use the term "climate grief" to refer to a wide grief and anxiety related to the overall effects of climate change. Often the lines between climate change and other major ecological catastrophes become blurred, which is understandable, since climate change has an effect on so many other problems. Climate grief becomes a description of a general "ecological grief" or "eco-anxiety".

For the last five years, I have been researching eco-anxiety and thinking about how to encounter it constructively. I've invited psychologists to lead discussion groups on the matter together with me. I've guided workshops and given dozens of public lectures, especially in Finland, my home country. And I've met a lot of people with climate grief and eco-anxiety.

These two phenomenon are profoundly interlinked. If grief is not recognized, it can manifest itself as anxiety. There are many kinds of anxiety, but a key factor in practically all of them is a feeling of uncertainty. When we experience anxiety, we know something of a threat or a problem, but not everything. Anxiety is borne of encountering problematic uncertainty.

With the climate crisis, there is loads of uncertainty. There is the often-exaggerated scientific uncertainty. Nowadays most people know that things are indeed changing rapidly, but it is difficult to know the exact changes and their speed in the ecosystems around us. Then there is all the social uncertainty, related both to disputes and to practical choices. Uncertainty about which social norms to follow brings anxiety.

Climate grief is related both to changes that have already happened and to changes that are coming, or are in the process of happening. Thus, climate grief often has elements of what the grief theorists call "anticipatory grief" or "transitional grief". This complicates things. All kinds of grieving can be difficult in our contemporary societies, where skills in private or public grieving have long been neglected. But anticipatory grief is always hard. What is truly lost, or will be? When do we grieve those losses – when they begin, or when they end? It is easier to grieve concrete losses that have happened, such as the loss of a certain part of ecosystem or community. But how does one grieve losses which are ongoing for decades?

Earlier theories of grief do not discuss ecological grief, but they still contain highly useful insights. One of the current tasks is to apply earlier grief theories – and grief wisdom – into climate grief. An example of the insights are the terms coined by grief researchers William Worden and Thomas Attig. Worden defined that one of the key tasks in a grief process is "the adjustment to a new environment". Attig depicted the whole grief process as "relearning the world". Something has profoundly changed, something or someone is either lost or in the process of going away, and grief can help to us adjust.

Worden and Attig often had in mind the loss of a loved one, usually a human being. But these definitions match the needed scale of climate grief. The world around us has changed, and is changing still. We need to adjust to a new kind of social and ecological environment, with ongoing social disputes around climate politics and the ongoing physical effects of climate change. We need to *relearn the world*: it is not like it was, or like we thought it was. For many middle-class citizens of industrialized nations this brings a profound existential challenge. The world is revealed to be much more tragic and fragile than people thought it was. For many young people, the climate crisis is the first enormous existential crisis that they face. And our societies have not been very good in recent decades in building emotional resilience or existential resilience.

What, then, can be done? Luckily, much, although it is not easy. Many people have already engaged in relearning grieving skills with others. There are "Good Grief" peer groups in the US, grief workshops in the UK, and revitalization of ancient weeping practices in Finland – to name a few, rather countercultural practices. It can be profoundly relieving to admit and share feelings of grief and sadness in a safe setting. However, this often takes time, and requires trust to be built. These practices are also much easier, in general, for women than for men, because of cultural conditioning.

One useful practice, which can be done also alone, is naming emotions. My latest book in Finnish is about this: naming "ecological emotions" and "climate emotions". When things have a name, they can be more easily encountered, and experiences about them can be more easily shared. This naming practice has grown gradually in the 2000s. The Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht has been one pioneer in this, with words like solastalgia, homesickness because of environmental changes, and terrafurie, rage because of mindless destruction of nature. Place-specific words can be invented, such as "Reef Grief" or "Snow Anxiety". At the moment, numerous Finns – and other Nordic people – suffer from "winter grief" (talvisuru), loss of traditional winters because of climate change.

We need more vocabulary of the various forms of climate grief, and we need more thinking about the tasks and stages of grief in relation to them. We also need more thinking about the various other emotions that are connected with grief and anxiety, such as anger, frustration, and guilt. Study on "eco-anger" or "climate rage" has only begun, as has research on "climate burnout" and "climate depression". To mention one more, trauma dynamics need more attention.

At its best, a grief process leads to revitalization of a person's energies, to an ability to reinvest meaning in those practices of life that seem elementary. The world is now different and I am different, but there can still be meaning in life. There are people who have gone through this kind of process of climate grief or a process of post-traumatic growth, usually over several years, and their experiences provide much-needed encouragement. The way forward leads not through a by-pass lane of grief, but instead through a grieving process, hopefully with the support of understanding peers.

A brief vocabulary for climate grief related to winters
(A Nordic perspective)

- **snow anxiety**: people who would like to have snow feel anxiety because they don't know if they will receive snow this winter. Problematic uncertainty brings anxiety. Snow anxiety (in Finnish: lumiahdistus) is felt by many residents in the North, both young and old alike. Children love to play in the snow, while older people either ski or feel more like home in the traditional snowy

conditions. The loss of light, which comes with the loss of snow which reflects light, increases the health impacts of climate change, both physical and mental.
- **winter grief**: grief for the loss of traditional winter conditions (in Finnish: talvisuru). As grief in general, this has many forms. A strong winter-lover may feel bereavement. Many others feel a more vague sense of longing and loss, which can increase "eco-nostalgia" (Glenn Albrecht's term). Depending on whether there is a possibility to constructively engage in a grief process, eco-nostalgia can lead either to a melancholy-like and passive longing for the past, or an effort to protect that good which remains.
- "**talvihaikeus", a kind of joyful sadness as related to winters**: *haikeus* is a Finnish word for a sense of simultaneous sadness and gratitude. A person who feels *haikeus* senses that something is changing or going away, but she is still able to feel joy and gratitude for the parts of the desired thing that remain.
- **winter joy / snow relief**: because of winter grief and snow anxiety, the arrival of snow can feel exceptionally joyful and relieving. Sadness and joy are connected.

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