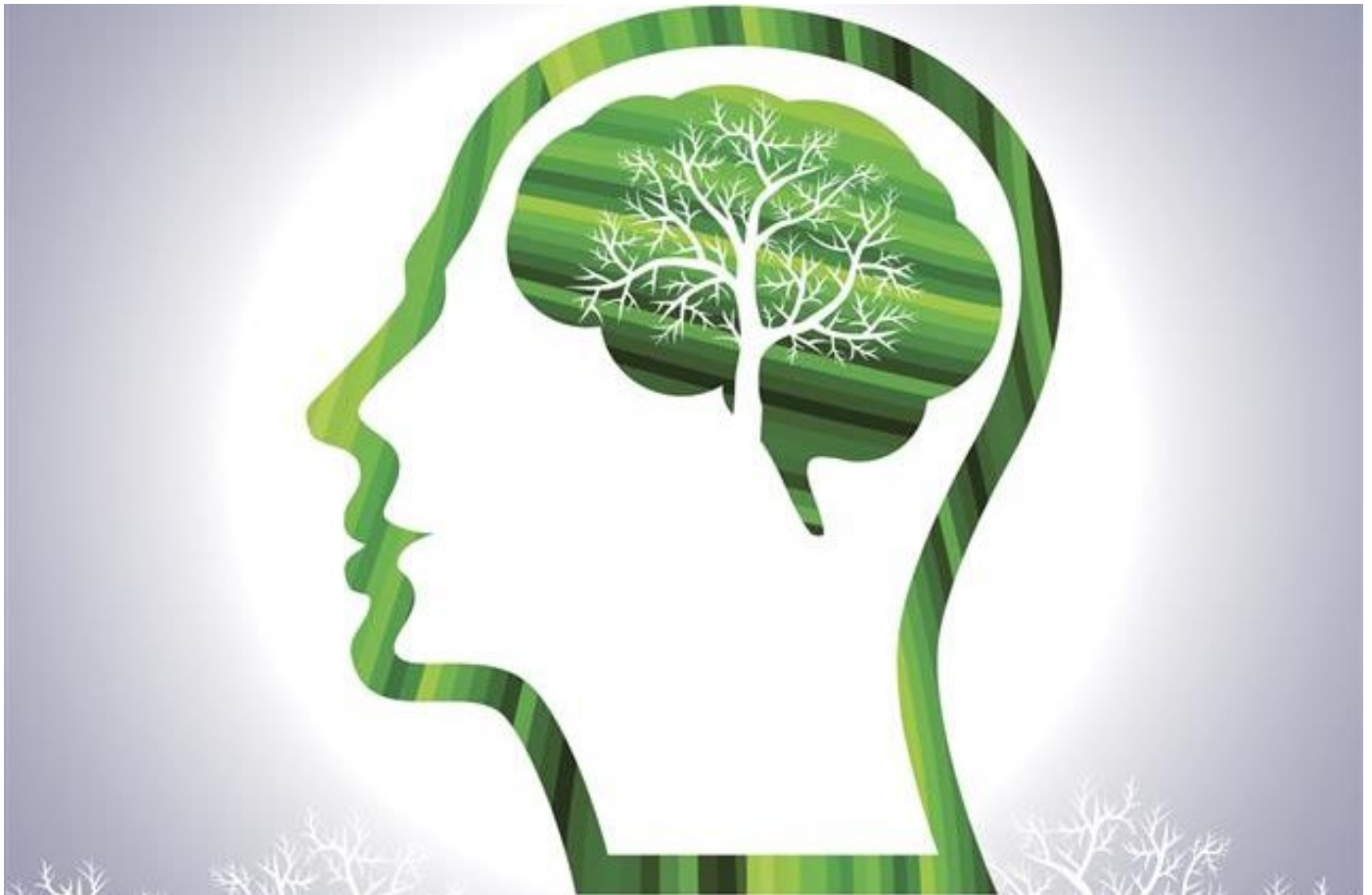


## BRIEF 6: Psychological adaptation to climate change



### **‘Overwhelming and terrifying’: the rise of climate anxiety**

Experts concerned young people’s mental health particularly hit by reality of the climate crisis

- The Guardian, Feb 10<sup>th</sup> 2020

Climate anxiety or climate change distress is becoming an increasingly common experience for many people in Australia and the world over. According to the Australian Psychological Society (<https://www.psychology.org.au/>), feeling the threat of climate change is a necessary component of being motivated to take action, but is also when we feel most distressed and worried. For many the threat feels so big and our ability to take meaningful action so limited that it can lead to a sort of psychological paralysis or an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and dread.

More and more is being written about how to manage ‘climate change distress’. In general, these strategies fall into four categories:

#### **1. Taking Action:**

In the Guardian article above, Dr Patrick Kennedy Williams suggested, “The positive thing from our perspective as psychologists is that we soon realised the cure to climate anxiety is the same as the cure for climate change – action. It is about getting out and doing something that helps.”

“Record and celebrate the changes you make. Nobody is too small. Make connections with other people and at the same time realise that you are not going to cure this problem on your own. This isn’t all on you and it’s not sustainable to be working on solving climate change 24/7.”

Further, the Australian Psychological Society recommends choosing a focus for action. Working in too many movements or on too many climate projects becomes unwieldy and can be overwhelming. Focusing will lower stress levels. Specialisation is a good behavioural strategy for coping. So prioritise the activities you choose to invest your energy. It’s ok to say ‘no’ sometimes.

## **2. Looking after yourself:**

Very few people can sustain a long-term commitment to helping others, whilst neglecting their own needs. Most of us burnout. Energy wanes, fatigue sets in, resentments and frustrations overtake us. Our capacity to love and care for others is a function of our capacity to love and care for ourselves.

Action against climate change is a long-game – decades. If you want to make a sustained impact in the space, you’ll need to be mindful of keeping your own emotional and physical energy levels topped up.

How is this done?

- a. Take regular breaks
- b. Don’t deny yourself fun activities
- c. Have healthy routines (eat, sleep, activity, socialise)
- d. Focus on a small core set of climate change activities (don’t spread yourself too thin)
- e. Take action with friends or colleagues or community members, so you feel part of a group
- f. Resist temptations to become highly self-critical at your efforts
- g. Acknowledge and accept that difficult emotions will be part of the journey of trying to make change on such a big issue

## **3. Connecting with nature**

Eco-psychologists emphasise the deep bond and reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Separation of humans from nature, through human systems of consumption and market-driven processes, lead to environmental devastation. Conversely, reconnecting with nature promotes individual healing, moves away from negative emotions like blame and anxiety and allows people to feel more balance between their thoughts and their feelings, leading to a natural movement towards environmental action and sustainable lifestyles.

## **4. Connecting with each other**

Social support enhances psychological wellbeing and reduces psychological distress during stressful times. It does this in a few ways, for example, by buffering people from stressful events and by providing people with alternative ways of thinking about or dealing with stressors. There are several ways that connecting with others can help mitigate climate change distress:

- Share concerns, thoughts and feelings about climate change with trusted friends and colleagues.
- Spend social time with your community, family and friends, both those who share your values, as well as those outside of your environmental interests.
- Have access to a mentor who can help you think through your work, give you strategic advice and be a good sounding board.

- Belong to a group of people who share your values and can work on your projects together with you, or act like a support group.

Further, taking meaningful action on climate change depends on communities working together to develop local solutions, in addition to activism and advocacy for broader policy change. As such, every act of kindness and generosity that fosters connection (especially across political divides), however small, is an action supporting positive action on climate change.

### **THIS BRIEF**

Your challenge if you choose this brief is to create a device/ communication strategy / psychological aid that combines encouraging and maintaining motivation to take action consistent with reducing the threat of climate change, with self-care strategies that can reduce climate change distress.

### **READ/LEARN MORE**

[https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/cf076d33-4470-415d-8acc75f375adf2f3/coping\\_with\\_climate\\_change.pdf.pdf](https://www.psychology.org.au/getmedia/cf076d33-4470-415d-8acc75f375adf2f3/coping_with_climate_change.pdf.pdf)

<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/01/23/coping-with-climate-change-distress/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/10/overwhelming-and-terrifying-impact-of-climate-crisis-on-mental-health>

<https://www.bath.ac.uk/announcements/rise-of-eco-anxiety-affecting-more-and-more-children-says-bath-climate-psychologist/>

<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/>

<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-22/edition-2/climate-change-psychologys-contribution>

<https://e360.yale.edu/features/ecopsychology-how-immersion-in-nature-benefits-your-health>