FEATURED ARTICLES

"Above All, Do No Harm:" Serving the Population's Growing Climate Distress

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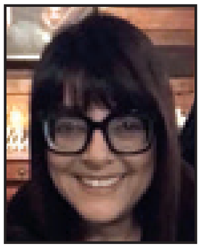

Disasters and property loss triggered or exacerbated by the climate crisis are affecting an ever-expanding percentage of the US and world population, with significantly more frequent, destructive, widespread, and unaccustomed rain, snow, excess glacial/snowpack melt and flooding, supercell tornadoes, wildfires with deadly air pollution, crop loss, species and habitat death, zoonotic pandemics, and drought. With more people experiencing direct exposure to such conditions, the percentage of the population reporting reactive grief, anxiety, or trauma over climate change (versus free-floating anticipatory anxiety and grief for *future* climate emergencies) continues to increase. By 2020, 67% of Americans reported feeling somewhat or extremely anxious about the effects of climate change on the planet (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).

In recognition of this growing concern, the American Psychological Association, International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, Climate Psychology Alliance of North America, and other respected organizations have issued a call for mental health professionals to seek education and training to develop the necessary competencies for meeting citizens' burgeoning demand for help with their distress. Reactions range from normal, understandable, and uncomfortable reactions to traumatic experiences and losses, to development or exacerbation of diagnosable psychological disorders (e.g., major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder) in already vulnerable individuals. One might expect this demand to grow geometrically over the coming years.

The American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* ("Ethics Code") (2016) requires that psychologists restrict practice to areas for which they have achieved adequate competency in their knowledge base and skills, through a combination of didactic education and supervised clinical training in those areas (Standards 2.01a, c, e). Although intervention for climate anxiety and grief certainly makes use of the foundational skills most psychologists possess, there are several aspects of climate distress that are challenging and unique. Ecopsychology as an area of specialization was first recognized by APA in the early 1980s, along with the formation of Division 34 (Society for Environmental, Population and Conservation Psychology). A meaningful literature of peer-reviewed research and innovative, empirically-studied, problem-specific psychological interventions for climate distress is expanding, and familiarity and experience with this body of work can enable clinicians to become competent to treat affected patients.

Some of the singular challenges in treating climate distress, relative to other traditional presenting problems, include:

- With some type of climate change happening in almost every geographic area, every *therapist* is experiencing the issue, to some extent, at the same time as their patients (a red flag for risk of countertransference issues to manage).
- In the US, the nation is split into sometimes hotly conflicting attitudinal and political factions regarding climate change, which can heighten distress and prompt patients to fear voicing their true opinions to close ones or their therapist. This situation has been termed "the Six Americas" (Yale Program on Climate Change, 2023): the Alarmed, Concerned, Cautious, Disengaged, Doubtful, and Dismissive groupings of public opinion on climate change. Related to this, therapists need to be prepared to assist the growing number of romantic partners who are having conflict over differing attitudes or household behaviors regarding climate change and are presenting to eco-psychologists with relationship conflict in increasing frequency. (Doherty, Thomas, Ph.D., personal communication, April, 2023).
- Unlike the types of irrational anxiety experienced in panic disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or other Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) conditions, fear and anxiety regarding climate change is *realistic* anticipation of future loss and likely personal and societal disruption. The estimated 68 million members of Gen Z and the Millennial generation, who will hit middle age by 2040 (when climate change effects are predicted to hit the catastrophic level) are more likely to be either Alarmed or Concerned about global warming than Gen X, Baby Boomers and older generations. Over the past decade, both acceptance and associated worry over climate change have increased faster among younger Americans aged 18-34 compared to older Americans (Marion, Rosenthal, Goldberg, et al., 2022). Anxiety, anger, and pressure to make a difference now combine with worries about career choice, livelihood, and childrearing in that questionable future. Reactions to present losses and accurate anticipation of future loss and disruption raise issues regarding proper use of diagnosis versus over-pathologizing normal reactions, and associated reimbursement issues for real distress that may not validly warrant a DSM-5 diagnosis. (Although distress over climate disasters and losses *is* real and can be very subjectively upsetting, onset of a diagnosable DSM-5 mood or anxiety disorder as a result may be primarily a risk for those with pre-existing generalized anxiety traits or symptoms (e.g., obsessive or catastrophic thinking).

- Wild swings from climate denial to a reckoning with reality can lead to climate overwhelm or paralysis if one does not utilize the research-supported triad (Pikhala, 2022) of emotional engagement, self-care, and whichever choice of empowered action fits one's interests and personality.

In my LACPA Convention presentation in October, I will be speaking in depth on common therapist emotional/interpersonal (countertransference) reactions to clients' climate distress. There are three important steps therapists can take to prepare for treating patients with climate distress:

1. Establish clinical competency. To be sure you are not operating outside of your areas of competence, pursue professionally respected training and education in ecopsychology and treatment of climate distress (e.g., available online through Climate Psychology Alliance(CPA)-North America, CPA-UK branch, https://livingwiththeclimatecrisis.org/facilitation-and-support; SustainableSelf.com; Lewis and Clark University, Pacifica Graduate Institute). Familiarize yourself with and subscribe to established newsletters on evolving climate conditions. Do you know what "greenwashing," "the individual responsibility" ad campaign, COP28, IPCC, "carbon offsets," the "climate elephant," or "+2.7 C" are? These are significant climate distress concepts now in the public discourse and which your client may want to discuss.
2. Reflect on where you and your partner or closest friends/relatives fall in terms of the Six Americas stances on climate change, and take the Six Americas SASSY Survey to assist you in that process (https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/sassy). Then consider what range of emotions you have in that stance towards others who feel similarly and towards others, respectively, who hold each of the other five stances. Journaling or voice recording these reactions and coming back to reflect further another day as well as when you later have a patient with climate distress can be illuminating and promote your own empathy.
3. Complete your own Environmental Identity Timeline (Doherty, 2022). This meaningful and stimulating tool was developed by APA Fellow, Past-President of Division 34, and long-time eco-psychologist Thomas Doherty (who will lead a LACPA CE Panel on November 4). Draw a line across a paper and label equal intervals into the different decades of your life thus far. Then mark dots with dates on your timeline for such environmental milestones as: first pet; family geographic locations and moves; favorite trips and athletic involvements involving nature, natural beauty, outdoor sports; natural or environmental disasters or first-hand contact with pollution; memorable courses regarding science and the environment; fearful or traumatic events in interaction with climate or the outdoors; favorite toys associated with the outdoors or animals; COVID or other experience of a zoonotic illness (one arising from the incursion of humans into wild species habitats). When you are done, consider what your timeline illuminates about the source of your feelings and beliefs regarding the natural environment, animals, and climate change. Consider taking it further and creating an environmental family tree, where you make a family tree genogram and for each family member, add nodes showing one or two things about them that would go on their environmental identity timeline (e.g., your uncle who spent five years displaced in a refugee camp despised camping in later life). These are also used as assessment tools with patients in climate distress. ▲

Dr. Borys *received her clinical psychology doctorate from UCLA in 1988. In private practice for 32 years, she specializes in treating and providing expert witness consultation regarding reactions to trauma, disaster, grief and the climate crisis; health psychology; and psychologist ethics/standards of practice. She is a member of the LACPA Ethics Committee and co-chair, with Pamela McCrory, PhD, of the LACPA EcoPsychology SIG.*

References are available on the LACPA Website www.lacpa.org.

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