



Living with Eco-Anxiety

MELISSA MOORE

BEGINNING IN THE late twentieth and especially early twenty-first centuries, a growing body of eco-psychological knowledge has emerged in response to humanity's growing awareness of the climate crisis. Psychologists, in seeking to normalize and to label what they view as a growing emotional dysregulation due to climate change, have proposed labels such as "eco-distress", "eco-melancholia", and "eco-anxiety."¹ Recently, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) adopted "eco-anxiety" as a "chronic fear of environmental doom."²

Another definition of eco-anxiety is a "persistent worry about the future of the Earth and the life it shelters."³ Eco-psychology is concerned with human psychological relationships with nature and how eco-events, like natural disasters, impact individual and community wellbeing and overall health, especially in terms of personality and identity.

Environmentalist Renee Lertzman conceptualizes eco-anxiety, or what she terms environmental melancholia, to be at the heart of our apparent apathy and helplessness as a species in the face of impending doom. "Environmental melancholia—an arrested, inchoate form of mourning—is at the heart of much of the inaction in response to ecological degradation," argues Lertzman.⁴ She advocates for *emotional integration*—the ability to bring awareness to emotional intensity—in order to deal with our collective trauma. According to Lertzman, emotional integration is the only way humans will be able to adapt in the face of impending disaster.

From a contemplative psychology perspective, which is this author's orientation, working with eco-anxiety is similar to working with heightened emotions. The contemplative method leans into feelings energetically as they arise,

staying with the emotional sensation instead of thinking about the issues or ruminating in fear. This methodology powerfully demonstrates that eco-anxiety is an expression of sanity; the antidote is to feel genuine grief over the state of the world as it is arising.

Contemplative psychology offers a compassionate and mindful approach to working with anxiety, as opposed to pathologizing an individual's experience and response to the reality at hand.⁵ This approach to psychology regards anxiety not as a medical diagnosis, but rather as a rational response to climate change. Severe instances, however, can have a mental health impact if left without alleviation.⁶ A severe case can debilitate one into states of catatonia or agoraphobia due to extreme anxiety.

The climate crisis feels personal even when one has not been personally affected by fires, devastating weather events, or hurricanes. It is increasingly difficult to ignore the apocalyptic imagery of devastation that the weather is unceasingly delivering in our daily headlines. In mid-August 2020, in the heart of Denver, Colorado, Sloan's Lake, the place where I go every day to resource myself, had a significant drop in oxygen levels in the water due to the high stagnant heat and fire smoke throughout Colorado. The result was that hundreds, if not thousands, of fish died and floated to the surface. On my morning walk, I met the stench of dead fish two blocks away. The fish were lying on their bellies gasping for oxygen—mimicking the gasping for oxygen that COVID-19-inflicted patients experience. There is no air; we can't breathe.

Ecological mishaps tend to motivate action when they affect us directly in our backyard.⁷ A large majority of Americans have lived through a major fire, an earthquake, a flood, or a hurricane.⁸ That, or we came close enough to know that the disruption is a daunting one. Eco-anxiety is now in the weave of the human fabric, something we are living with daily.⁹

These haunting incidents occur with such frequency that we can learn to dread the news. If one believes in science, it becomes apparent that it is only getting worse.¹⁰ The crisis is upon us! We live with these climate change events as if one has been diagnosed with a terrible disease with a poor prognosis; we are frozen by not knowing what we can do to help. We know that unless we did something yesterday, it will continue to worsen.

In spite of the pressing need to champion ecological issues, I confess my own inconsistent activism, and the extent to which a constantly changing focus around personal habits is mired in the tiresome discourse of political correctness. I tend to move in wide swings of extremism: one year eradicating all paper in my house (except toilet paper); another time living in a permaculture food forest in California while paying high water bills. I fly to offer seminars worldwide and agonizing over my carbon footprint while doing so; but I don't stop.

Many people become intentionally inactive and ignore the situation altogether, falling into what Dr. Lertzman calls the “hope and despair option.” Rather than motivating action, this option leaves us wallowing in ambivalence and paralysis. For many, the eco-crisis presents a significant concern; a large majority of Americans are concerned about climate change, and growing numbers see it as a crisis.¹¹ More and more people have responded by becoming vegan, creating gardens, choosing local community-supported agriculture, and even deciding not to bear offspring. Still, those of us with comforts and conveniences constantly find ourselves head-to-head with the paradox of feeling that we should give them up.¹²

It is challenging to bear the truth of the crisis consciously and consistently. It is easy to grow ambivalent and complacent just to keep ourselves and our families healthy and housed.¹³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, I’ve found many of my behaviors increasingly at odds with my environmental and ethical commitments. For example, I order way too much from Amazon when it appears to be the only place to get what I want. Convenience facilitates becoming unconscious of the urgency of the challenges we face.

Contemplative psychology calls for facing and feeling the underbelly of our anxiety and *resourcing* ourselves in doing so. Resourcing means we pause to integrate our emotional reactions by experiencing them fully and completely. Usually, when we are hit with an emotional reaction, we either bury it or act it out; however, resourcing means we integrate the feelings fully by giving the energy our attention. We offer ourselves a kind and open space to experience emotional energy as it is, completely. This is the contemplative psychology approach to working with emotions—we integrate them and utilize the energy as a strength.

We cannot advance any of our aspirations to make a change or to consciously steward the environment without learning to relate directly with eco-anxieties. If we do not embrace the emotions we are sitting with, we will never be consistent or successful in changing habits that need changing.¹⁴

For those of us who experience eco-anxiety, step one is to meet and feel that anxiety directly for what it is: helplessness, fear, stubbornness, or attachment. We need to take the time to touch all aspects of what exists and why we feel the anxiety we do. Karen Kissel Wegela reminds us that, “The very things we do to become confused can be turned around to and used to help us reconnect to our brilliant sanity.”¹⁵ The problem is that meeting our anxiety is the last thing most of us want to do. Often, we look for anything, any fix we can find not to feel the tinge of anxiety.

Emotions arise as messages, and they are full of wisdom when we’re not using emotions to confirm that we exist. If we avoid or micro-manage emo-

tions, then they govern us like demons; ultimately, however, emotions are our teachers. The way to meet our emotional energy directly is to feel our emotions as they arise by listening to the body, as opposed to the thoughts in our head. Learning how to do this is a contemplative discipline; it takes mind training—building the muscle of awareness that habituates us to come back to our bodies as an anchor. Learning to feel the energy of emotions.¹⁶

In using contemplative psychology methods as propagated by Chögyam Trungpa and Pema Chodron, such as meeting our emotions directly, it is essential to be gentle and kind toward ourselves. The practice is to befriend our emotional energy and learn to listen to emotional pain simply as information rather than as an obstruction.¹⁷

We need a robust, supportive environment and a means by which we can resource ourselves to be brave and experience the wisdom of underlying painful emotions.¹⁸ A supportive environment can take many forms, but at minimum, it must be a place where we feel protected enough to address genuine emotional depth. Sometimes a class or a group dedicated to grieving our planet's loss can be helpful.¹⁹ For myself, I've created contemplative psychology-inspired groups to support us in exploring how to live with our emotional energy related to the environment on a day-to-day basis. The entire curriculum of Karuna Training occurs in a cohort over the course of two years, allowing participants to bring many issues, environmental anxiety as only one issue, as a topic to be held and related to in the community. When we work in a community, the opportunity is one of 'being heard' and 'bearing witness' to others' emotional truths. This communal listening strengthens us and supports the further capacity to meet and hear others in their pain.

At the moment that we face our fears, anxiety, and complacency, and dare to feel them directly, we strengthen fearlessness because we are daring to feel emotions directly and fully on the spot. Facing fear can look like a breakdown or display of vulnerability on the surface, but the willingness to feel unpleasant emotional energy builds strength and resilience. Meeting this energy directly empowers us; we derive resourcefulness within ourselves by facing and feeling our emotions.²⁰

It is essential to find a community with whom we can rally to restore our faith and resource ourselves for the immense challenges humanity currently faces. Multiple ecological grief groups are forming—online salons and google groups designed to help us collectively process the ways in which we live in and out of alignment with our values. We need support: domains to hold the truth of our changing relationship to climate and the ecological challenges ahead of us because it is nearly impossible to bear it alone.²¹

For example, the day I discovered the dead fish in Sloan's lake, I was fortunate to attend an ecology group with whom I could share my feelings about what happened. The ability to talk about it strengthened me such that from the moment I left the group, I could move beyond my shock and begin to investigate what happened and what could be done. My initial research, however, led me to a good deal of speculation from my neighbors on Nextdoor posts, from "Someone put some blue chemicals in the water," to "The lake is dead, and the spring has dried up." These speculations were pure anxiety speaking—yet another opportunity to look beneath impulsive, reactive fears and discover what is happening in our own minds and in the broader situation.²² Once we can discern our true feelings and bolster/brace/ground/reinforce ourselves enough to investigate a situation thoroughly, then and only then can we ask the question, "What can I do?"

To work with my anxiety around the lake, I again turned to Nextdoor, but this time I started my own channel "Let's Help Sloan's Lake," on the NextDoor app. In starting this channel, I've collected people with much more information and learned that the problem is greater than I imagined: Not only has the lake lost its original spring, but the neighborhood runoff is what provides the water in the lake. Often when we examine a situation more deeply, we end up peeling back a layer of hidden truths and find out even worse news.

Ultimately, it is essential that the work of addressing eco-anxiety extends to feeling one's feelings directly and authentically, as well as doing so in a like-minded community.²³ Thus preparing ourselves for a journey where we can make whatever changes we think are appropriate and in accord with our values. On my daily walks to the lake, I now keenly keep an eye on water levels and the lake's general health. I see the face of Sloan's lake change daily, and recently the lake appears healthier due to extreme late winter snowfall. However, I know the lake's apparent health is an illusion.

Living with eco-anxiety is about tuning in to the environment and holding nature along with ourselves in loving kindness. It is a journey of realizing the anxiety is accurate, and there's a reason it's coming up—it is intelligence! The environment is speaking to us, the elements are raging from a human perspective, and the real question is, are we listening?

To live with eco-anxiety is to embrace the notion that we are interconnected with this sacred earth and all its inhabitants. Their health and sanity are directly related to our health and sanity. When we begin to feel into and embrace our planet and its inhabitants as a family, we naturally want to find ways to act; even small changes work to make a difference and help to ease our anxiety.²⁴ The connection we have with the environment abides in the heart, flourishes in

the mind, and lives through the body. We all need to find ways to stay focused, and staying focused is 99% of the effort.²⁵

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NOTES

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