**The Climate Crisis – a Question of Connection.**

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It is a cliché to say that the climate crisis is the greatest existential threat to the future of humankind’s ability to survive on this planet, so why doesn’t that awareness translate into immediate remedial action? 30 years ago, when I first got involved in climate activism (e.g. protesting against the road through Twyford Down), its effects were predicted rather than evident. Now they are upon us: flood, fire, melting ice, to say nothing of the wars raging around us whose origins can ultimately be traced to scramble for diminishing resources, and the plagues born of unnatural proximity between humans and other species. A truly apocalyptic scenario – yet our leaders, driven by voting intentions among the wider public, roll back on their inadequate pledges towards mitigating the looming disaster.

Human beings, their behaviour, relationships and emotions, are our core business as clinical psychologists. Surely, we have some responsibility here. My own reading of the paradoxical human response to the crisis is as follows. We might see ourselves as unitary selves, but the stability of our internal state is dependent on the roles and relationships that contain us and give us context. Connection is key. Gilbert (1992) emphasizes our dependence on our perceived position in the primate hierarchy for inner coherence. Our newer brain, rational, faculties that have enabled us to so dominate our environment, only hold sway while a benign relational context obtains. When that falters, we are hard wired for our emotions, and therefore our bodies, to take over. Context in terms of time and place recedes, so past threat experience gets added to the current crisis, further fuelling the response.

Our rational minds can grasp intellectually the arguments around an important, but not immediate, threat like climate change. However, when this is translated into major lifestyle changes now, that switches to the sort of threat that mobilises emotion and body to defend the status quo. “You mean I have to give up my car?......” Further, where the enormity of the climate threat is felt as a destabilisation of the good enough sense of self, the emotion/body system hastens to shut out the threat, leading to paralysis and denial. This is the sort of process those of us who work in mental health, for instance, are familiar with on the individual scale. Multiplied across a population, and affecting reaction to such an urgent crisis, this response heralds disaster.

So, we know how to support our clients to manage emotion and behaviour. We are scientists of behaviour change. How can this be harnessed in the service of meeting the climate challenge? What follows are suggestions, based on the way that I work clinically, through using emotions positively (Clarke 2021). Emotion and body take over in the service of short-term internal state management – and do so ‘under the radar’ of conscious awareness; this is the problem. Conscious use of the power of our emotions can be the solution. Left to themselves, emotion/body controls us even though we might not realize it. We can consciously take back that power.

**Defensive Emotions**

To start with considering the emotions triggered by the climate emergency, fear, anger and sadness, followed by guilt when recognising our complicity, come to mind, and these are all essentially defensive emotions. Fearcan be the starting point for action, but only the starting point. If it is allowed too much scope it will paralyse. A bit of fear will mobilise us to defend. In the case of sadness, meeting the feeling head on and allowing the tears to flow is the natural way for humans to come to terms with what is unbearable. We need that healing, and allowing the flow is easier if it expressed along with others who feel the same way. The grief will be more bearable if shared, but it needs managing, as giving into grief must not become an indulgence. Action is needed too, and this is where anger can shine. Anger mobilises the body for positive action. The dangers inherent in anger are obvious so it too needs careful management. Anger under your control can use the body’s energy for action and provide the accompanying courage to work on change. Guilt, like fear, has some motive power, but needs to be strictly limited, as otherwise it too can paralyse.

**Expansive Emotions**

Emotions that figure less prominently in the psychologist’s armoury have perhaps most to offer in response to the environmental crisis. Humans are hardwired for affiliation as well as to meet threat, and an array of emotions facilitate this. The importance for wellbeing and security of belonging to a kinship group of friends and family is evident. However, sense of connection has a wider reach. Membership of social group, job or profession, nation etc. are all embedded deep in our identity and consequently evoke strong emotions. Our sense of connection with place, with the non-human creatures with whom we share this planet, such as those kept as pets, runs deep. Then, across the ages, humans have experienced and honoured experience of relationship with something all encompassing, whether designated as a deity or acknowledged in vaguer terms. This is an example where relationship, which is known through experience and not facts, reaches beyond the precision of our verbal knowing, so that labels matter less than that sense of connection, sometimes known as spiritual. This connection has a strength that needs harnessing in the cause.

While the defensive emotions concentrate on preserving our fragile sense of self, expansive emotions operate in the opposite way, enabling us to open ourselves in relationship and take responsibility beyond narrow self-interest. They liberate us from being sunk, blinkered, in our individual self-consciousness, to embrace relationship and engage with the wider cosmos. Joy, love and wonder are obvious examples. These have a crucial part to play in our need to accept responsibility for our planet. All human consciousness is a dance between these two states. Facilitating recognition of this dance and working to shift its balance away from getting bogged down in individual self-interest, towards opening to the cosmos around, is a task that we as psychologists should be capable of.

So, what are these expansive emotions and how can they be harnessed in response to the crisis? Wonder, (or Awe as Matthew Fox who has written eloquently about all this would put it – Fox 1983), and gratitude, are natural responses to the beauty of the earth and her creatures. Love for the natural environment, and therefore our planet, can flow from this, and connect (as expansive emotions connect while defensive ones separate) with love for our fellow humans, our children and their children down the generations and the non-human creatures with whom we share the planet. Allied with the other emotions this provides the self-transcending motive force to make a difference.

Love means responsibility for the beloved, and where love of earth meets the climate emergency, this responsibility can feel crushing, leading to fear, withdrawal, depression. This is the source of ‘eco anxiety’, which has been rightly identified as a rational, non-pathological, response to the situation. The imperative is to harness this anxiety towards action and divert from its paralysing potential. As with all emotions, there is no straight ‘right way’ but a dialectical dance, that needs to be managed in what DBT calls our ‘Wise Mind’ (Linehan 1993), in the service of both living, as far as possible, in a way that fosters a good future for ourselves and for the planet.

Anger, with its potential to motivate, provide courage and energy as it gets the body ready for action, can come into play here – again, bypassing its destructive potential by harnessing it in service of love and gratitude to right the wrongs that have been perpetrated on our precious home, the earth.

**Conclusion**

As psychologists we are in a better position than most to recognize the way human cognition shuttles constantly between its rational and its emotional/body systems. Further, we have tools that can help steer this delicate balance. On the most basic level, the skill of mindfulness can be developed to help us link the rational side that knows the bigger picture and appreciates the crisis, with the expansive emotions and their motivational power, towards taking control. The body’s threat mode can be calmed by breathing, and that is just the start. We have a duty as creatures dependent on the health of this planet to use our expertise to do whatever we can, and to guard against ourselves becoming sunk in despair and paralysis at the enormity of it all. Joining with others of a like mind is the best antidote to individual despair, and the DCP’s Climate Emergency Action Group is a good places to start.

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