

CLIMATE GRIEF

WHAT IS CLIMATE GRIEF?



Grief is the intense sorrow we experience in response to losing someone or something that we deeply care about.

We mourn the loss of loved ones, of relationships and jobs that didn't work out, of dreams that are left unfulfilled. In the same way, our sense of loss also extends to the rapid destruction of the planet we call home. We are grieving the loss of the planet as we know it, and those of us engaged in climate activism also understand that things will get much worse in the future unless we overhaul the systems that exploit our planet.

Climate grief, also known as ecological grief, is a relatively new concept in literature. It has emerged to describe how climate change has an impact on our mental health. It refers to the feelings of loss, despair and anxiety while witnessing collapse of ecosystems, ecological disasters, extinction of non-human species and more generally, the man-made harm inflicted on the planet. This may be a relatively new phenomenon to those of us in the Global North, but many people in the Global South who have already experienced the effects of climate change on a devastating scale have been dealing with these emotions for a long time.

Climate grief is an important concept because it highlights our psychological response to a rapidly warming planet; after all, the climate crisis is not an abstract, scientific phenomenon - its effects can be physically felt. To grieve the loss of our home is a legitimate mental health response to the climate crisis, and constitutes an important part of what it means to be a human in the Anthropocene.

HOW DO I RECOGNISE CLIMATE GRIEF?

Not everyone experiences grief in the same way. For some, grief can come out as anger and rage, especially at the inaction of governments and corporations to reverse the scale of the crisis. In recent years, research has also been focussed on understanding 'eco-anger' and 'climate rage.' Others may feel a surge of 'eco-anxiety' or 'climate anxiety' at the thought of time running out to save our planet. After all, we are running out of time to minimise climate catastrophe, and we have less than a decade left. Climate grief can also cause sadness, frustration, denial and confusion. More often than not, you will have experienced some form of each of these emotions.

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Climate grief can also be anticipatory or transitional - you may not experience climate grief immediately after a loss or ecological disaster. Instead, anticipatory grief is the process of grieving losses before they materialise. For instance, in the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, some of you may have experienced anticipatory grief - the feeling that things are about to get much worse.

Anticipatory grief can be hard to articulate because of the uncertainty associated with it: you do not know exactly when or how you will experience a tragic event. Similarly, the transitional nature of climate grief means that you grieve the loss of the planet as you live through these rapid, overwhelming transitions. The concept of 'solastalgia' may also be particularly helpful to explain this phenomenon. Solastalgia refers to the lived experience of environmental change, and sparks feelings of emotional or existential distress. As Albrecht (the philosopher who coined the term) puts it, solastalgia is "the homesickness you have when you are still at home".

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE CLIMATE GRIEF?

Climate grief is a difficult emotion to process, and it can often be a lonely experience. At times, you might even think it is easier to stay away from climate news, and suppress your emotions altogether (it really isn't helpful to do the second, but do think seriously about how much news you consume, when you consume it and why). This might be a short-term solution, but in order to sustain climate activism over a period of time, neglecting your emotions can hurt your wellbeing, morale and ability to take climate action. You have to confront your grief, not just to look after yourself, but to be effective in taking action.

Acknowledging grief becomes necessary to sustain individual and collective morale, and to deal with despair without giving into it. The next section addresses each of these elements in more detail.

CLIMATE GRIEF: QUICK SUMMARY

- We can experience grief not only at the loss of loved ones, but also at the loss of our planet, and of our imagined futures
- Climate grief can manifest as many different emotions, including rage, anxiety, sadness, frustration and denial
- Climate grief can happen to you before ecological loss or disaster is experienced on a personal level- it can be anticipatory.
- Acknowledging and confronting this grief is important for looking after your mental and emotional health, but also in order to effectively take action.