

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Climate change impacts all aspects of life—causing extreme weather, wildfires, melting of polar ice caps, displacement of wildlife, just to name a few. And since the issue is politicized worldwide, the inaction of many governments and industries is frustrating and anxiety-provoking. How do we deal with this? Apparently, it is a major problem because the therapy community has identified it as a stressor. Our guest today is Wendy Greenspun, a climate-aware psychologist to provide some insights. Wendy, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining us.

WG: Thank you so much for having me.

VC: Wendy, let's start with your background and training and tell us if you've had any special training in the climate aware area.

WG: OK, so I am a licensed clinical psychologist, I am also trained as a family therapist and have a certificate in psychoanalysis and I work a lot with couples, families and individuals. In terms of training in climate psychology, this is a really new specialty field so when I started to get involved a number of years ago there was no training. In fact, I am one of the people who is starting to train other mental health professionals in this arena, but it is a growing field. So hopefully there will be more.

KK: So, Wendy, you mentioned a trade organization, the Climate Psychology Alliance. I wanted to know if it meant that the profession has acknowledged this as major issue?

WG: Well, it is beginning. So, the Climate Psychology Alliance started in the UK 10 or 15 years ago and we now have a North American branch so climate, so Climate Psychology North America and it has grown immensely in just the past few years. The American Psychological Association has had a task force on climate change so there's more training going on. I was part of making a clinical video to train therapists in doing climate aware therapy, there's a Climate Psychiatry Alliance, so there are a number of professional groups who are now engaging in this area and seeing the importance of learning about this and recognizing the struggles that people are going through in the face of growing climate disruption.

KK: Do you think that the media has helped create climate change anxiety?

WG: That's a really interesting question. I used to think that the media wasn't covering the climate and environmental crisis enough and so they weren't helping to raise awareness of this growing trauma that's happening to our planet. Then there was sort of an over-focus in many ways, I think on climate distress and all that was going on so I think sometimes the level of alarm that's being presented in the news is raising people's awareness but also their levels of distress so I wouldn't say they are to blame for it. I would say they raise the awareness of what is actually happening and as a result people are feeling climate anxiety, climate distress, climate grief. I also would add that that's not necessarily a bad thing. So, climate distress is a sign that you're aware and that you care. And sometimes that is the first step in being able to take meaningful action, so we just have to find ways to manage that distress so it's not overwhelming and can be worked with in useful ways that actually propel our whole culture/society, governments, businesses, forward in positive ways.

VC: How does this integrate into your work with patients? In other words, do they come to you and say oh, I'm distressed about the climate situation, or do you learn about it in the course of the therapy?

WG: That's another really good question. I would say yes to both of those. So, there is a list of climate aware therapists, a directory that is on the Climate Psychology North America websites, so that's climatepsychology.us, so some people have come to me directly with their presenting problem focus being on their climate anxiety or climate grief through finding me in this directory. I hear from colleagues in other parts of the country where there are extreme weather events and disruptions where of course people are facing all kinds of trauma, traumatic impact, dislocation, loss, all kinds of things so of course they're coming more directly into it. And then I also have clients that in the course of our work together I listen for indications that this might be on their mind and I think a lot of times clients don't know that it's a topic for psychotherapy. They think they're supposed to talk about their own individual problems, their family history, experiences they've had as opposed to these larger existential questions, broader based socio-cultural problems so it really behooves therapists to learn to let their clients know it's OK to talk about this.

KK: Let me ask you, I'm really curious. Tell us, what is the difference between someone who has experienced a loss and a trauma, in let's say a natural disaster like a hurricane or a tsunami, versus the patient that comes to you that has not experienced that and still feels this anxiety?

WG: Yes, there clearly are some differences and in the climate psychology realm we sometimes think about different kinds of traumatic stress that are resulting from various manifestations of climate and environmental harm so for those who have the privilege, the social location where they haven't yet been directly impacted by extreme weather events, by environmental harm, they may be experiencing anticipatory stress. So sometimes this is called pre-traumatic stress disorder, those who are anticipating what the future might look like for themselves, for their children, for future generations and really suffering a lot of anxiety. Then there is what you're asking about in turn those who have already suffered from some kind of disruption or dislocation from an extreme weather event. And that is more than acute trauma experience and then post-traumatic stress disorder that might be the result of that because people lose their place, their community, their home their identity, in many ways. So much is disrupted and that's a real trauma and that requires a kind of disaster response and trauma treatment that can be really, really helpful. And then I would also add that there is a third kind of traumatic stress which is for those individuals and communities who have been suffering decades and centuries of ongoing environmental harm so that is front line marginalized, Black and brown, low-income communities who are in what has been referred to as sacrifice zones, you know, located near toxic waste dumps or in flood plains and they have been, have lead in their water, so all of these environmental harms that are embedded in environmental racism, and that's an ongoing pervasive form of traumatic stress. Really, social location determines a lot about our experience, geographic location, in fact so much of that experience, and I'd even add generational location can have an impact. Young people are fearing about having a foreshortened future and that's different from someone who is considerably older and doesn't have a lot of their life left ahead of them and are not going to suffer the worst harms that will be coming down the road.

VC: Can you tell us about your patient profile of those with climate anxiety? Does it skew younger, older, couples, singles, and is it mostly, because you did touch on environmental racism, is it mostly a white upper-class concern among those people who can afford therapy and have it be a part of their lives?

WG: I will start with your last question first about environmental racism. What research does show is that communities of color, individuals of color are actually the most worried and distressed about the climate crisis. But those same individuals may not have the financial resources and the availability of health and mental health access so they may not be going to therapy for this, and as we're learning, individual therapy may not be the

treatment of choice for the kind of pervasive forms of injustice and harm and trauma that are going on, though there might be more community-based help, intervention, support, elevating of community leaders who are already providing a lot of help and then addressing the underlying systemic issues. In my own practice with, at least in my private practice, it is primarily for me white, middle-class folks but not only. And the age range really varies. I have some younger people who are really feeling the distress about their future, questioning whether they want to have children, what kind of career path do they want that feels meaningful to them in the face of their anxiety and distress. And then I have older folks who are concerned about their children and grandchildren. So, there is quite a range in terms of what the presentation is and who's coming in. And couples, since that is a specialty area of mine. It's interesting to see sometimes there are differences in their levels of distress, in decisions that are being made about their futures. Where do we live? Do we want to move somewhere that might be safer as the sea level is rising and there might be more harms that we will face if we stay where we are, differences like that.

KK: I'm listening to you and I wonder as a therapist, how do you deal with your own anxiety, climate anxiety?

WG: I really appreciate you asking that because it comes up a lot, you know, that one thing that's interesting about doing this kind of work is that therapists are embedded in the same trauma, that same unfolding crisis that our clients are so that we're not able to be outside of it the way we are with so many issues of the clients that come to see us, so it's really essential for therapists to have their own sources of support and have ways of managing their distress much like they are advising and helping their clients to do and that has certainly been true for me. I know when I started this work and I was first teaching a course for mental health professionals, reading a lot about climate change and all that was happening and social injustices that are embedded, I got so distressed myself. I was not sleeping well, I was thinking about this constantly, I couldn't stop talking about it to anyone I saw or met with and I really needed a place for myself to talk through my feelings and developed an ongoing relationship that's still there with my kind of climate buddy, one of my colleagues where we meet together, we teach together, we talk about our feelings, and then have developed groups of other professionals where we meet and talk and process our own emotions in doing this work.

VC: I know that you have talked about something called Climate Cafes. So, could you talk about that a little bit, tell us what they are and who goes to them?

WG: Sure. So, kind of following what I was just answering about finding other people to share my climate distress with, Climate Cafes were developed from the model of something called Death Cafes. And Death Cafes were set up as spaces for people to come together to share their anxiety concern, worry, ways of processing their emotions about death and dying, and so the idea, the model got transported to the climate realms. So, Climate Cafes are community spaces usually, since Covid, they can take place online or in person. They started in the UK and a number of us in the US and Canada have now been trained—and across the world, really, have been trained in this, where it could be a one-time meeting or a series of meetings where people come together really just to share and process those deep emotions, because often people don't feel like they have a place to talk about their climate distress and grief. There is something so enormously both meaningful and helpful about not feeling so alone in these emotions. It's really helpful to talk it through to be able to bear the feelings, to kind of honor the painful aspects of this but that also allows us to feel stronger in going forward to take important action or to get involved in various ways and to continue with our lives. So, it's been a really powerful forum. And there are other kinds of climate distress processing groups. There are climate grief groups, there's something called the Good Grief Network, there's the WorK that Reconnects, that's Joanna Macy's network, there are many forums coming up led by mental health professionals and others to help people not feel so alone in their climate distress.

KK: When you worked at Columbia University, which I know you have done for many years can you tell us about your work with students who are studying climate? What do you do with them?

WG: I had worked in the counseling service at Columbia for 25 years and I was hearing from more students about their climate anxiety and distress, especially among those who were studying environmental science or sustainability or climate management and so I decided to start holding workshops for those students to be able to talk about how do we maintain sustainability of our emotions when we're doing this work. Some students were talking about, their science professors would say at the end of class, "See you next week, if there is a next week," and they would leave this class and they would feel so down and so scared and they didn't have anyone who was acknowledging it is very hard to be learning about this, so I started these workshops that help students come together so they could talk about those kinds of experiences, the feelings they were having and then to talk about how do we build emotional resiliency in the face of this, things like being able to calm your nervous system when you're feeling overly activated or dysregulated emotionally. How do you join with others? How do you take action that allows you to feel less hopeless or helpless? How do you replenish yourself? A lot of students and climate activists I've worked with will feel like the problem is so big and important and urgent that I have to work at it all the time and students would talk about feeling guilty if they wanted to go out and have fun with their friends and so, I very much talk about, you have to let yourself do that. This is a marathon, not a sprint, we have to take breaks from it, we need to have good self-care, we need to cultivate all kinds of forms of managing this emotion and again connecting with others, so lots of ways. That was primarily the work that I would do. I still go back to Columbia and other settings and do similar kinds of workshops.

VC: So, what would you say is the most challenging aspect of this work and what is the most rewarding?

WG: They are probably related. What is most challenging is, it's really heartbreaking to hear the despair of people who are letting themselves know about what's going on and that I don't have answers. I can't solve it, I can't say, "well, just do X, Y and Z and then everything will be better" because obviously I can't solve that problem. What I can try to do is help them to bear it and to feel less alone. That's probably what's also most rewarding, is because I go through these same emotions myself and feel, care so deeply about this, this has been some of the most meaningful work I've ever done and I sometimes feel when I'm sitting with someone who had tremendous climate anxiety it's like we are meeting each other in a very important place. There's sort of an ethical engagement of, a moral engagement, a spiritual engagement, a caring engagement that is kind of beyond what I've experienced in most kinds of therapy that I've done so it's been really important for me personally and I hope in helping others.

KK: I know that the listeners out there are going to wonder if you have any tips for them when they are dealing with climate anxiety.

WG: I'm glad you asked that because it's always helpful to give practical ideas. Some of it I've already talked about. The first thing might be figuring out how to calm your nervous system if you're feeling overly activated, anxious, worried, and that can be a lot of different things. Taking a walk-in nature, that can be really soothing and calming. Even listening to the sounds of nature, looking at pictures of green spaces we've learned calms our nervous system. You could also do things like connecting with other people who make you feel supported and cared for. Meditation calms the nervous system, yoga, exercise, eating good food, enjoying yourself, those are some helpful aspects. And then in general, I know I said connecting with others can calm the nervous system but that's another source of helping yourself to not feel so alone as I've already been talking about, and actually in the process you're building a, what one of my colleagues calls a culture of care. It is spreading the word and helping raise awareness so it's not just helping yourself but helping the cause more broadly. And then I talk about 'purposing', finding a sense of meaning and purpose in the face of the climate and environmental crisis

and environmental justice issues. So that can mean joining an activist group. It could be as simple as doing something within your local communities, starting a composting club or plastic removal or diminishment. It could mean identifying the values that are most important to you in this. I know one of the ways that I got started in the climate psychology field, I had joined an environmental activist group and a speaker that came there said, “do what you already know how to do and what you feel passionate about.” And then I was like, “Oh, I’m a psychologist. Maybe I have something I can do.” So, working with who you already are, what you care about, there are creative people, artists, dancers, singers who are transforming their climate distress and grief into creative acts that they can share with others that both helps to, again, transform the emotion so it’s not just sort of stuck inside but also offers something to others. Those are some of the things that I would say, and then search online for groups or organizations or networks. For example, there’s something called The Climate Journal Project where people share in writing, online, their climate distress and emotion so there’s lots of groups out there to be part of and to help with all this distress and not feel so helpless.

VC: Well, you’ve already answered part of what I was going to ask you as the next question which is if you can suggest some resources for people, which you just did, and also, how can people find out more about you and your activities as a climate-aware therapist and how can they contact you?

WG: Great, well, in terms of some other resources, again, climatepsychology.us, that’s the Climate Psychology Alliance of North America or Climate Psychology Alliance dot org which is the sort of parent organization in the UK, there’s lots of resources there including listings of climate cafes that are going on. At climatepsychology.us there’s a climate-aware therapist directory. And in terms of contacting me, your listeners can go to my website which is wendygreenspun.com.

VC: Can you spell that for them?

WG: Sure, W-E-N-D-Y G-R-E-E-N-S-P-U-N dot com.

VC: Thank you so much, this has been most interesting and enlightening. This will be a subject of conversation for a very long time.

WG: Thank you so much for having me.

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