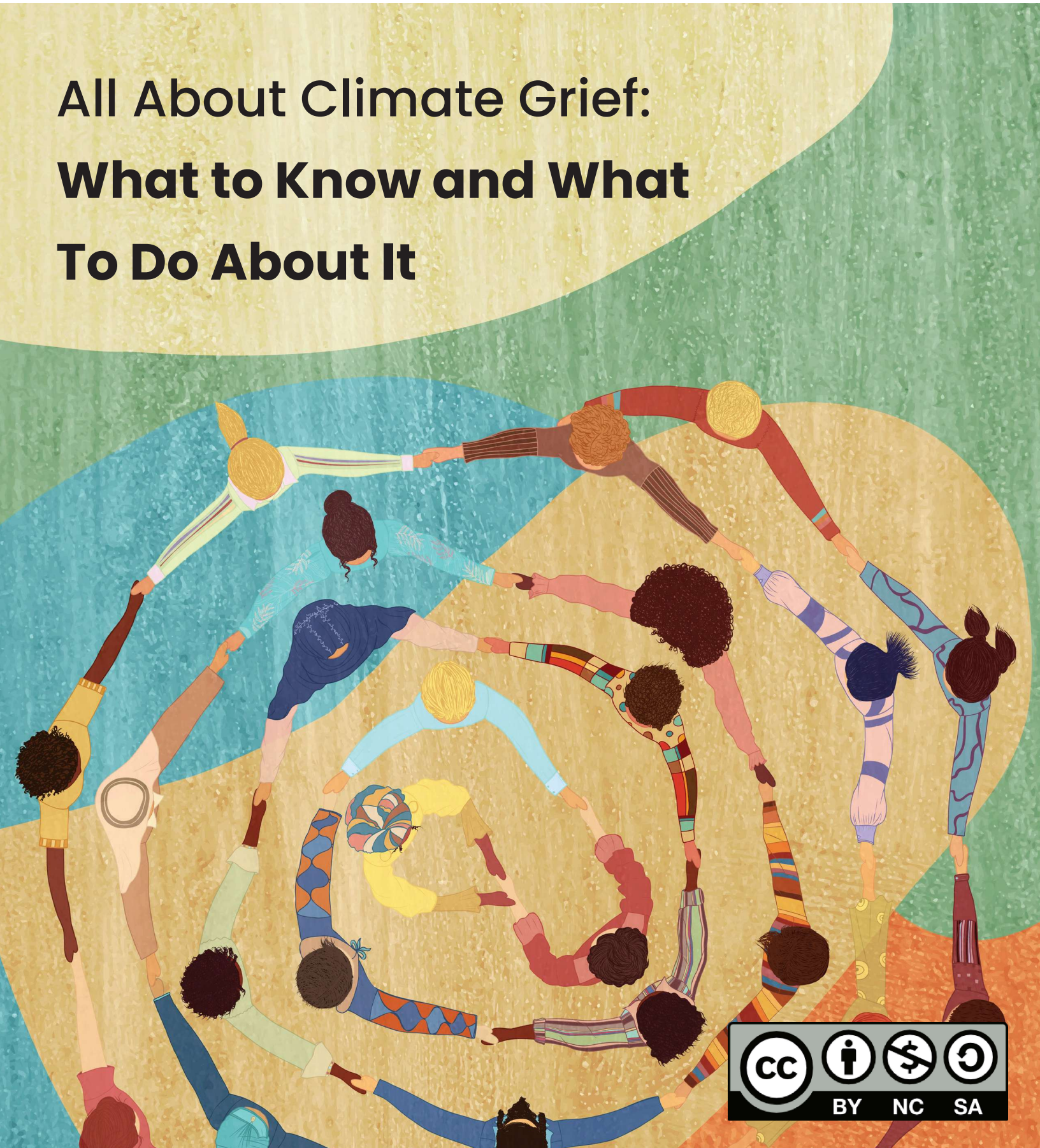
Climate
Mental Health
Network

All About Climate Grief: **What to Know and What To Do About It**



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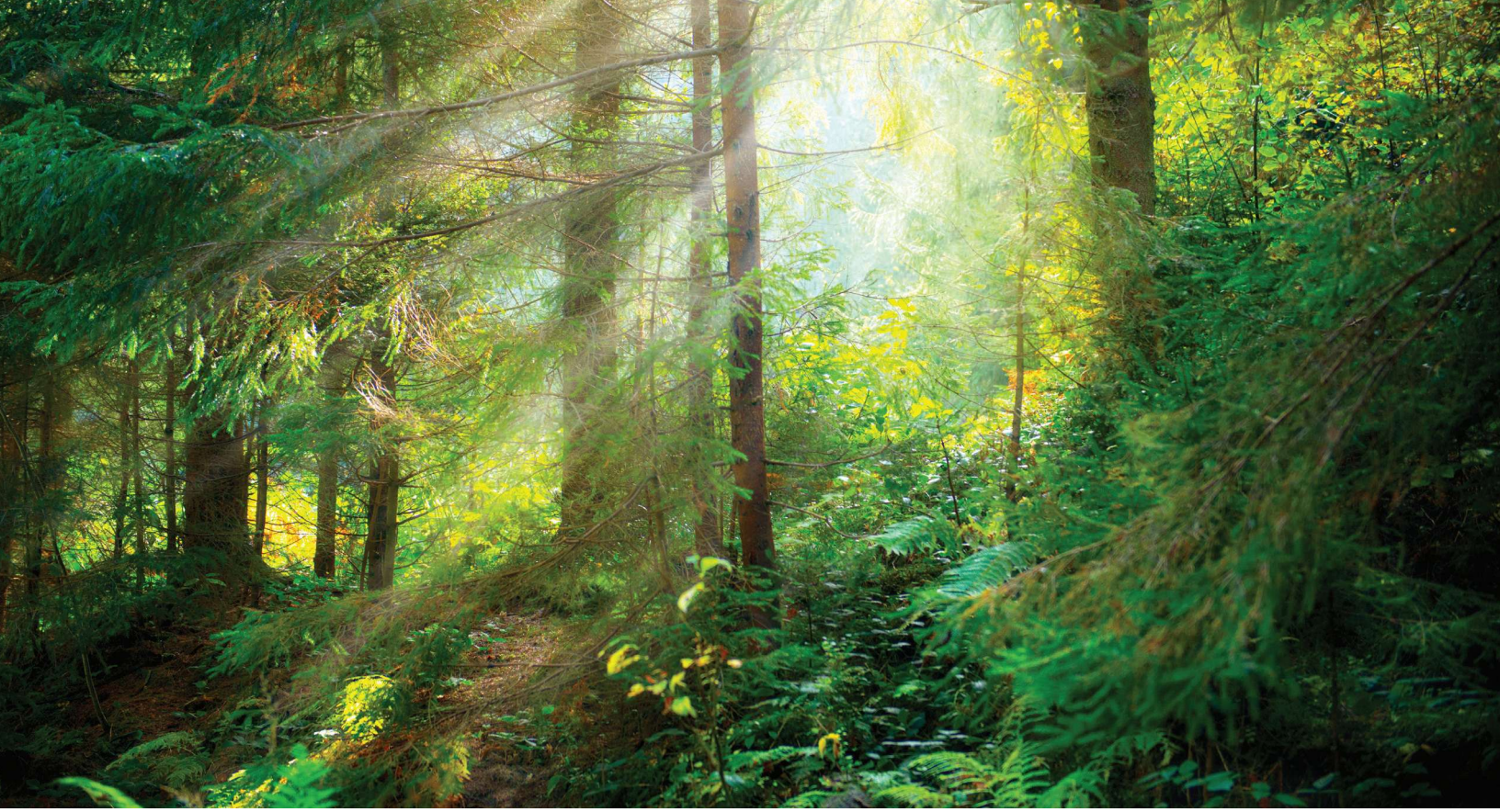


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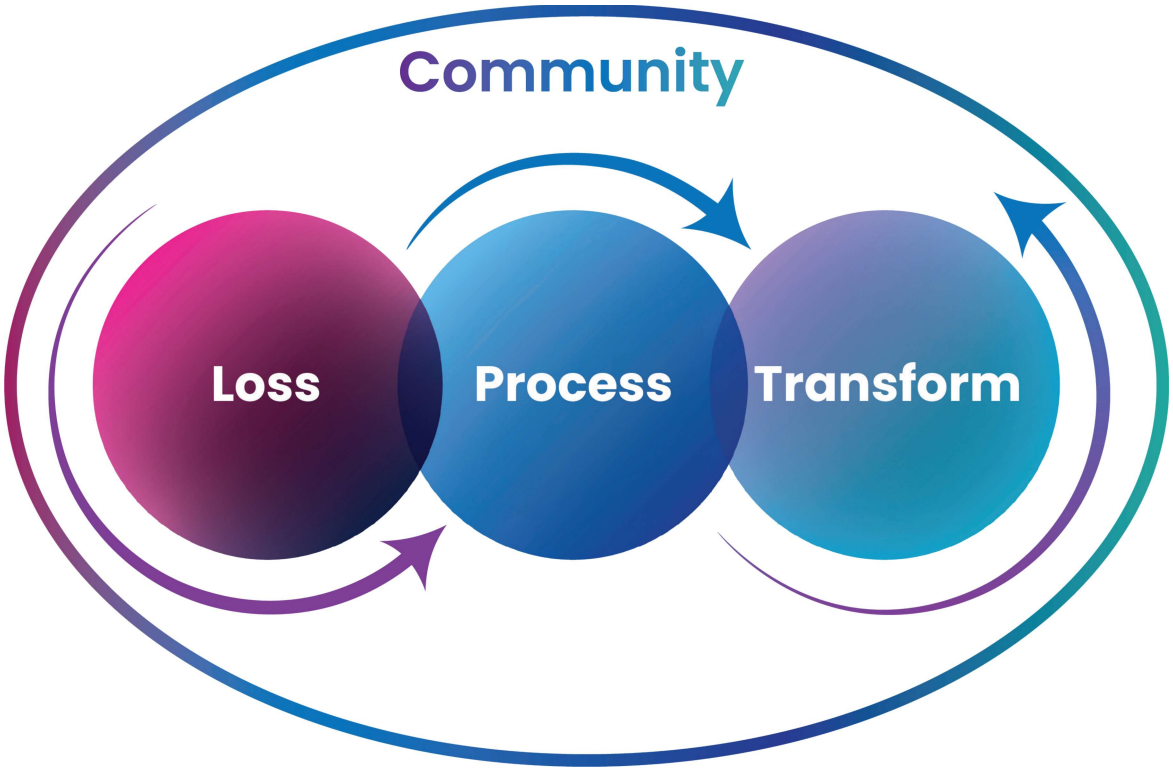
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Part 1: What To Know About Climate and Ecological Grief

Who developed this guide?

Dr. Panu Pihkala, an expert in eco-emotion studies, with help from Anya Kamenetz and Sarah Newman at Climate Mental Health Network.

Santtu Oja created the graphic design of the grief images.

The research behind the guide can be found online in Panu's article *"Ecological Sorrow: Types of Grief and Loss in Ecological Grief"*, and we include tips for further reading at the end of the guide. There are more resources for climate emotions at climatementalhealth.net

Note of caution

To deliberately engage with negative emotions, you must be well resourced and supported. These resources are not a replacement for professional services when needed. In the US call or text 988 for a 24/7 crisis hotline. Outside the US, find emergency mental health numbers at findahelpline.com

In the second part of this guide we provide a full range of resources and activities to process grief in a healthy, safe way.

Climate Emotions Wheel



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Climate Emotions Wheel © 2024

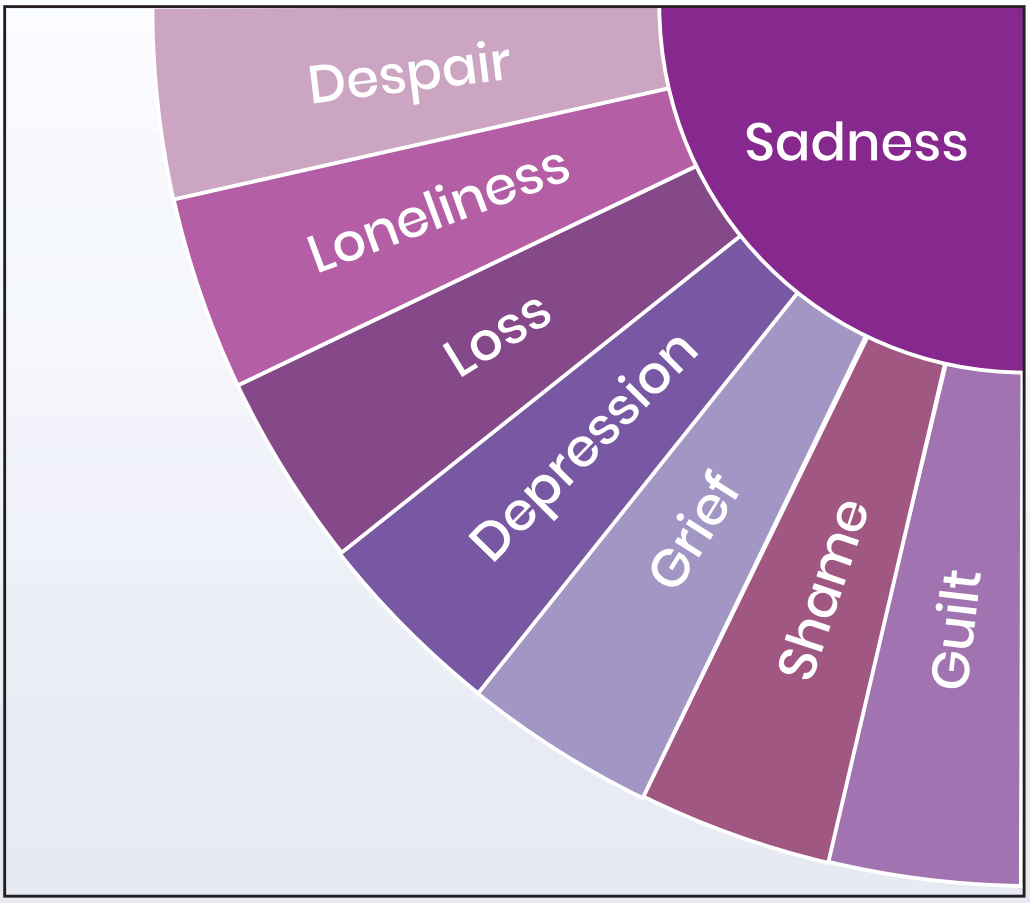
Climate Mental Health Network

ClimateMentalHealth.Net

Who is this guide for?

You, who right now may be feeling sadness because of damage to ecosystems.
You, who works in support of others or the more-than-human world.

Sadness is one of the four quadrants of the Climate Emotions Wheel. Many emotions may be felt in connection to grief, ranging from guilt, to anger to gratitude.



Types of grief about the state of the world

Climate grief is related to "environmental grief" (as early scholar Kriss Kevorkian calls it); "ecological grief"; solastalgia, Glenn Albrecht's term for place-based distress caused by environmental destruction.

Ecological and climate grief can make up a part of sorrow about the state of the world in general. Grief specialist Darcy Harris calls it "sociopolitical grief". Grief and grievance are often intimately connected here, because there are so many injustices. Regardless of what terms and causes of grief feels most suitable for your experience, it is important to recognize the multiple causes of grief and to find ways to engage specifically with ecological sorrows.[1]

Climate grief refers to sadness and mourning of the impacts of anthropogenic global warming.

Grief is related to a deep process of change. This makes it one of the most ubiquitous climate emotions. Sadness and grief help us manage change. They are signs of our love and care. And they can help us to appreciate both the past and the present.

Studies and surveys show that most people around the world are feeling a form of ecological and climate grief. However, not everyone is able or willing to link their sorrow with climate change. The political disputes and psychosocial difficulties around climate issues complicate research about climate grief.

Outdoor or nature-based jobs and lifeways, can make people more prone to experiencing climate-related losses and grief. For example, climate scientists know so much about the impacts of the crisis that it brings on very difficult emotions.

For some people, climate grief is a result of direct impacts of environmental change, such as droughts, wildfires, or floods. Many life situations and transitions can also make people more sensitive to climate grief, such as having children or grandchildren, thinking about one's subject of study or profession, and thinking about one's legacy in life in elderhood.

Climate grief across generations: for parents, caregivers and educators

Parents, caregivers and educators often experience vicarious grief and/or trauma as they envision the pain their children might feel and the uncertain future they face. They may also experience moral distress, regretting that they didn't do more to prevent it. There is a natural tendency to want to deny or avoid the pain, but we cannot shield children from this grief. What we can do, however, is ensure they don't have to face it alone. Knowing that they have a supportive adult to lean on provides children with a sense of security. When parents and other caring adults support children through grief, they provide the emotional foundation that helps children not only process their feelings but also grow stronger and more capable of handling life's difficulties.



In many social situations, there can be pressure to repress sadness. Society often encourages people to "move on" quickly, put on a brave face, or avoid showing vulnerable emotions, especially in public settings. As a result, individuals—including children—may feel like their sadness is something to be hidden, or that they need to "get over it" quickly. However, repressing sadness doesn't allow for emotional healing; instead, it can cause unresolved feelings to linger or even intensify over time.

It's essential for parents and caregivers to model how to return to sadness when the moment is right. If we don't give ourselves the space to revisit those feelings, they may get stuck, lingering beneath the surface and affecting our emotional health in hidden ways. Parents and educators can teach children that it's not about avoiding sadness, but about learning how to handle it in healthy, constructive ways. This process allows feelings to be fully processed and ultimately released. It also helps children see that sadness doesn't have to be permanent or overwhelming; it can ebb and flow and returning to it can be part of moving forward. They learn that it's okay to revisit difficult emotions when necessary and that there's no shame in feeling sad -- it's part of our emotional landscape.

The Benefits of Exploring Grief

It can understandably feel difficult to connect with grief and sadness.

Contemporary societies have drastic problems in relation to these emotions. Sadness has often been hidden away from public spaces, and there is often pressure to be positive or neutral, as on social media and in the workplace.

Unaddressed grief can curdle into depression or cynicism. In contemporary cultures people often resist or even fear feelings of grief. But it is not the feelings themselves which are problematic. Problems ensue if the waters of grief are not allowed to flow, but are pent up in a poisoned well.

Engaging with climate grief is also ethically important, because it is an expression of empathy. In addition, societies and communities have ethical tasks towards those who mourn, including many children and young people: it is a moral task to support each other in times of trouble.

If not for yourself, learn to navigate climate grief so you can support the people you love. Plus, if we collectively re-learn to engage with sadness, it can serve life in profound ways.

Grief doesn't mean giving up

Observing our emotions makes it clearer to understand what can be done about them. When we know what we are feeling, we can more clearly see what kind of engagements might help us to process our feelings.

It's a prejudice and misconception that allowing oneself to grieve means that one has given up on improving a situation.

Instead, facing our climate grief can renew the imperative and energy to take action. Ecological grief can lead to "resistant mourning", where people testify to injustices and losses. Many kinds of actions are important in this "environmental commemoration", ranging from private rituals of remembrance to public mourning of climate injustice.[2] Be wary, however, of being vulnerable with grief in a public, possibly contested space. In addition to mourning as part of public climate action, it is important to have safe spaces for deep engagement with climate grief.

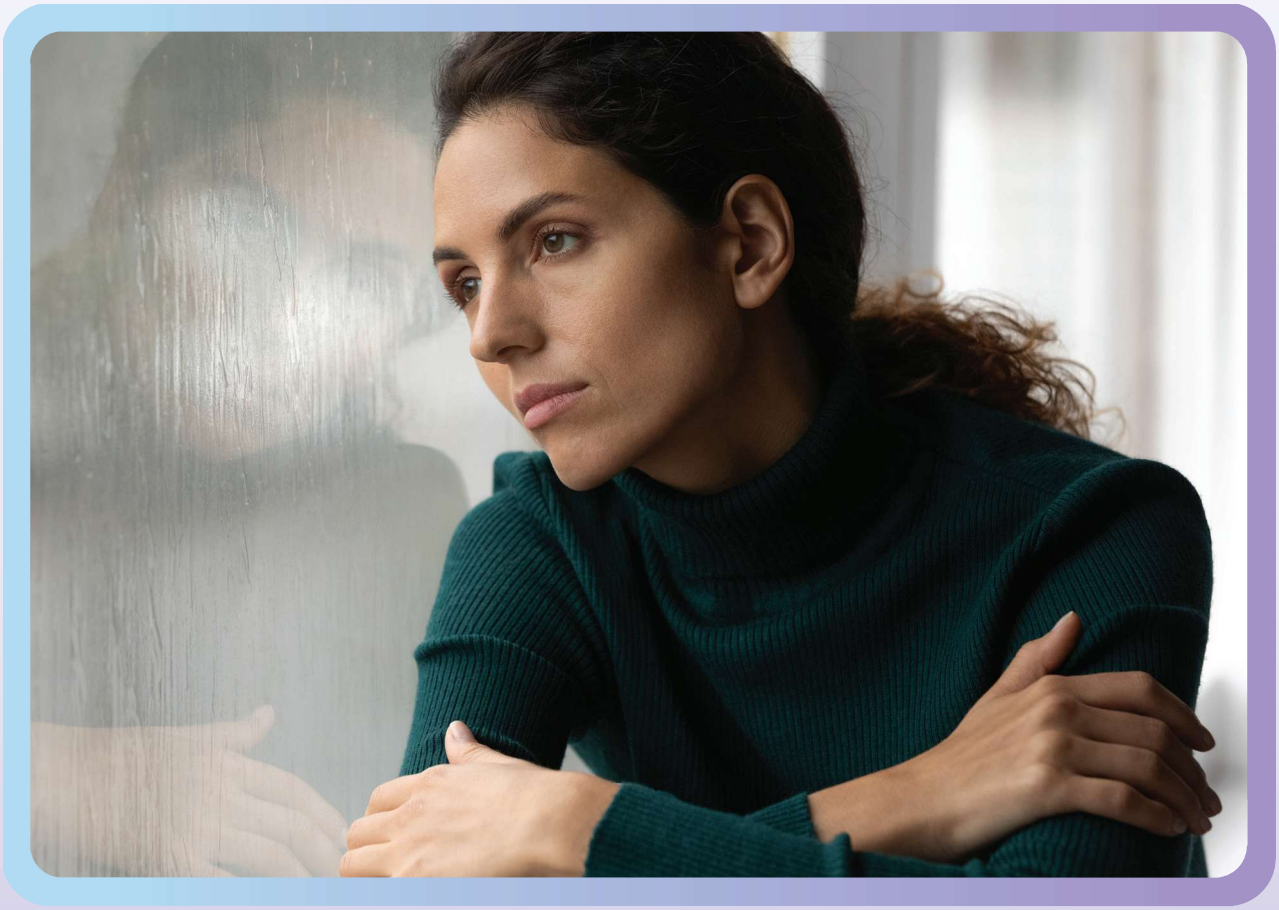
It is necessary to be open to sadness if we want to experience joy and love.

Grief helps us to engage with losses and to cherish what has been - and what remains. It is thus a gateway to gratitude. Our sadness helps us to connect to the people, places and creatures we care about. Denying our sadness means denying our full humanity.

This is not about being gloomy: it's about being open to the full spectrum of emotions. It is very difficult to feel deep joy amidst the climate crisis if we are using our energy only for distancing, and do not also encounter loss in a healthy way. We need to keep our emotional channels open, and to do so, we can't just block some emotions.

Deep down, grief is part of a process of transformation. Many humans are re-learning the world and realizing how interconnected we all are. Grief is a process where we leave some things behind and become open to new forms of living: a broken heart is painful, but more open.[3]

We wrote this guide to help.



Developing a constructive attitude towards grief

Grief can feel bad and frightening, but fundamentally it's not the grief which is the problem: the climate crisis is the problem, and various feelings of sadness come to help us to engage with the losses.

One can develop a constructive attitude towards grief over time, by engaging in various practices and reframing grief cognitively as a friend.



Exercise: A conversation with grief

Imagine your sorrow as a supportive figure.

Maybe it's a raven. Maybe it's a grandmother, or an old tree. Let your imagination roam and see what kind of figure comes up. It may be helpful to first imagine a safe space and spend some time there, breathing deeply.

Questions you could ask:

- Sorrow, what changes and losses do you wish to help me to engage with?
- Sorrow, what kind of things would you advise me to do in order to find consolation?
- Sorrow, what things do you wish to help me to be grateful of, and appreciate more?

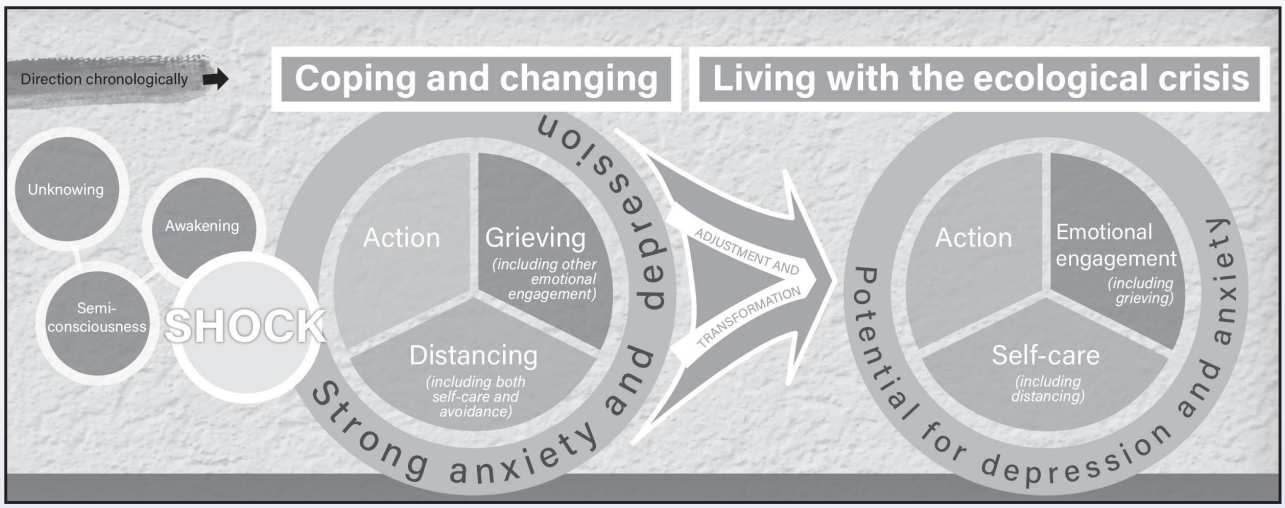
It can also be highly useful to **write about your personal attitudes towards sadness and about the factors which have impacted that**. What kind of attitude towards sadness did you learn from a) your parents, b) your peers and community? Was one allowed to show sadness, and if, in what situations? Was the constructive dimension of sadness understood by others near you? And how did all this affect you? Psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan offers useful questions for this kind of reflection.[4]

Part 2: Models of Grieving and Healing

Grief is part of a wider process

This image from Panu's research shows a model of what it means to cope with grief and other ecological emotions. This is a dynamic process; think of a wheel rolling forward.

These emotions will never fully go away, because our losses are ongoing, and because feeling is part of being alive. But we can reduce the potential for suffering acutely from pathological levels of depression and anxiety. We can move from suppressing and burying emotions, to confront and engage with our emotions. We can manage this with appropriate self-care. And this all frees up energy for purposeful action.



(For videos about the dynamics of the Process Model, see www ecoanxietyprocess.com)

Miriam Greenspan's method for Healing Through Dark Emotions

1. **Intention: Focusing your spiritual will**
   Make a deliberate intention to "stay with the trouble" and work with these emotions.

2. **Affirmation: Developing an emotion-positive attitude**
   Practice an attitude where you appreciate emotions as important parts of life.

3. **Bodily sensation: Sensing, soothing, and naming emotions**
   Learn to pay attention to the ways in which emotions are present in your body. Learn somatic skills of tending to them: e.g. breathing exercises, caressing parts of your body, trembling, or relaxing.

4. **Contextualization: Telling a wider story**
   Think about how a certain time, place, and history has affected these emotions. What is the wider story of why you and other people feel a certain way?

5. **The way of non-action: Befriending what hurts**
   Get to know your grief; as strange as it may sound, let it be your friend who actually wants to help you. Meditation and imagination exercises are among the ways to do this.

6. **The way of action: Social action and spiritual service**
   Helping others is a great way to channel the energies and information of the emotions constructively. Grief and compassion are interconnected.

7. **Transformation: The way of surrender (flow)**
   Greenspan summarizes three fundamental sentences: Help me. Thank you. I surrender. All mourners need help; gratitude exercises can be challenging but are important; and surrendering to emotional flow gets energies moving forward.

William Worden–Four Tasks of Mourning

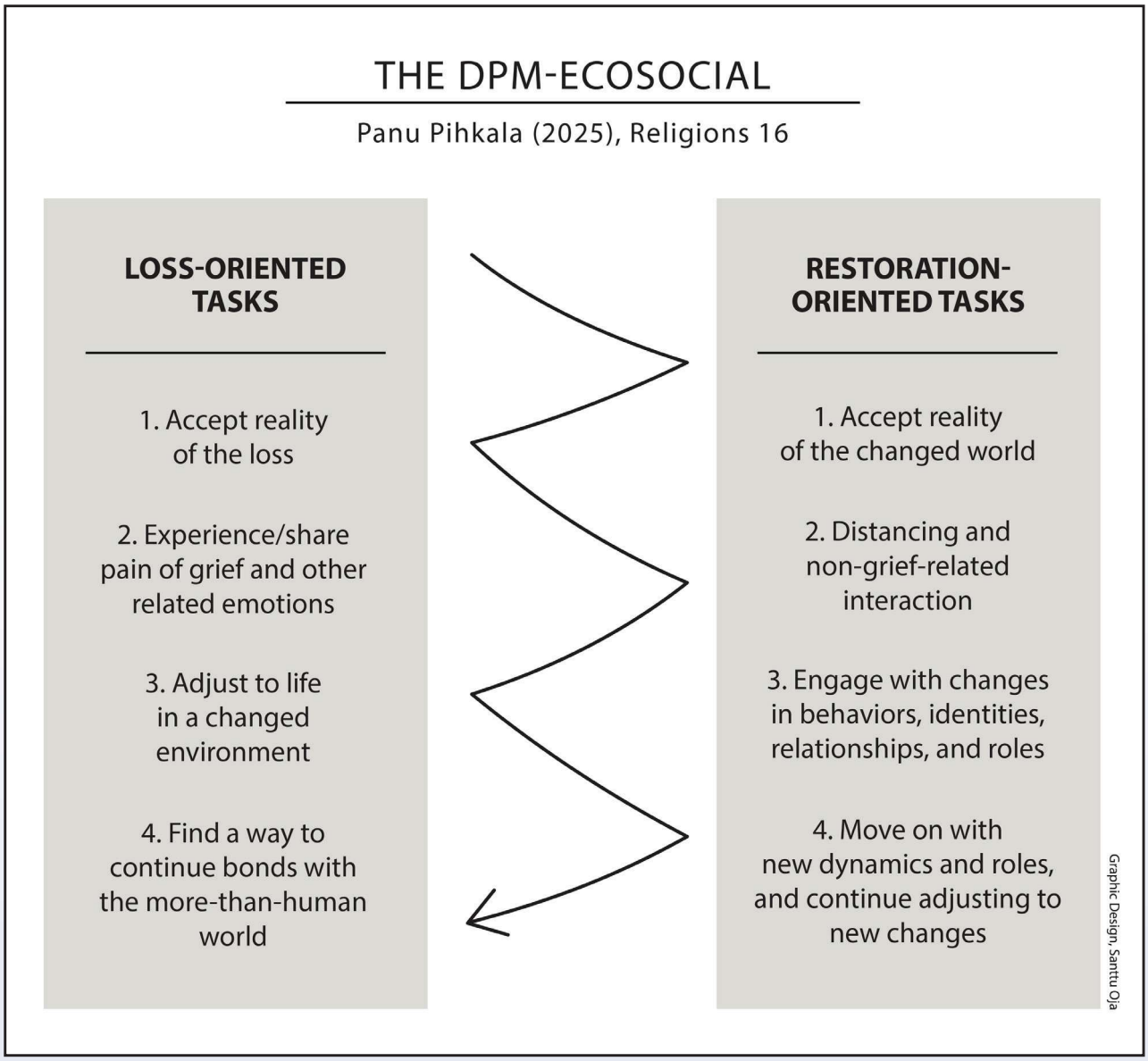
1. **Accept the reality of the loss.** In relation to climate grief, this means acceptance of the severity of the climate crisis, and ongoing work in coming to grips with specific losses.

2. **Process the pain of grief;** engage with various difficult emotions related to the grief process. The Climate Emotions Wheel shows many of these emotions. Negotiation of how much climate guilt one should feel is a major part of this in climate grief, as well as negotiating forms and levels of climate anger/rage.

3. **Adjust to a changed environment**. This is a very literal task in climate grief. Adjustment includes needs for transformation (see Panu's Process Model of Eco-anxiety and Ecological Grief).

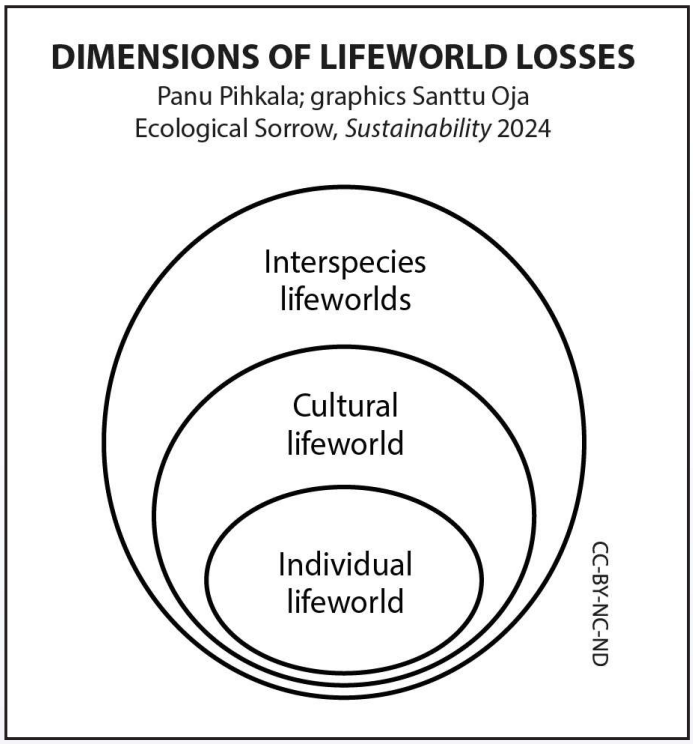
4. **Reinvesting life energy and moving on in life,** with a new kind of relationship to what has been lost or damaged. In climate grief, this manifests as an ability to be active in life, and in maintaining an emotional connection to changed environments. The framework of "continuing bonds" in grief research is related to this.[5]

Panu Pihkala's recent research provides an application of these tasks into ecological and climate grief. It also builds on the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe and Schut), another well-known grief theory.



A model of "unprecedented" and "unacknowledged" ecological grief[6]

Scholars Bailey and Gerrish have made their own application of two major dimensions in ecological grief. They argue that ecological grief is both "unprecedented"—that is, nothing of this scale has happened in our history—and also "unacknowledged" —that is, our modern culture doesn't have spaces, times, or ways to fully recognize this grief. Connecting these two dimensions, they posit a complex process of transformation and transition.



Joanna Macy – The Work that Reconnects Spiral

1. "Coming from Gratitude". The sessions start with a phase of increasing capacity to deal with difficult issues, through grounding and reminding of connection to loved people and places, present and past.

2. "Honoring our pain for the world" through rituals of expression of grief, rage, emptiness, and fear.

3. Once these dark feelings are expressed and heard, we are given the opportunity to take a different perspective, "Seeing with new and ancient eyes."

4. Then we are invited to "Go forth" into action.



https://www.activehope.info/images

Pauline Boss – Ambiguous Loss[7]

In her book The *Myth of Closure,* Boss recommends:

Finding meaning amidst the loss;

Normalizing ambivalence;

Reconstructing identity;

Revising emotional attachment;

Adjusting ideas about mastery; and

Discovering new hope (or vitality).

(e.g. Boss, The Myth of Closure, WW Norton 2022)

Part 3: Anatomy of climate grief

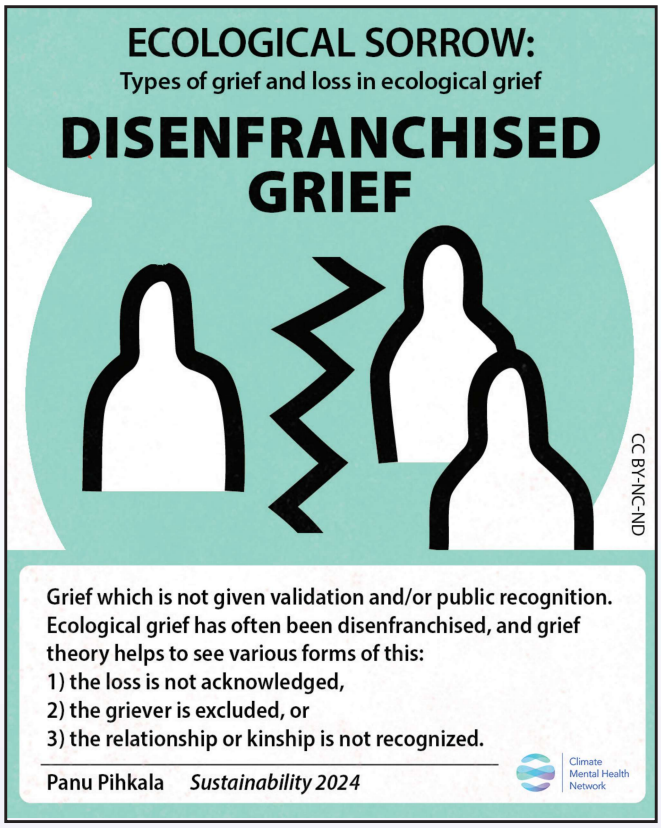
The following set of graphics–developed by Panu Pihkala, describes important concepts that help us understand climate grief. For the most part, these concepts have been developed elsewhere in psychology and applied to climate grief.

It can be heavy to read all the types of loss and grief; please remember that you can do this in parts and take enough time to ground yourself.

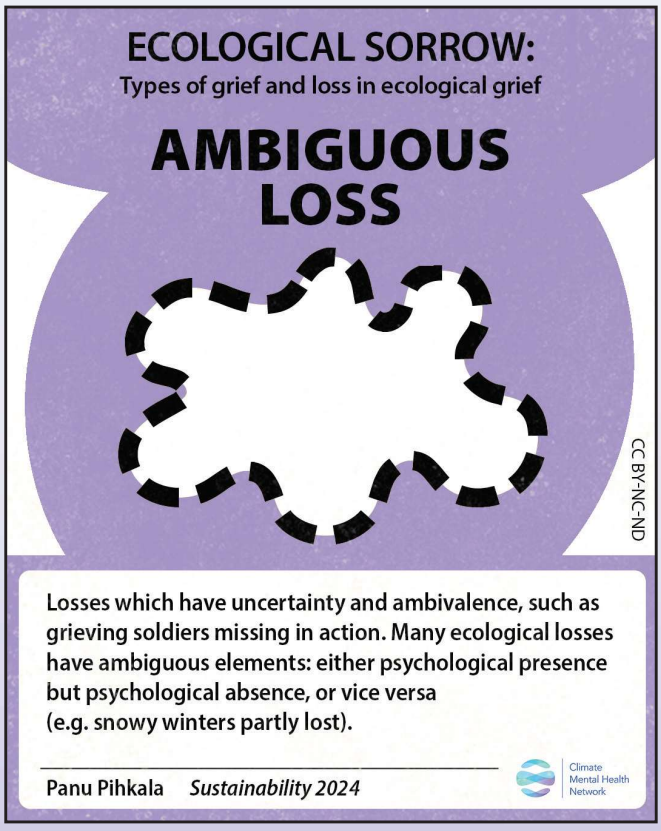
Activity: Try writing down ideas and images that come to you while reading these (perhaps drawing or painting as well)

There is no "typical" or "simple" grief. Many of our assumptions about grief relate to common experiences, such as the death of a beloved spouse. And climate grief is different from this example in many ways: for example, it includes multiple and continuous losses, and it can have elements of ambiguous loss.

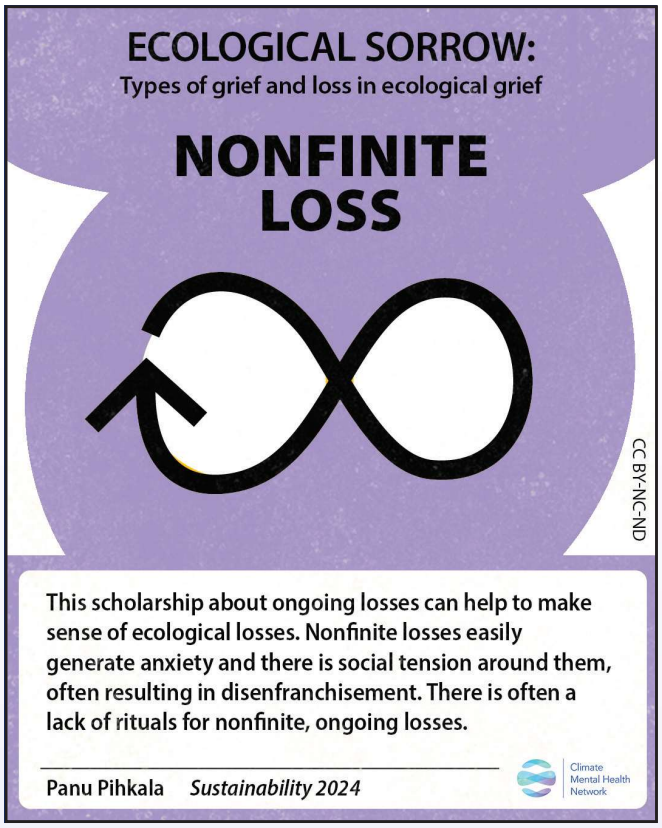
For longer discussion of the various types (or aspects) or ecological loss and grief, please see Panu's article Ecological Sorrow. Short definitions are given in the images which follow. Before that, we briefly give examples of these aspects as they relate to climate grief.



Disenfranchised grief: The existence of climate grief may go unrecognized by others or by society at large. There is no funeral, no ritual of mourning, and social support is often missing. At worst, others may claim that climate grief is not necessary and/or ridicule those who grieve.



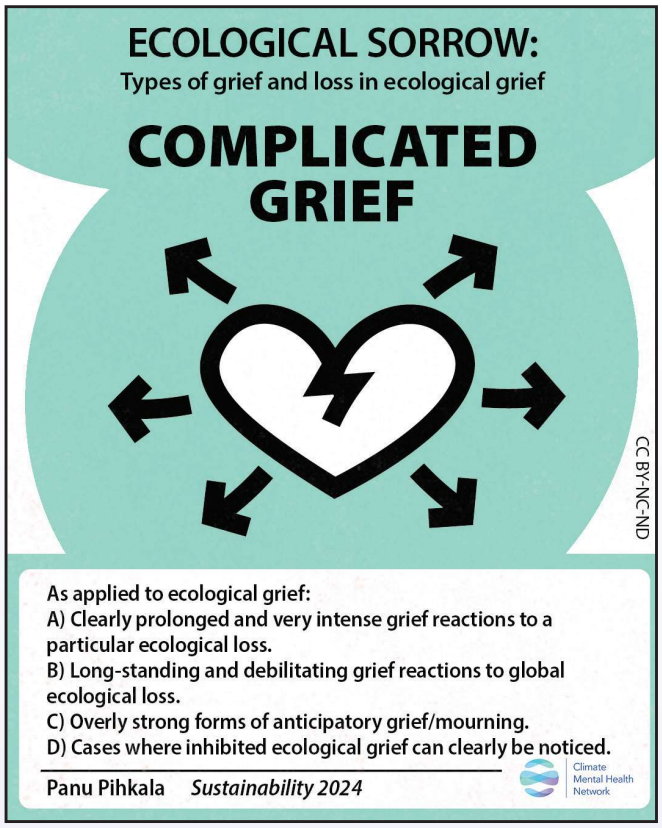
Ambiguous loss: A death is final and widely recognized. But what if you are mourning a soldier missing in action? Some losses are ambiguous. Climate change produces a lot of these kind of losses. Is a certain species totally gone or not? Or how to grieve the fluctuating loss of snow during winters, or the loss of relaxation during summers when there are so many heatwaves now?



Nonfinite loss: biodiversity continues to decline, but does not reach zero; the sorrow continues as the losses continue. Some losses keep reminding us of themselves. There may be an initial period of crisis and an intense process of grief, but even after that some losses continue to be felt. Nonfinite loss can lead to chronic sorrow (see below).



Tangible and intangible loss: The loss of a home to a wildfire is tangible. The loss of a feeling of safety in one's home because of wildfires is intangible–abstract and difficult to define. Often the intangible aspects of ecological losses become disenfranchised, and they need social recognition.



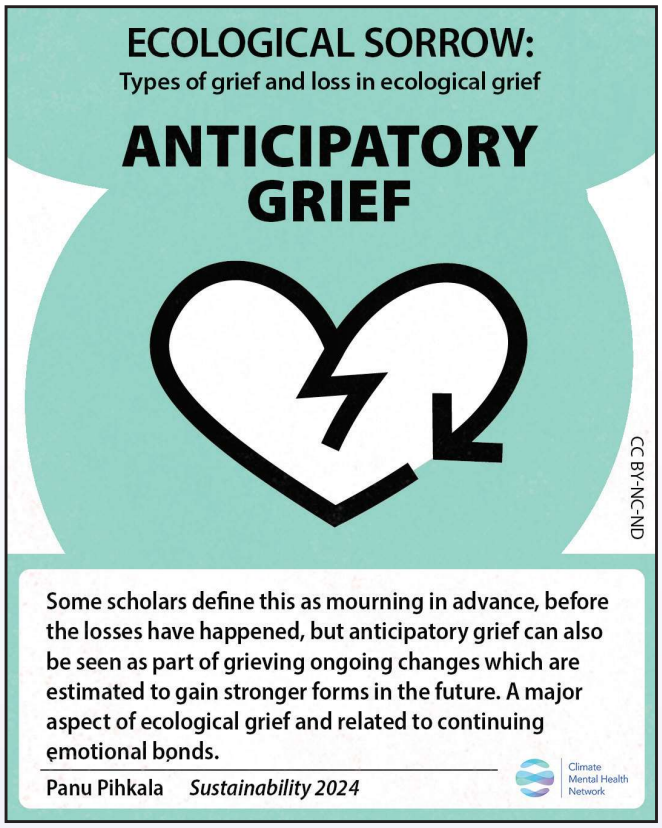
Complicated grief: This term is used when grief is so acute that it's debilitating. It's also used when mourning a problematic relationship, like that with an abusive parent. Similarly, climate grief can be complicated by feelings like guilt and anger, and it can be severe at times



Temporalities - Grief x Time

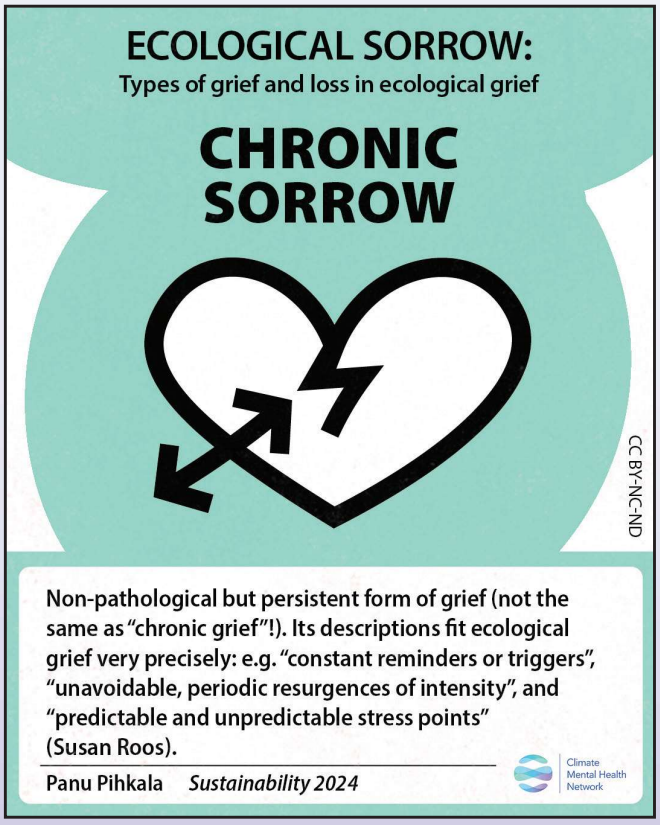
The climate crisis is an ongoing phenomenon with many different manifestations, so there are many particular characteristics of how grief unfolds in time:

Transitional grief: similar to aging, we must constantly adjust to new losses in the climate, which brings on fresh feelings of sadness.



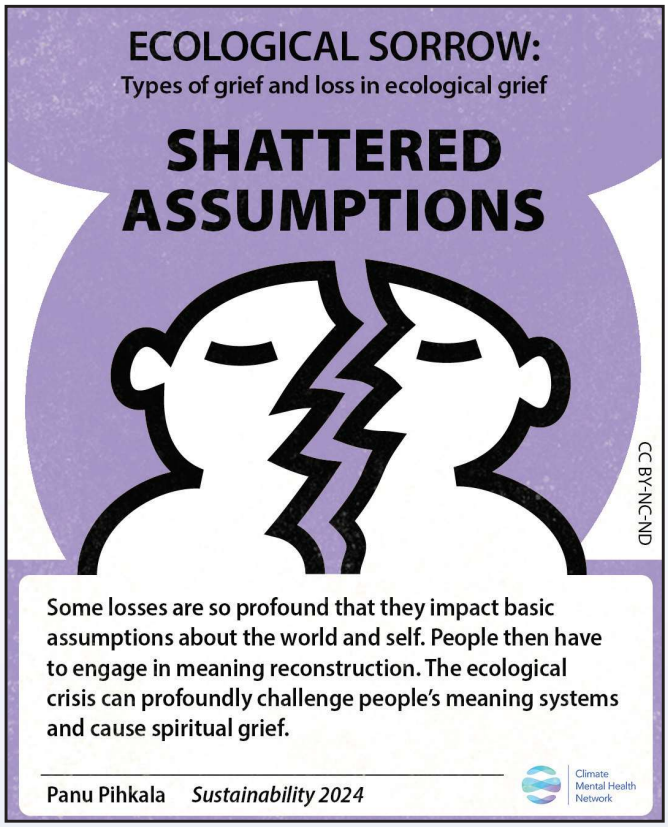
Anticipatory grief: A lot of climate discourse focuses on terrible things happening into the future. So we feel sad about things that haven't yet happened.

Anticipatory grief is a well-established concept in grief research. At its worst, anticipatory grief may paralyze people before the loss has even happened, and cause them to miss their final moments with the person or place that is in decline. At its best, this prescient grief can help people confront the losses and changes of life, and make good use of the time that is left.

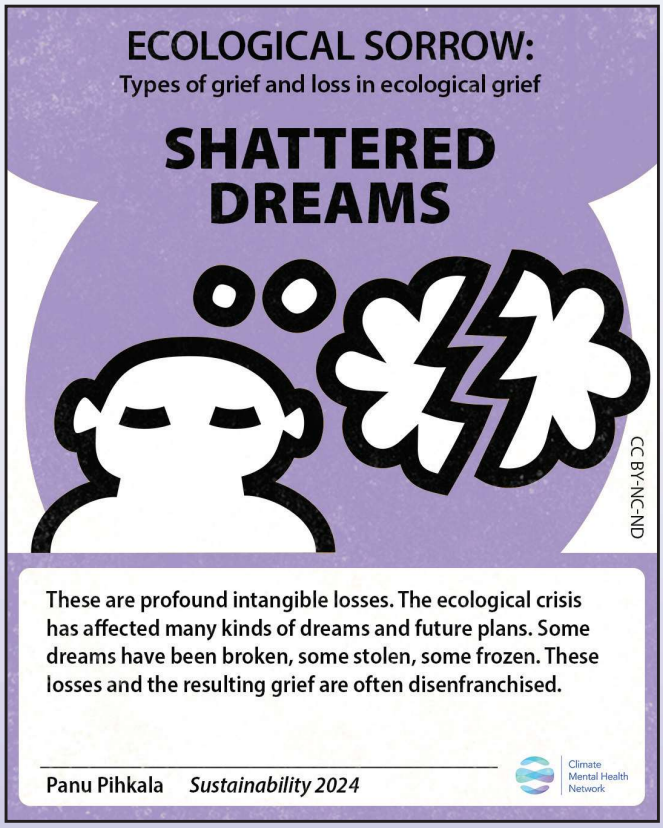


Chronic sorrow: more gentle than grief, less pathologized than depression. There are constant, both predictable and unpredictable, reminders of the loss. People need skills to live well with chronic sorrow, so that it does not become debilitating.

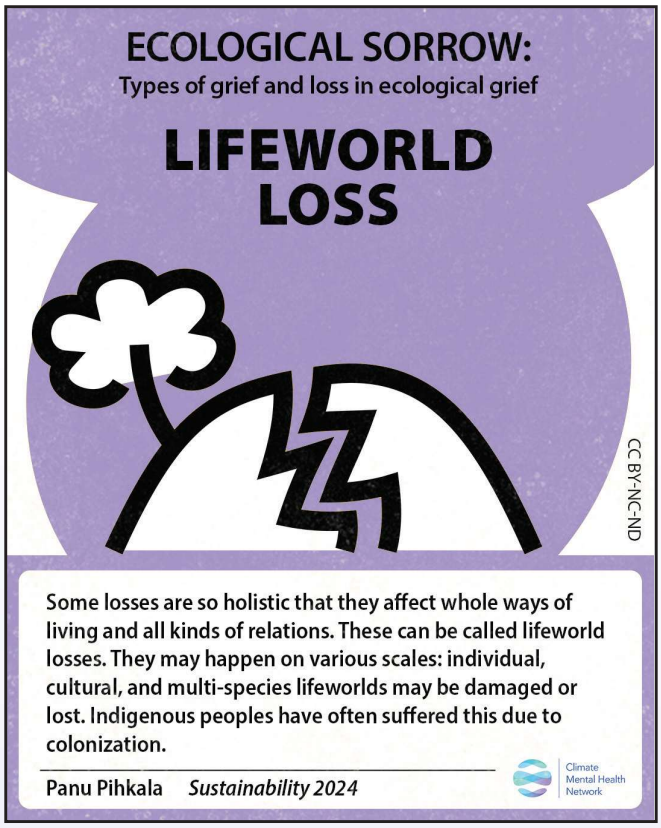
Holistic losses



Shattered Assumptions: The climate crisis can be bewildering. Compare it to the loss of an important relationship. It can seem to destroy your hopes for the future; you mourn what might have been. It also deeply challenges certainty, what you thought you knew. And perhaps there is a loss of identity, or aspects of it. Work must be done to reconstruct meaning and overcome an existential or spiritual crisis brought on by confronting this grief. Fundamental assumptions about the world and one's role in life are in a process of change.



Shattered Dreams: The climate crisis can shatter people's dreams and ambitions. These intangible losses too often remain unnoticed and unsupported. For example, young people can feel that the professions they are studying towards are no longer relevant. Or they now fear having children.



Lifeworld Loss: Many Indigenous people under colonization have suffered this version of loss: Loss of their family members and community, losses of the entire ecosystem and food web that supported them, and loss of the culture and traditions that made their lives possible, and their history for generations. Think of what the deliberate extermination of the buffalo meant for the Plains Indians. Now think of the sixth great extinction and the lifeworlds that are fading right before our eyes. Climate change can produce lifeworld loss on individual, collective, and multispecies levels.

Part 4: What To Do About Climate Grief

The above resources describe various aspects of loss and grief. When engaging with ecological grief and climate grief in practice, we recommend three basic ways and three basic modes:


by thinking (cognition)


with your body (somatics)


creatively (arts, imagination)


alone


with one or a few trusted others


in community

A shortlist of various methods and ideas

Grounding yourself



1. Take a deep breath and maintain steady breathing
2. Touch yourself gently, sway, stretch…
3. Various (other) mindfulness methods
4. Meditations–many climate grief authorshave offered meditations
5. Chanting, humming
6. Spend time in nature
7. If possible and desirable, be in touch with another person, non-human animal, or something in nature (e.g. lying in grass or touching leaves)

Tuning into sadness and letting it flow



8. Listen to appropriate music
9. Sing or drum, or compose your own song about ecological grief
10. Drawing, painting, sculpting (CMHN art therapy guide)
11. Draw a grief map
12. Make sounds to express your emotions including crying
13. Dance, or dance-like movement (e.g. authentic movement, eco-somatics)
14. Writing, e.g. journaling, letter writing, free writing for 10-30 minutes

Create a ritual for processing grief [either with or without words]

15. Candles
16. Stones
17. Flowers
18. Mandalas, altars, temporary art pieces
19. Memorials: private or communal commemorations
20. Bring an act of kindness or an offering of beauty to a place that is scarred, destroyed, or lost.
21. Saying you're sorry [engaging with both guilt and grief, and trying to move on with a lighter heart]
22. Mark annual days for communal or personal remembrance

Connecting socially

23. Join a peer support group, online or locally
24. Join an existing ecological grief ritual. examples: Remembrance Day for Lost Species; Council of All Beings
25. Ask your local spiritual leader or spiritual community for support
26. Visit an art exhibition or installation which helps to engage with ecological / climate grief



Growth via Grief

Sadness and other negative emotions deserve to be honored and expressed. They are important in themselves.

Once we have made the time to name, express, and process our grief, we may want to turn to the question of "silver linings" or growth via grief. But we shouldn't rush there, or we risk conforming with the toxic positivity in the dominant culture.

Once you have shed your tears, it may be possible to turn to the question of growth.

This is closely related to the concepts of "adversarial growth" or "posttraumatic growth". A big question to reflect on either in general or in relation to doing a grief map:

When you think about your path, do you see any kind of growth which has been produced by engaging with climate grief?

Here are some possibilities to reflect on:

- Stronger awareness of what is truly important in life
- Greater appreciation of the more-than-human world ("nature") and our profound relations with it
- Meaningfulness evoked by togetherness, relationality, and pro-environmental action
- Honor evoked by taking part in efforts towards a more just world
- An awareness of new personal and community strengths that you were not previously aware of (or did not yet have)
- New paths in life because of environmental consciousness that entered through the portal of sorrow
- A more realistic and empathetic worldview

"Give yourself time, and trust that you will find some way to make meaning of this loss.... Mentally place yourself in a wider circle of those who grieve and contemplate grief as a universal emotion. At the same time, find a way to get support from others who have endured or are in the process of grieving similar losses." Miriam Greenspan, 2004, p. 113

Further reading, endnotes, references:

1 Harris, Darcy. 2025. 'An Exploration of Sociopolitical Grief'. Mortality (online ahead of print); Wilson, Da'Mere T., and Mary-Frances O'Connor. 2022. 'From Grief to Grievance: Combined Axes of Personal and Collective Grief Among Black Americans'. Frontiers in Psychiatry 13. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.850994.

2 For guidance, see Mihai, Mihaela, and Mathias Thaler. 2023. 'Environmental Commemoration: Guiding Principles and Real-World Cases'. Memory Studies. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980231176037.

3 Francis Weller; Thomas Attig; Robert A. Neimeyer.

4 Miriam Greenspan *Healing Through the Dark Emotions* (2004)

5 Attachment functions in slightly different ways between humans and places/environments, compared to inter-human relations. But the main idea of continuing emotional bonds with what is lost/damaged is similar. For example, instead of avoiding a place damaged by climate change, one can learn a way to engage with it (see the "wounded place work" by Trebbe Johnson, for example).

6 Ecological grief: how can we bear this together?. *Critical and Radical Social Work*. Published online October 25, 2024. doi:10.1332/20498608Y2024D000000059
We also recommend the insights about "Ecological Grief Literacy" by Cooke and colleagues:*

"Many people are feeling ecological grief. How can we help those whose work puts them at risk?' Anna Cooke et al. May 7, 2025. The Conversation https://theconversation.com/many-people-are-feeling-ecological-grief-how-can-we-help-those-whose-work-puts-them-at-risk-228793

Cooke, A., Benham, C., Butt, N., & Dean, J. (2024). Ecological grief literacy: Approaches for responding to environmental loss. *Conservation Letters,* 17(3). https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.13018

7 Pauline Boss, *The Myth of Closure*, WW Norton 2022

Bill Plotkin *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*

Tschakert, Petra, Neville R. Ellis, C. Anderson, A. Kelly, and J. Obeng. 'One Thousand Ways to Experience Loss: A Systematic Analysis of Climate-Related Intangible Harm from around the World'. *Global Environmental Change* 55 (2019): 58–72. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.11.006.

Mitchell, Kenneth R., and Herbert Anderson. All Our Losses, All Our Griefs: Resources for Pastoral Care. 1st ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983

* "Pihkala P. Ecological Sorrow: Types of Grief and Loss in Ecological Grief. Sustainability. 2024; 16(2):849. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16020849

* For a brief essay about climate grief, see Pihkala's text for the BBC Climate Emotions series: 'Climate Grief: How We Mourn a Changing Planet'. https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200402-climate-grief-mourning-loss-due-to-climate-change?ocid=ww.social.link.email

More resources for grief rituals and creative responses

- Guerrilla beauty / Radical Joy for Hard Times. Engaging with a local wounded place – or simply a place – can help with more global climate grief. Trebbe Johnson and co.
https://humansandnature.org/guerrilla-beauty/

- The Dinner Party https://www.thedinnerparty.org/

Making It Through, Together: Ritual Collection for Life After Loss
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b1066184611a029fec8f7c4/t/63ec0ad407b5557d3ada3594/1676413672334/ritualcollection

Grief books on Climate Mental Health Network's page
https://bookshop.org/lists/grief-climate-mental-health-network